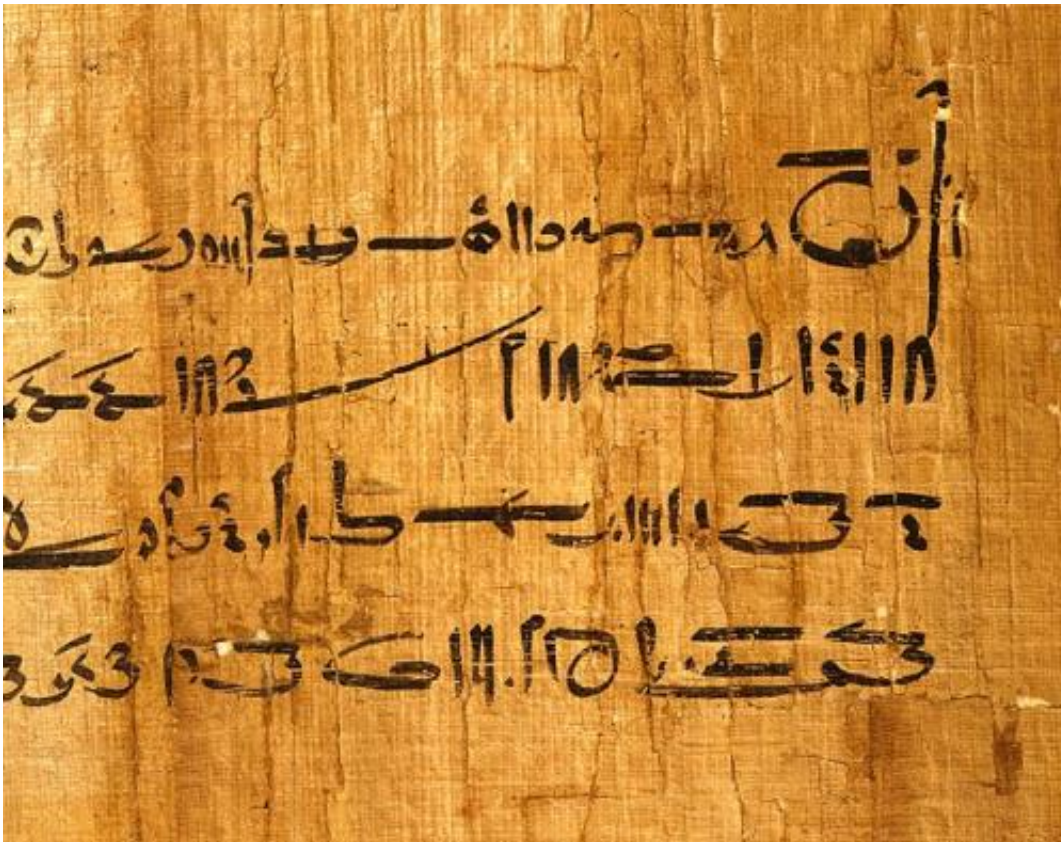


Chicago Demotic Dictionary refines knowledge of influential language

September 18 2012, by William Harms



This marriage annuity, written in the Demotic Egyptian language, provides information on how a husband agrees to provide for his wife. The flowing script was used in Egypt from about 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. Credit: Courtesy of Oriental Institute Museum

(Phys.org)—A dictionary of thousands of words chronicling the

everyday lives of people in ancient Egypt—including what taxes they paid, what they expected in a marriage and how much work they had to do for the government—has been completed by scholars at the University of Chicago.

The [ancient language](#) is Demotic Egyptian, a name given by the Greeks to denote it was the tongue of the demos, or common people. It was written as a flowing script and was used in Egypt from about 500 B.C. to 500 A.D., when the land was occupied and usually dominated by foreigners, including Persians, Greeks and Romans.

The language lives on today in words such as adobe, which came from the Egyptian word for brick. The word moved through Demotic, on to Arabic and eventually to Spain during the time of Islamic domination there, explained Janet Johnson, editor of the [Chicago Demotic Dictionary](#).

Ebony, the dark wood that was traded down the Nile from Nubia (present-day Sudan), also comes from Demotic roots. The name Susan is indirectly related to the Demotic word for water lily.

"Demotic was used for business and legal documents, private letters and administrative inscriptions, and literary texts, such as narratives and pieces of wisdom literature," said Johnson, the Morton D. Hull Distinguished Service Professor at the [Oriental Institute](#).

"It was also used for religious and magical texts as well as scientific texts dealing with topics such as astronomy, mathematics and medicine. It is an indispensable tool for reconstructing the social, political and cultural life of ancient Egypt during a fascinating period of its history," she continued.

"The University of Chicago is pretty much Demotic central," said James

Allen, PhD'81, the Wilbour Professor of Egyptology and chair of the Department of Egyptology and Ancient Western Asian Studies at Brown University. "Besides the Demotic dictionary, the University also has some of the world's top experts on Demotic on its faculty.

"This dictionary will be very useful, as there are more unpublished documents in Demotic than any other phase of ancient Egyptian," he said.

The Demotic language was one of the three texts on the Rosetta stone, which was also written in Egyptian hieroglyphs and Greek. In addition to being used on stone carvings, the script was left behind on papyrus and broken bits of pottery.

"Before Demotic, Egyptians developed a script form of hieroglyphs called hieratic; Demotic evolved from that. Because it was cursive, it was much easier and faster to use than were the elaborate pictures of the hieroglyphs," said Johnson.

