

## DEMOTIC DICTIONARY PROJECT

**Stephen Vinson**

This year the Demotic Dictionary Project under the direction of Janet H. Johnson continued to make progress and we are all hopeful that the end is in sight! Research Associate Steve Vinson continued working through our entry on the letter S, by far the largest chapter of the dictionary, which, at more than 150 manuscript pages, is almost twice as long as the next longest chapter, Š. Research Assistant Tom Dousa worked for us part time, continuing the revision of H. François Gaudard cheerfully and ably continued the onerous task of double checking all of our bibliographical information. He is working through a Demotic version of the conflict between the Egyptian gods Horus and Seth for his dissertation, work which promises to enrich the dictionary as well. Brett McClain has continued to make good progress on producing the hundreds of scans of photographs and hand copies required for our entries; his efforts were supplemented last summer by Egyptology students Harold Hayes and Nicole Hansen. These scans will be one of the important and innovative features of the dictionary. For the first time in the history of the lexicography of the ancient Egyptian language, dictionary users will be able to see exactly what the Egyptian scribe actually wrote. In addition, for those who use the dictionary in electronic format, the scans can be copied and opened in any graphics processing program, and thus enlarged or manipulated by anyone who may wish either to check the dictionary staff's readings or to copy the writing into another document.

A number of new developments have speeded our efforts this year and promise to make the next year and a half more productive than ever. The Dictionary invested in two new Power Macintosh G3 computers, whose extra memory and increased speed make manipulating our large graphics and text files far quicker. The computers' added memory has also enabled us to create two new backup copies of all computer files, an important safety feature and, as work gets closer and closer to completion, a very significant psychological security blanket!

The Dictionary was also pleased to play host to two distinguished European Demotists, John Tait of University College, London, and H.-J. Thissen of Cologne University. Tait and Thissen came to Chicago to participate in the Chicago-Stanford colloquium on Hellenistic Egypt co-sponsored by the Oriental Institute. The collo-

## PHILOLOGY

quium, which was held on 4 April, was devoted to the relationship between Greek and Egyptian literature during the Hellenistic period (i.e., the period from the conquests of Alexander the Great into the early Roman Empire), and Tait and Thissen both impressed and delighted symposium participants and audience members with erudite discussions of the “Homeric Influence on the Inaros-Petubastis Cycle” (Thissen) and “Tradition and Innovation in Egyptian and Demotic Narrative” (Tait). More importantly for the dictionary, however, Tait and Thissen lent their expertise to our efforts for a few days, gamely attacking a number of problem words and phrases in our depressingly long list of words about which we are unsure of the reading, the definition, or, in all too many cases, both! Among the areas in which the most progress was made was a team-reading of P. Philadelphia 30, one of the many tantalizing and frustrating texts known to Demotists, and that in a field with no lack of tantalization and frustration. P. Philadelphia 30 is an account of expenses for the construction of a tomb, which makes it a rarity among Demotic documentary texts. While hardly the kind of text that many would find inherently fascinating, its unique subject matter and the fact that it is substantially intact and written in a very clear, legible, and accomplished hand has inspired most Demotists to try their hand at it at one time or another. Unfortunately, it is so full of unknown words that it has defied decipherment and to date no full transliteration and translation has been published.

Tait and Thissen provided us with numerous suggestions for reading or defining some of our “mystery phrases”; the many good results which arose from those days of work have inspired us to compile a list of problematic words that we hope in the near future to post on the World-Wide Web, seeking assistance from colleagues everywhere. Over the years, most major Demotists have made contributions to the dictionary, but this promises to take our international collaboration to an entirely new level!

The most important development of the year, however, was the approval of Janet Johnson’s request to take a year’s leave from teaching to concentrate on the dictionary. Thus over the next year, the dictionary will have two full-time staff members, Johnson and Vinson, supplemented by the halftime efforts of Tom Dousa. The dictionary will also profit in the next year from the efforts of Alejandro Botta, a doctoral student in Aramaic at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, currently living in Chicago and completing his dissertation on the relationship of Aramaic and early Demotic legal formulae. Botta will revise the dictionary’s entries on legal terminology, as well as check our citations of Hebrew and Aramaic cognates or correspondences; he will also take on the production of digital scans when Brett McClain leaves the dictionary for a stint as an epigrapher at Chicago House.

As the work on the actual Dictionary manuscript is reaching a conclusion, our revision of entries continues to yield new discoveries and stimulate novel insights. For example, this year, while looking through copies of Demotic ostraca made by the great German Demotist Wilhelm Spiegelberg, most of whose academic papers are housed in the Dictionary office, members of the Dictionary staff came across an example of an entirely new sub-genre of Egyptian texts: a rare contract for the hiring of a boat (O. Strasbourg 189). While contracts for shipping services on the Graeco-Roman Nile are common in Greek, until now no other example had ever

## DEMOTIC DICTIONARY PROJECT

been found in Demotic. In this little text, a ferryboat operator acknowledges that he has received payment to transport a mummy across the river from the main town of Thebes to one of the cemeteries on the west bank of the Nile. Because the ferryman also acknowledges that he is still obligated to transport two persons across the river at some unspecified time in the future, it seems fair to label the document a “contract.” Modest as it is, our ostrakon does show that an agreement between Egyptians for the commercial use of a water craft might be reduced to writing. The text reads:

