

# News & Notes

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## On Making a Dictionary of Demotic Egyptian

"Language or Speech is the utterance of articulate sounds or voices, rendered significant by usage, for the expression and communication of thoughts."

—Noah Webster,

"Introduction" to *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828)

Consider the problems facing the lexicographer of an ancient language. The Herculean efforts of Noah Webster in America and Samuel Johnson in England to make comprehensive dictionaries for their own language produced works of lasting value. No matter how competent a reader may be, having one of these dictionaries in hand vastly increases the range and clarity of his understanding of other peoples' recorded thoughts.

In one important sense their work was easier than that of the small group of scholars who plan to make the first comprehensive dictionary of demotic Egyptian. Webster and Johnson worked with their native tongues; they could hear at first hand the full range

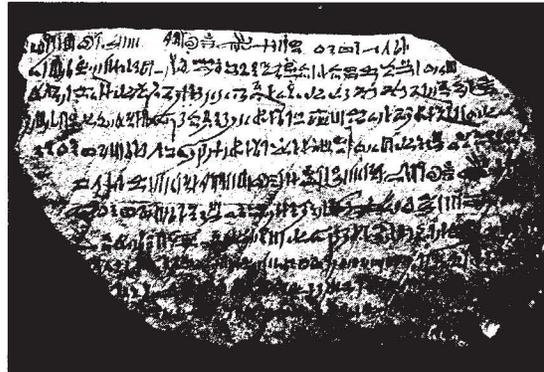
(cont. on page 2)



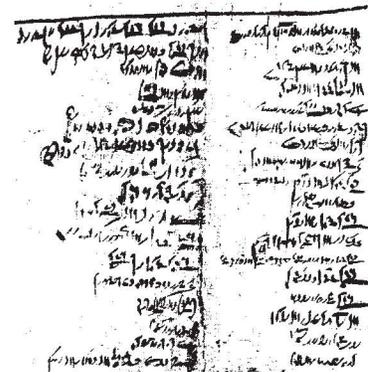
The Demotic Dictionary Project staff (l. to r.): George R. Hughes, Professor Emeritus of Egyptology, Project Egyptologist Mark Smith, Project Director Janet H. Johnson, Michael Fitzpatrick, Robert Ritner, Richard Jasnow, Charles F. Nims, Professor Emeritus of Egyptology. Not pictured: Eugene Cruz-Uribe.



Hieroglyphic

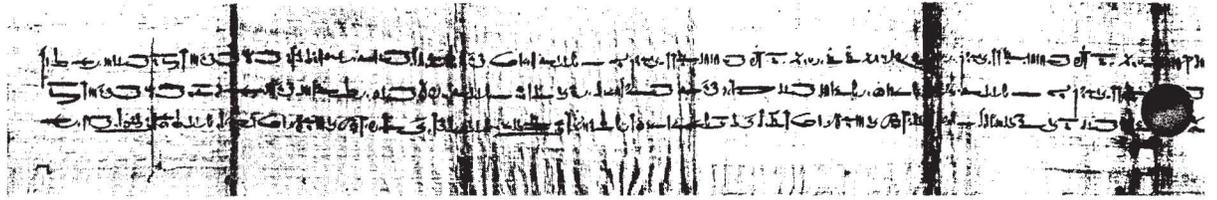


Hieratic



Demotic

Ancient Egyptian writing took three major forms. Shown here are: 1) a monumental hieroglyphic relief, in a highly detailed, raised inscription, from the reign of Thutmosis III (1475-48); 2) a hieratic ostracon, in a good official hand, recounting a creditor's plea for justice: his debtor broke a promise to repay a jar of fat. From the 20th Dynasty (1200-1090 B.C.); 3) a section of the reverse side of the demotic papyrus described on the following page, showing the individual signatures of witnesses to an endowment contract. From the reign of Nectanebo I (ca. 365 B.C.). Compare these roughly drawn signatures with the careful artistry of the document itself.



*This masterful piece of Egyptian calligraphy, now on display in marriage contract (about 365 B.C.). Such contracts fixed the rights. This one reads: "There belongs to the children whom you will be field, courtyard, building plot, male slave, female slave, all a world which I possess." [Trans. by Charles F. Nims; see credits text (reading from right to left) is written in an unusual mixture*

### MAKING A DICTIONARY (cont.)

of nuances of meaning and consult whole libraries of books in a living language. Demotic, though it is the most recent of the three Egyptian scripts (illustrated below), has not been spoken for nearly 1,600 years. Modern Demoticists have to puzzle out the meaning of forgotten words which sometimes occur only once in a single text. Moreover, of the thousands of hand-written papyri and ostraca (limestone flakes and potsherds) covered with demotic writing, the vast majority has never been translated.

