The Demotic Dictionary Project
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Onchsheshonqy Had A Farm

"The Instructions of 'Onchsheshonqy'" is a collection of ancient Egyptian aphorisms intended to instruct 'Onchsheshonqy's son on proper behavior (with family, friends, officials, and employers) and to pass on a selection of Egyptian folk wisdom. Those of you who have followed the progress of the Demotic Dictionary Project know that this text is one of the large, important texts on which the supplement we are currently preparing is being based.

Since Egypt was, and is, largely an agricultural country, many of the aphorisms deal with animals, their uses, and their ways. For example,

Don't tether your donkey to a palm tree, lest he shake it!
If a donkey runs with a horse, it will take a million(?) steps.
Don't kill a snake and leave its tail!
A snake which is eating has no venom.
The one who has been bitten by a snake is afraid of a coil of rope.
If a bird flies from place to place, a feather will fall from it.
Frogs are the ones which praise the inundation; mice are the ones which eat the grain.
Oxen are the ones which harvest the barley and emmer; donkeys are the ones which consume it.

Occasionally these aphorisms even tell us the Egyptian word for the noise that different animals make. Thus,

The hissing of a snake is more significant than the braying of a donkey.

This sentence can be compared to one from another piece of demotic wisdom literature, known as Papyrus Insinger after its first modern owner.

A donkey is not praised for its load because of braying.

In some cases, such as these, either these names of animal noises or the names for the animals themselves may be considered onomatopoeic, that is, they imitate the sound itself. Thus, the word for snake is *hef* and the sound it makes is *nef*. The Egyptian word for donkey is ꜥꜣ the first sound of which is often described as the sound which we make in the back of our throat when we are strangling. The word for "braying" is *huhu*, reminiscent of English "heehaw."

Further examples of this phenomenon are found in other demotic texts on which we have been working. The common Egyptian word for cat is *miou,* that for dog, or puppy, is *yiuyiu.* One ostracon even says "The *yiuyiu* said *wuhwuh,*" for which the best English translation is "The puppy said 'woof woof'." There is also a word *gaagaa* which is used in demotic to mean "scream" but which corresponds to a word in an earlier Egyptian story which indicates the cackling of a goose. In earlier stages of Egyptian there are further examples such as *baa* meaning "ram" or *jedfe,* lit. "(animal which) says *fff*" meaning "snake." There are a few other cases where, although the animal name is not reflecting the animal's distinctive noise, the name seems quite appropriate. For instance, the word for "ant" is *gepgep,* which seems to come from a verb meaning "to hurry."

One recently published demotic text makes use of punning as a mnemonic to help remember names of different birds. This text contains two lists of birds. In the first, each bird is said to be on a specific tree or bush where at least the initial sounds of the name of the bird and the name of the tree are identical (e.g., *p3 ḥb ḥr p3 hbyn* 'the ibis is upon the ebony-tree'). In the second list each bird is said to have gone away to a place and again at least the initial sounds of the name of the bird and the geographical location are identical. An indication that the Egyptians were conscious of the word-play involved in such names is provided by other words, not related to animals, where the same phenomenon is found. For instance, the word for "sistrum," a musical instrument which, when shaken, sounded somewhat like a mariachi, is *sesheshy.*

As in modern societies, so in ancient Egypt, people made pets of their dogs or cats, which are sometimes shown on a stela or in a wall painting with their master. We have several references to specific kinds of dogs in demotic texts (e.g., there is an ostracon with a sketch of a man holding 2 dogs on leashes, one of which is called a "snub-nosed dog" and the other a "Maltese" dog). One ostracon mentions a "dog with a flaw/blemish," which may actually refer to a "dog with spots," i.e., "Spot." In addition, just as modern farmers have had the tendency to name their cows, so ancient Egyptian farmers named theirs. A few of these names have been preserved, including *Ta-romoom* "The one who goes ro-moom," which sounds rather like an attempt to mimic her mooing or lowing and reminds one of the English "ruminate," which meant, originally, to chew the cud.

As this report shows, writing a dictionary, which is often a tedious task, can sometimes provide a bit of levity and can sometimes make one aware of aspects of the culture behind

the language which one would not otherwise have thought about. The writing of the supplement is moving forward at a good pace. The first draft for 16 letters of the alphabet has been completed; three are in progress, leaving only 4 completely untouched. There are over 450 pages of draft manuscript on which the initial checking of every reference has begun.

Robert K. Ritner, the Associate Editor of the Demotic Dictionary Project, presented a status report on the project at the 2nd International Congress of Demoticists held in Leiden, Holland, in September. Everyone involved seemed to like the format which has been developed and the most common question was "How long will it be until it's done?" We had to admit we couldn't say for sure, but by this time next year I hope I can say we are well on the road to finishing the final manuscript. We are, at the same time, thinking ahead to how best to continue our work beyond this initial supplement. More of that as the time nears.

I would like to acknowledge the extraordinary contribution of all the members of our small staff, including Professor George R. Hughes, our invaluable resource person on unusual words, out of the way references, and common sense, as well as Robert Ritner, Lisa Moore, Adrian Esselström, Edward Walker, and Joseph Manning, all Research Assistants. Richard Jasnow has been on leave this year, working in Würzburg, West Germany, with Professor Karl-Theodor Zauzich, who spent a month in Chicago in the fall helping us with the myriad of problem words which had been identified by the regular staff.