- 1 PN, the ferryman of
- 2 Thebes for year 28, is the one who says to
- 3 Teos son of Imouthis: You have paid me for
- 4 the fare of Imouthis your father.
- 5 And I am to transport his embalmer
- 6 (and) his choachyte. Written by ꜥPhratres son of Peteseꜥ
- 7 at his dictation in regnal year 28, Mekhir 4

This text was dated by Spiegelberg on paleographic grounds to the Roman period. Among the few Roman emperors with a year 28 is Augustus, so it seems likely that the ostrakon belongs to his reign. If so, then the text dates to 29 January 2 BC. The word “choachyte” in line 6 of our translation is the term the Greeks used to refer to a particular type of funerary priest, Egyptian *wꜥḥ-mw* or “water-pourer.” They were responsible for providing mortuary rituals, including offerings, at the tombs of the deceased. In Egypt this was a lucrative business and a large number of preserved Demotic texts reflect the activities of choachytes, especially the purchase, sale, and inheritance (by both men and women) of common or family tombs and the rights to perform associated rites. The word translated here “embalmer,” *swnw*, is best known to Egyptologists as the Egyptian word for “physician,” but in Demotic, it could also be used to refer to professional embalmers, thus reflecting a conceptual connection between medical treatment and embalming in the minds of the Egyptians. Finally, the phrase “ferryman for year 28” shows that the right to operate a ferryboat was a concession that individual boatmen had to bid for and be awarded. Texts from the Fayyum (an oasis in northern Egypt to the west of modern Cairo) show that would-be ferrymen might pay substantial sums of money for the right to ply their trade, sums which might include the rental of a ferryboat that was owned by the entity empowered to grant the concession.

In our lexicographical work, we are concerned not only with the main meaning of the Demotic words but with their extended or figurative meanings and use in idioms. This aspect of our work is both extremely interesting and very challenging: interesting because it gives us intimate insight into the way that the Egyptians used verbal images drawn from their everyday experience and cultural presuppositions to express themselves in a nuanced and often colorful manner; but challenging because it necessitates establishing the most plausible meaning for expressions that, at first meaning, can potentially be interpreted in several different ways. This is no easy matter, and the researcher must use all the clues at his or her disposal. Often, the context in which an idiom occurs helps us to tease out its figurative meaning. Sometimes, however, the context itself is as obscure as the phrase we are trying to elucidate, and then study of the idiom’s history (i.e., its use in earlier or later stages of

## PHILOLOGY

the Egyptian language) may help establish a meaning for our Demotic examples. A good case in point is a “jocular” phrase encountered while working through the S-words file.

In our own experience, it is not always easy to tell whether someone is laughing “with” us or laughing “at” us — and in Egyptian the ambiguity is not merely psychological but also linguistic. Two proverbs from a Demotic wisdom text called the Instructions of ‘Onchsheshonqy present us with just this problem. In both cases, the Demotic verb *sbi* “to laugh, joke” is construed with the preposition *irm*, which is usually the equivalent of English “with.” One of the proverbs begins, “Do not *sbi irm* your son in the presence of his mother,” while the other says, “Do not *sbi irm* a cat.” As it is hard to imagine how one could “laugh WITH” a cat, this latter proverb has generally been taken to mean “do not mock a cat,” a meaning which seems quite reasonable given the well-known Egyptian propensity for deifying felines; the construction in the other proverb has, on analogy, been taken to mean “do not mock your son.” But last year, Joachim Quack, an eminent German Demotist, proposed that the phrase *sbi irm* ought to be taken as “laugh with, joke with” (see *Enchoria* 23 [1996]: 244). He referred to the Coptic descendant of *sbi irm*, **ϢⲔⲖⲈ MN**, which is rather unhelpfully translated in Walter Crum’s standard *Coptic Dictionary* “to sport with.” To explain how one could “sport with” a cat, Quack proposed that the word is used here metaphorically for an “attractive but potentially dangerous lady.”

The examples cited in Crum’s *Coptic Dictionary*, however, show that the Coptic expression had a wide range of connotations, from neutral joking with, to sexual dalliance, to unambiguous mocking. And the combination *sbi irm* certainly seems to mean “to mock” in an Egyptian letter of the late Twentieth Dynasty, which contains one of the few known jokes from ancient Egypt. The letter was brought to our attention by Edward Wente, whose translation is adapted here:

“I’ve heard that you are angry and that you have caused me to be maligned(?) through slander on account of that joke which I told the chief taxing master in that letter, although it was Henuttowy who had urged me to tell some jokes to the chief taxing master in my letter. You are the case of the wife blind in one eye who had been living in the house of a man for twenty years; and when he found another woman, he said to her, ‘I shall divorce you because you are blind in one eye,’ so it is said. And she answered him, ‘Is this what you have just discovered during these twenty years that I’ve spent in your house?’ That’s me, and that is the joke (*sbi*) which I made about (*irm*) you.

The Egyptian expression translated here as “the joke which I made” is clearly a past-tense construction and almost certainly refers to “that joke which I told the chief taxing master” — thus, *irm* here almost has to be translated as *about* (you). If that’s so, then it seems likely that in Demotic, *sbi irm* could well be taken as “to joke about, laugh at, mock” just as it could in late Egyptian and Coptic; and it seems equally likely that the “cat” of the ‘Onchsheshonqy proverb is, to paraphrase Freud, probably just a cat.