

The Demotic Dictionary Project

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The past year has been an exciting and productive one for the Demotic Dictionary Project. Demotic is the Egyptian script used from the middle of the seventh century B.C. to the fifth century of our era for economic and legal documents, private letters, literary and scientific texts, and even some religious and administrative texts. Although ultimately derived from hieroglyphs,

demotic is extremely cursive, which presents great difficulties in reading the texts. As a result of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, we have increased our staff by having Mark Smith become a full-time staff member and adding three students who work part time: Michael Fitzpatrick, Richard Jasnow, and Robert Ritner.

This past summer we began the actual gathering of vocabulary and preparation of dictionary cards. Our current goal is a volume which will include all vocabulary which occurs in demotic texts published in the last twenty-five years and not attested in an interim glossary published in 1954. We decided to start gathering the vocabulary by working on the longer literary, religious, and scientific texts which have been published during this time span because they contain the bulk of new vocabulary which does not appear in the glossary. For each text, the first step is the preparation of running transliteration and translation, with commentary as needed, in which the text is broken down into minimally self-coherent units, usually sentences. From these annotated translations the students prepare the actual dictionary cards. For each word in each sentence in each text, a card is prepared giving the suggested transliteration and translation of the word and citing, in transliteration, the context for the word, the context usually consisting of the entire sentence in which the word appears. To the card is then added a facsimile of the word as written by the demotic scribe, usually a Xerox from the published photograph of the text. Any discussion of the word in secondary literature is also noted.

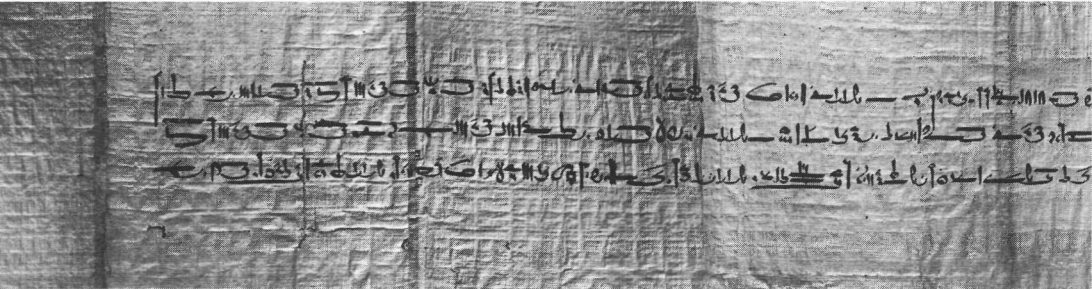
Following this procedure, we have so far collected the vocabulary from most of the long literary, religious, and scientific texts that were our initial target. These include a religious text containing a series of benedictions recited by a man for his deceased daughter; an astronomical text describing and explaining the representations of the sky goddess Nut in the cenotaph of Seti I at Abydos and the tomb of Ramesses IV in the Valley of the Kings; a "wisdom text" in which a man who has been imprisoned for failing to warn the king of an assassination attempt gives his son pragmatic advice on how to live his life; a hymn to the sun god Amon, hieroglyphic parallels

for which are known from late-period temples built at Philae, Karnak, and Khargeh Oasis; and a text describing the construction of an Egyptian temple and naming the various rooms which comprise it, e.g., the crypts, the sanctuary, the storehouses, and the dwelling place of the sacred animal. All of these texts carry forward centuries-old native Egyptian traditions; and many are late copies of earlier texts, e.g., the astronomical text which, dating from the Roman period, is fifteen hundred years younger than the New Kingdom originals with which it deals.

A marked foreign influence appears, however, in others of the texts with which we worked this year. One such text is an astronomical treatise in two sections, one describing aspects of the moon, the other giving dates of eclipses, all taken as omens and associated with predictions of good and evil fortune which will affect the nation. The section on eclipses begins with a list of Babylonian month names, indicating a Babylonian origin, and the events portended are to affect not only Egyptians, but Hebrews, Amorites, Assyrians, and Cretans. The composition appears to be Persian in date (sixth century B.C.), although the manuscript which has been preserved is a Roman copy. Two literary texts, one of which describes an Egyptian expedition to India via a country inhabited only by women, the other of which relates the story of two heroes contending for the armor of a fallen king, reflect the influence of Greek epic literature, while a medical text dealing with infections, fevers, and other ailments reflects some knowledge of contemporary Greek medicine. From all of these texts we have gleaned a rich harvest of new words; week by week, the amount of material in our files grows larger and larger.

The highlight of our year was the Demotic Dinner held May 23 in the Oriental Institute Museum. In conjunction with the dinner the museum staff organized a small exhibit of objects from the thousand-year span when demotic was in use and a small display of the dictionary staff at work. Everyone attending received a copy of one of the proverbs from the "wisdom text" described above and a copy of a demotic marriage contract from the period immediately preceding Alexander

the Great. We thank all those who attended and helped us make a good start on raising the money necessary for the matching portion of our grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

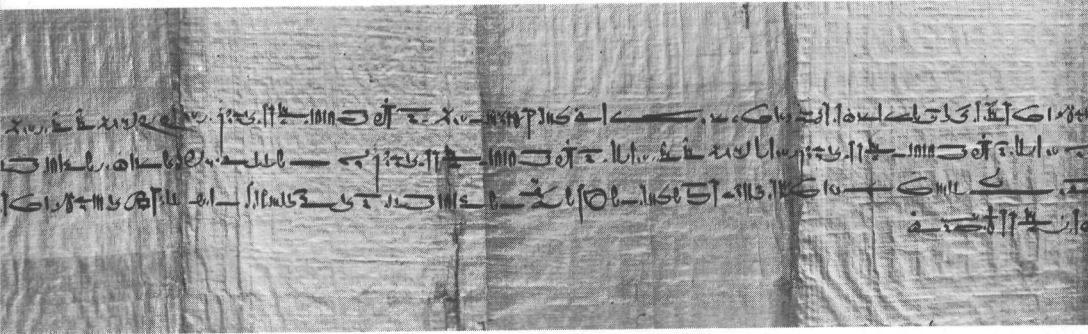


A Demotic marriage contract from the Institute's collections, dated December, 365 B.C. It reads from right to left, beginning on page 83.

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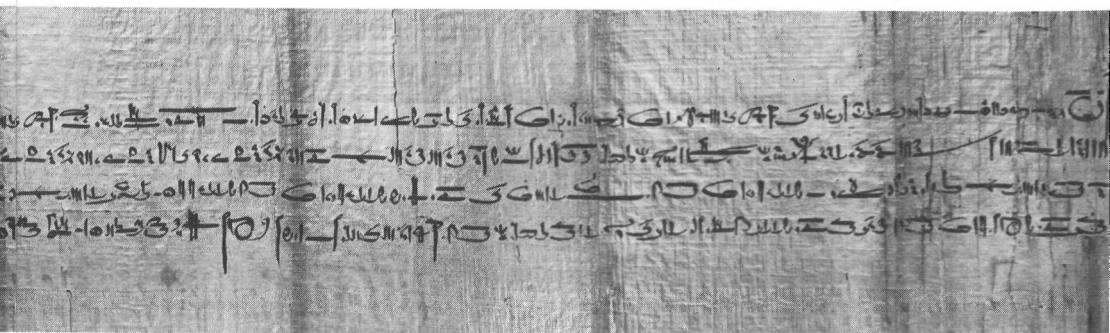
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