

MIDDLE EGYPTIAN TEXT EDITIONS FOR ONLINE RESEARCH

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METEOR (Middle Egyptian Text Editions for Online Research) is the acronym given to the project funded as part of a Mellon Foundation grant for Less Commonly Taught Languages. It is preparing an annotated, interactive, electronic Readingbook for Middle Egyptian, the classic stage of the ancient Egyptian language. The Readingbook includes a corpus of texts representing the numerous genres represented in Middle Egyptian and appropriate for students beginning their study of that language and the hieroglyphic script. Students are able to access any section of each text, sentence by sentence, in hieroglyphs, and practice reading the hieroglyphs and transliterating and translating the text. A click of a button brings help with reading signs, understanding grammar, or finding vocabulary. In addition, there are extensive linked informational sidebars and graphics. The sidebars include brief explanations or descriptions of topics mentioned in the texts and supplementary chronological, geographical, historical, and cultural information. The graphics include digital maps and images illustrating Egypt, the areas where individual texts were discovered, items mentioned in the texts, and, to the extent possible, the actual individuals mentioned in the texts, thereby helping the student to place the individual texts in their social, cultural, religious, political, historical, and geographical contexts.

During the academic year 2002/2003, data entry of the transliteration, translation, lexical, and grammatical analyses of the eleven Middle Egyptian texts being entered in Chicago was almost completed. This data entry was done by graduate students working from full transliterations, translations, and grammatical analyses prepared by Johnson. As noted last year, Sandy Schloen, our programmer, has designed an elegant method for entering, stacking, and otherwise manipulating the hieroglyphs, and the hieroglyphs for these texts have been entered and linked to the transliteration and translation. This year, graduate students began checking all the data entry that has been done in Chicago. Students with at least one year of study of Middle Egyptian (including Vanessa Davies, Rod Edwards, and Jackie Jay) worked through the “front-end” of every text, looking for errors, including typos, incorrect links, and the like. More advanced graduate students (including Josh Trampier and Malayna Williams) checked the “back-end” of every text for similar problems. Harold Hays, a doctoral candidate, checked the grammatical analysis of each text for accuracy and consistency. He also worked very closely with Schloen to resolve data entry or retrieval problems as they arose. Michael Berger, who handles all the administrative duties for this project, continued to supervise and coordinate the graduate students when they moved from checking data entry to preparing the “cultural links” providing background and supplemental information for the users. Most of the sign list, which not only gives the identification and common phonetic uses of each sign but also a schematic to help students learn how to draw the sign, was entered this year; links to the hieroglyphs in individual texts will be added when the schematics for drawing the signs are completed.

Schloen, with occasional assistance from Lec Maj, the Computer Research Assistant for the Division of Humanities, is making progress on moving METEOR’s text files, which are in XML format, to a more stable “back-end.” Tamino, an XML-based database, is being used to store, validate, and index the textual data, offering user-level security and greater flexibility for data entry, querying, linking, and analysis. Conversion of a sample text to the Tamino format has been successfully completed. The process has been established for converting the remaining texts. The possibility of improving and expanding the Readingbook’s user interface using the Java environment, with its cross-platform capabilities, improved font handling, and front-end tool set, is also being explored.

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The first extensive “classroom” testing of the Readingbook took place this year. During Autumn Quarter, Johnson taught the second year course in Middle Egyptian. That course is designed to expose students to as many genres of Middle Egyptian texts as possible. Each of the texts we read this year was available in the Readingbook. We did not use the Readingbook in the classroom, but all students were encouraged to access the program from home or from the Computer Lab in the Oriental Institute. Most did so regularly and passed along problems that they noted. When, toward the end of the quarter, an electronic “glitch” made it difficult to access one particular text in the Readingbook, the students complained that they felt very lost. In reality, they did very well on that text, so one did not have to worry that they were depending on the Readingbook to “do” their homework for them. The testing continued in the Winter Quarter in Johnson’s hieratic class (hieratic is a more cursive script developed from the hieroglyphs); about half of the texts that were studied are included in the Readingbook. During Spring Quarter, she taught the third quarter of the first year course in the Middle Egyptian and again concentrated on texts that were available in the Readingbook. All year long, students were encouraged to pass along information about typos, incorrect links, incomplete information, and the like, and to indicate additional (types of) information they would like to see included. Their corrections have been incorporated, as have several of their suggestions.

Johnson, Schloen, and Berger gave a brief presentation of the project, its purpose and its current status, at a meeting held at Northwestern University in November 2002. This meeting was held to discuss programs funded under the Mellon Foundation’s general umbrella of “Cost-Effective Uses of Technology in Teaching.” This presentation emphasized, as had the original proposal to Mellon, that the Readingbook is not a stand-alone teaching tool for learning Middle Egyptian. Rather, the Readingbook serves as an excellent, reliable resource to supplement both formal classroom instruction and individual efforts to learn this fascinating, but difficult, language (and script). The presentation also noted that the “shell” which Schloen has developed is very flexible and can be used with any language, not merely Middle Egyptian. It is especially useful for any language for which the student must learn a new script as well as new grammar and vocabulary. The Readingbook may eventually be published as a CD-ROM or DVD, but it is currently being delivered over the Internet using the World Wide Web.