The script was particularly useful as a means of conducting everyday business, such as paying taxes. "People would write the information down on potsherds and put them in the basement, much as we keep track today of our income tax records by keeping copies of our past returns," Johnson added.

THE ORIGINS OF THE DICTIONARY AT CHICAGO

Johnson, PhD'72, has worked with Demotic since she was a graduate student at the Oriental Institute. The advent of computer technology facilitated the assembly of the Demotic Dictionary, which unlike its older sister, the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, could be organized

electronically rather than on index cards.



Credit: Oriental Institute Museum

The Assyrian Dictionary was completed last year after 90 years of work, while the Demotic Dictionary, which does not include as much information as the Assyrian Dictionary, was completed in less than half the time.

The work began in 1975 as a supplement and update to Wolja Erichsen's *Demotisches Glossar*, published in 1954. The dictionary is based on texts in Demotic that were published by scholars from 1955 to 1979, and lists new words not included in Erichsen's work as well as new uses of words included there. The words are listed in the dictionary with references to how they were used in documents.

The use of computers helped speed the process of preparing the dictionary because it allowed scholars to reproduce the cursive script of Demotic electronically and add information in Roman fonts. By providing photographs, or facsimiles of the script, the dictionary provides an exact representation of the way people wrote the language.


The final entry for "S" has been completed, and 24 other letters are online. Eventually there will be a published dictionary primarily for university libraries.

NEW INSIGHTS ON HOW PEOPLE LIVED

Much of Johnson's own work deals with scholarship on women who lived during a period of transition in Egyptian society. Although the rulers in the classical worlds of Rome and Greece frequently minimized the role of women in their cultures, the Egyptians had an idea much closer to equality of the sexes.

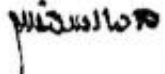
On a wall in the Oriental Institute Museum, for instance, is a papyrus scroll on display bearing the text of an annuity written in Demotic. Annuities were written by a husband to a wife to acknowledge money she had brought into marriage and also guaranteeing to provide a set amount of food plus money for clothing for her use each year during their marriage.

1 Middle Egyptian

 *hbny* (hebny [vocalisation unknown]) “ebony”

The first sign, on the left, is a top plan of a reed shelter, phonetic *h*; the leg and foot is a phonetic *b*; the wavy line is water, a phonetic *n*; the two diagonal strokes originally indicated duality but came to have the value of *y* because of the presence of *y* in the dual ending. The last two signs are “determinatives,” signs used to indicate the semantic range of a word. The top sign shows a stick of wood, indicating this is the name of (or something made of) a wood; the lower sign, consisting of three strokes, indicates plurality or abstraction.

2 Demotic

 *hbny* (hebny [vocalisation unknown]) “ebony”

The first sign, on the right, is a phonetic *h*; it is followed by a phonetic *b* (which itself consists of 2 strokes, the first one curving to the right at the bottom); then follow a phonetic *y* consisting of three strokes, frequently linked at the bottom, a phonetic *n*, and another phonetic *y*. The last sign is the demotic form of the “wood determinative.”

3 Greek

ἕβενος (hebenos) “ebony”

Credit: Oriental Institute Museum

The documents in Demotic show that people during the period continued the respect for women that had been typical of earlier times in Egyptian history. Women could own property, for instance, and also had the right to divorce their husbands.

Another Demotic scholar at the Oriental Institute is Brian Muhs, who has worked on tax records written in demotic, both official government tax records, and tax receipts issued to taxpayers.

Authorities conducted censuses, which were used to collect taxes with different rates for men and women; compulsory labor requirements for men only, such as digging ditches; and professional taxes for people practicing a profession. There were sales taxes and taxes collected as

grain from harvests.

"The government often leased the collection of taxes to the highest bidder, who was required to pay the amount of the bid to the government regardless of how much tax they collected," said Muhs, associate professor at the Oriental Institute.

"To protect the taxpayers from overzealous tax collectors, the tax collectors were required to issue tax receipts to taxpayers upon payment of their taxes," he explained. "Multiple tax receipts for the same individuals frequently survive, because individuals usually kept their tax receipts together for multiple years."

The preserved literature tells stories of human drama, with consequences in the afterlife of rewards for the righteous and punishment for the sinful.

The literature also has proverbs rich with folk wisdom, carried in instructions that are left on papyrus. They provide insights in the way people were expected to behave. "Do not sit down before a dignitary," the instructions caution, for instance.

Other examples of common sense include: "Pride and arrogance are the ruin of their owner"; "Do not sit or stand still in an undertaking which is urgent"; and "Money is the snare the god has placed on earth for the impious man so that he should worry daily."

A TOOL USED WORLDWIDE

Prof. Friedhelm Hoffmann of the Institute for Egyptology at the University of Munich said: "The Demotic texts play a crucial role in providing the necessary insights into the time when the classical world of Greece and Rome had close contacts to the Egyptian culture.

"The stories Herodotus (fifth-century B.C.) tells about Egyptian kings of the second-millennium B.C., for example, have to be understood not in the light of how the second millennium really was, but in the light of what the Egyptians of the fifth-century B.C. thought and narrated about these ancient times," he explained.

"I myself have been using the Chicago Demotic Dictionary since the first letters were published, not only for looking up words and but also finding their meaning," Hoffmann said.

The publication of the dictionary has doubled the number of words known in Demotic, and subsequent translations and publications will produce even more, Hoffmann said.

That work may prompt a need for a CDD 2.0, he said.

Provided by University of Chicago

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