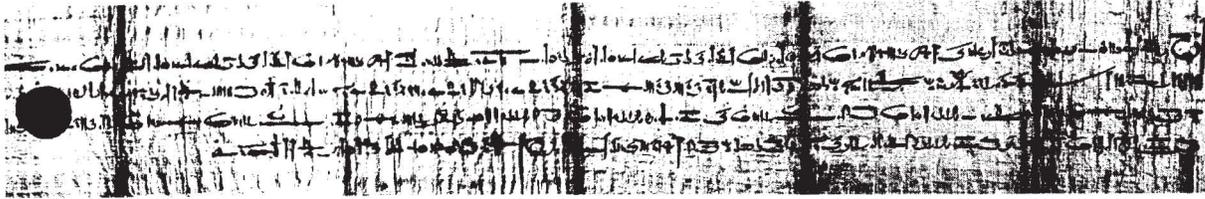
Clearly a demotic dictionary will be immensely useful. Demotic was the predominant form of writing in Egypt for more than ten centuries, from about 700 B.C. to 400 A.D. Even so, while most Egyptologists can deal with hieroglyphic and hieratic texts (see below), only a handful can read those written in demotic. One reason: demotic is more cursive (flowing and joined) than the other forms of Egyptian writing, so that its characters, being more similar to one another in appearance, are more difficult to identify. Another reason why demotic texts have been neglected is that demotic came into use during a period in which Egypt lost her independence. A series of foreign powers controlled the throne, including the Greeks and Macedonians under Alexander and the Roman emperors. Many important historical questions about this period remain unanswered, as Project Director Janet H. Johnson points out in her interview in this issue, but few investigators have learned demotic and observed what happens in Egypt after the great dynasties at first hand, or as nearly so as is now possible.

That research into demotic has lagged behind the rest of Egyptological studies is curious, however, because the modern world began learning to read Egyptian by studying demotic, not hieroglyphs. The road to the present Dictionary Project begins with the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799. For 1,400 years before that stela, covered with

demotic, hieroglyphic, and Greek writing, was found, no one could read any of the three forms of Egyptian writing. In deciphering the Rosetta Stone, scholars started from their knowledge of Greek, found parallels in demotic, made rapid progress, then lost interest as they learned more and more about hieroglyphs. Yet demotic (whose name comes from the Greek "demos" or "people") is used for extraordinarily interesting purposes, often closely tied to the daily lives of Egyptians, as in the marriage contract shown above. It came into general use as a more rapid and convenient form of writing, as reflected by the more perishable nature of the materials on which demotic is found, such as papyrus, as compared with the carved stone inscriptions of most hieroglyphs.

The Demotic Dictionary Project now under way at the Oriental Institute is staffed by the world's largest group of Demoticists (those pictured on the cover page) and has at its disposal one of the world's finest demotic research collections. The Project can trace its roots back to Germany in the 1880's, when Wilhelm Spiegelberg began compiling materials for a demotic dictionary. At his death he left these materials to his student, William F. Edgerton of the Oriental Institute. During the 1930's Edgerton and several of his students, including George R. Hughes and Charles F. Nims (both of whom are retired but actively advising the Dictionary Project), worked intermittently on the dictionary, which was still far from complete when Edgerton died in 1970. All of his and Spiegelberg's demotic materials were given to the Oriental Institute.

Noah Webster and Samuel Johnson made their dictionaries nearly singlehandedly. Those days are gone: a modern lexicographer depends upon the work of generations of linguistic detectives. Project Director Janet Johnson's immediate goal is to publish a supplement to the *Demotisches Glossar* (1954) by W. Erichsen that will add vocabulary published more recently, correct errors, and



Oriental Institute Museum, is the earliest surviving demotic of inheritance; they are largely economic documents. In part, o me everything which I possess and what I shall acquire, house, ls, all title deeds and contracts with all free persons in the ow.] Notice that the signature of the scribe at the end of the f demotic and cursive hieroglyphic.

add new vocabulary items identified by the dictionary staff. Dr. Johnson estimates that the present job of compiling vocabulary and preparing cards for individual words will take three years from start to finish (they began in October 1978). Preparing the manuscript for publication will take another full year. The techniques now being developed in making this supplement will be applied to making the magnum opus, the comprehensive demotic dictionary. It is a slow, laborious process, one which needs your support.

*Author's note: For most of the information in this issue I am indebted to Janet Johnson and Mark Smith, both of whom devoted much time to giving elegant answers to the clumsy questions of an interested amateur.*

—Ronald Brown

#### MEMBERS' LECTURE

Mr. Joseph A. Callaway

AI, A PALESTINIAN TOWN IN THE  
EARLY BRONZE AGE

Thursday, May 10 at 8 p.m. in Breasted Hall  
at The Oriental Institute.

