

The Demotic Dictionary Project

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“There is nothing new under the sun.” With this adage in mind we are not surprised to

see many of the day to day concerns of modern man reflected in the personal papers of ancient Egyptians. The staff of the Demotic Dictio-

nary Project has spent most of the last year working on just such "minor" documents.

Both "death and taxes" play important roles in the documentation preserved from Egypt in the Late Period (mid-first millennium B.C. to mid-first millennium of our era). Demotic ostraca include receipts for payment of harvest taxes, dyke taxes, bath taxes, poll taxes, crown taxes, beer taxes, wine taxes, salt taxes, oil taxes, palm-tree taxes, pigeon taxes, onion taxes, and taxes on various occupations (including those of singer, barber, weaver, and an induction tax to become a priest). There were what appear to have been property taxes, taxes on the transfer/sale of property, estate taxes, and even a burial tax.¹ Such receipts are usually quite simple: "Regnal year 26, first month of summer, day 26. Pabek, the son of Pa'at, the son of Sus, paid the poll tax of 2 staters." (O. Berlin 5646) But by studying large numbers of these, especially when their provenience is known, one can derive im-

portant information on a range of economic and social topics. For example, the amount of poll tax paid in the Roman period by residents in different parts of the country (higher in the Fayum, lower in Upper Egypt) may reflect differences in fertility of the land, but the reduced rates for citizens of the nome capitals and exceptions for Roman citizens, some bureaucrats and priests, and other favored members of society reflect differences in status within the country.

"Mummy labels" are another category of small, repetitive texts which, although often ignored, can provide valuable social and religious information when studied as a corpus. These small tags give the name, often the patronymic and place of birth, and sometimes the age, date of death, or occupation of the deceased, usually in the form of a small prayer on behalf of the *ba* (soul) of the deceased. "Her soul will serve Osiris-Sokar, the great god, lord of Abydos: Senapollonia, the daughter of Apollonios, whose mother is Senhor-mehef, she being a woman from the village of Bupahe."

1. G. Mattha, in his publication of *Demotic Ostraca* (1945), identified over 80 categories of taxes.

(M. Strasbourg Ho 146 [=Forrer 108])² Such tags might also include shipping or burial instructions. "To Tutu, the son of Imhotep, the Overseer of the Mystery: 'Perform burial for Senmenkh, the daughter of Prepito, in year 37, first month of inundation season, day 9, in conformity with this letter!' Pamont, the son of Pamenh the younger, the priest who enters [into the temple or, here, perhaps, the embalming place], of the second phyle, wrote (this)." (M. Wangstedt 3) As with the tax receipts, none of these texts is individually very interesting, but the study of large numbers of them can provide religious and sociological data otherwise unattainable, such as the average age at death, age at marriage, and establishment of genealogical files. From the latter can come studies of inheritance of office, approximate social class of different occupations, and relative status of marriage partners.

2. On the back of this label is the deceased woman's name and patronymic written in Greek. Many mummy labels are bilingual in this fashion; there are also many written entirely in Greek.

Death and taxes may have been inevitable, but "wine, women, and song" diverted the minds of the ancient Egyptians. The wine and song are combined in the Demotic version of the song of the harper, the "portrayal of a dissolute, albeit professional singer and harp player" named Horudja. "As soon as he discovers wine and meat in his field of vision, he goes in, although no one has invited him, and he says to those at the festival, 'I can't sing—I am hungry. I can't perform with the harp without being sated with wine. Command (it)! He drinks the wine of two, (he eats) the meat of three, the bread of five while (all the others) are amazed, and the harp at his breast becomes a disgusting piece of work. He makes the guests call to him, one after another, three times, 'Sing!' He begins to lift the harp after he has gotten drunk. . . . His words don't suit his work, his voice and his harp don't harmonize." (P. Vienna 3877)³

Wine drinking might be-

3. See E. Lüddeckens, "Zum demotischen Gedicht vom Harfner," in *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur* (1977), pp. 334-37.

come the cause of contention, as in a series of oaths of which we have copies:

“Transcript of the oath which (the man named) Horus will make before (the god) Thoth on behalf of Patmin in year 22, second month of summer, day 27: ‘As for this $\frac{1}{3}$ (measure of) wine about which you are contending with me—you did not bring it out at my behest. I did not drink it.’ ” (D. O. Strasbourg 1399) Other oaths touch on the relationships between men and women: “[Copy of] the oath which Tay . . . , the daughter of Padjema, shall make in year 9, third month of inundation season, day 17, to Wennefer, the son of Senmin, in the estate of Djeme in the west (Western Thebes): ‘As the gods who dwell here together with every god who dwells here live, since I lived with you I did not steal from you. I did not rob you in excess of the thirty (*deben* of) silver.⁴ I have nothing secret from you. I did not chase after men while I was living with you.’ If she makes the oath, her

4. Probably the dowry which the woman brought with her to the marriage.

name is cleared. If she refuses to make it, that which she shall reveal, she shall give it.” (D. O. Strasbourg 843)

Graffiti, the “Kilroy was here” of the ancient world, are extremely common throughout Egyptian history. Often they consist of nothing but the name of the scribbler, but the desire to have one’s name remain alive is sometimes expressly stated: “The good name of Pakherkhonsu, the son of Djedkhonsefankh, remains before Amoun, Mut, Khonsu, and Min ‘high of feathers’, the great god. As for the one who shall read these writings and greet me, Amoun shall greet him. Pakherkhonsu, the son of Djedkhonsefankh, wrote (this) in year 5, third month of summer, day 1, of the . . . King Alexander, son of Alexander the god, while he . . . at Djeme (Western Thebes).” (G. Medinet Habu 86) Such graffiti are found not only in the Egyptian Nile Valley but wherever Egyptians went, leaving a record of their travels. “The stonemason of greywacke and galena Hema, the son of Patiharpocrates, who inspects greywacke and galena since the time of King Nec-

tanebo (II), the Medes [the second Persian occupation, immediately preceding Alexander the Great], and the Greeks, without Min having caused that fault be found with him. His name remains here before Min, the Chief of the Mountain [the stone quarry], forever. (It is) written." (G. Wadi Hammamat 1)

Texts such as these are extremely numerous and although we have managed to read and process a large number of such graffiti, mummy labels, and ostraca of all sorts, we still have a large number left to do. However, we are about to turn part of our attention to the task of establishing the meaning of problematic words which have appeared

in texts published during the last 25 years, preparatory to writing the actual dictionary supplement on which we are currently working (see Annual Reports, 1976–1981). The staff, which has jelled to form a very efficient and hardworking team, consists of Professor George R. Hughes, consultant and lifesaver, Robert K. Ritner, Senior Research Assistant and Assistant Editor, Adrian Esselström, Eugene Cruz-Uribe, Richard Jasnow, Elizabeth McVey, and Lisa Moore, Research Assistants. Dr. Mark Smith worked with us for one month finishing the difficult passages of several of the literary texts on which we had worked in earlier years.