*The Quadrangle Club, 1155 East 58th Street, will be open to Oriental Institute members who wish to make dinner reservations. Please call Mrs. Schlendler, 493-8601. The privilege of the use of the dining room at the Quadrangle Club is a courtesy extended to members of the Oriental Institute only on nights when there is an Oriental Institute lecture.*

#### AN INTERVIEW WITH JANET JOHNSON (cont. from back page)

**Q:** Yes, you've done work on magical texts, I wonder if you might describe some of the things you've found?

**A:** Well, the major corpus of texts that I've published have been magical texts. They're late Roman, 3rd century A.D., probably, written for the most part in upper Egypt. They are spells for curing illnesses, or preventing snakebite, or causing a man to have a dream in which a god will come and tell him the answer to a problem. There are erotica, how to get a man or woman to love you or hate you, or leave you alone.

An interesting thing about them is that there are Greek magical spells, contemporary, also from Egypt, written in Greek, which are in many cases very, very similar, and the magical names included are in some cases identical in Greek and demotic. The demotic texts often have glosses to those magical names, presumably in order to ensure that the pronunciation of these words was made correctly. There certainly was a feeling that the pronunciation of these names was very important, some of the earliest evidence we have for pronunciation. At the same time the gods or demons being evoked in some of these include not only Egyptian gods but also a few that seem to be commonly known throughout the Hellenistic world and the Roman world, including some Syro-Palestinian gods, and even some Mesopotamian deities that have become recognized throughout the empire as being efficacious.



CREDITS: The photos of the Demotic Dictionary Project staff are by Shirley Fisher and those of the documents are from the Museum Archives. The translation of the contract was done by Charles F. Nims, "A Demotic 'Document of Endowment' from the Time of Nectanebo I," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo*, Vol. 16 (Wiesbaden, 1958), pp. 237-46.

NEWS & NOTES STAFF: Ronald Brown, Editor; Shirley Fisher, Production.

## An Interview with Janet Johnson

Q: If someone were standing in the marketplace at Alexandria in, say, 1 B.C. and were talking with an Egyptian merchant, what language would he be likely to be speaking? Do you have a pretty good idea of how it would sound?

A: He would be speaking demotic. We have very little idea of how it would sound. The demotic script does not normally indicate vowels. There are what are called alphabetic characters which indicate one specific letter in the alphabet or one specific sound in the sound inventory, but not all words are written with these. Even taking aside the question of vowels, we can't be certain how the pronunciation of some consonants sounded. And so, no, I don't think we would know exactly how it would sound.

Q: Do you find that there are areas of what we would consider normal daily activities we would engage in that are just missing from demotic texts?

A: Sure, we have no texts that tell us how to talk in the "supermarket." We have lots of texts telling of people harvesting their food and paying their taxes, but we have no texts relating how they went about the daily activities of purchasing food, or trading for food, or simply producing their own food. We have basic economic records of major transactions but no records of minor transactions. If you sold something for a nickel you weren't likely to get a receipt for it; if you sold it for a hundred dollars you might. The nickel transactions are more common than the hundred dollar ones. So that's one realm of things. Interfamily relationships (with the exception of those cases where there's a problem and one goes to court about it), the normal training of a scribe, or any other profession . . . these are things which are hinted at sometimes but we have no text that sits down and tells us: at the age of seven a boy is sent off to learn a trade, working with precious metals, or carpentry, or the life of a scribe, and here's how it goes. Things like the wisdom texts have hints, but there are a lot of gaps, things that we don't know.

Q: Just briefly, what would be the most promising areas of demotic research?

A: That's a very hard question to answer, because there's a wealth of material in a lot of different fields, each of which has some value, not only for Egyptologists, but for others as well. For the economic historian there's a wealth of economic material, some of it published and some not. A large amount would be published if more people would be willing to work in the field, and more people would be willing to work in the field if they had basic



*Director of the Demotic Dictionary Project, Janet H. Johnson, is author of The Demotic Verbal System, "The Demotic Magical Spells of Leiden I 384," and other works. She has recently been awarded tenure and promoted to Associate Professor of Egyptology at the Oriental Institute.*

research tools such as dictionaries with which to work.

Judicial questions: there are some court records, but a lot of legal contracts from which one can derive an idea of how civil law was set up.

Historical questions: there are some texts that are not straight histories by any means, but which deal with historical characters or questions. Because of the problems in reading them, these have never been used to any great extent by people dealing with the history of the period.

The whole question of literary style is something which has never been studied very much because very few people have dealt with demotic literary texts. It's something which, once one had done it for demotic, would be useful for comparison with earlier Egyptian material and with contemporary Greek literary material. There was a very large Greek colony in Egypt, and a large percentage of Greek literary texts that we know are preserved from the Greek colony in Egypt, because of the extreme dryness. You have two traditions going on side by side at this period, and we do know of some demotic texts which were translated into Greek, so there certainly was some knowledge back and forth, some mutual influence.

Another field that's very important is religion. The demotic religious texts reflect a stage in Egyptian history when, once again, the Greeks were present: to what extent has Greek religious thought influenced the Egyptian, and to what extent has the Egyptian influenced Greek religious thought as it is expressed in Egypt? And you get magical texts, which have a varying amount of religion, as well.

*(cont. on inside page 3)*