

TRADITIONAL EGYPTIAN II (PTOLEMAIC, ROMAN)

التقليدية المصرية (خلال العصر البطلمي والروماني)

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Short Citation:

Engsheden, 2016, Traditional Egyptian II (Ptolemaic, Roman). *UEE*.

Full Citation:

Engsheden, Åke, 2016, Traditional Egyptian II (Ptolemaic, Roman). In Julie Stauder-Porchet, Andréas Stauder and Willeke Wendrich (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles.

<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002k6stb>

15561 Version 1, March 2016

<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz002k6stb>

TRADITIONAL EGYPTIAN II (PTOLEMAIC, ROMAN)

التقليدية المصرية (خلال العصر البطلمي والروماني)

Ake Engsheden

Neo-Mittelägyptisch/Spätmittelägyptisch (ptolemäische und römische Zeit)
Égyptien de tradition (époques ptolémaïque et romaine)

From 404 BCE - 394 CE hieroglyphic texts were in general composed in the high-status language variety termed Traditional Egyptian. This was used exclusively in religious and sacerdotal contexts and is as such opposed to Demotic, which served both as a spoken and as a written language. Traditional Egyptian is a reflex of how the late scribes perceived the classical language. The result is a morphologically impoverished Egyptian (in comparison with the classical language), in combination with a phonology that corresponds largely to Demotic. Traditional Egyptian served as a vehicle for many new compositions, in particular religious inscriptions in temples and on papyri, but also funerary, historical, and autobiographical texts. Meanwhile, older texts in the classical language continued to be copied: as long as there are no reliable means of dating texts according to linguistic criteria, it remains difficult to establish the exact corpus of texts written in Traditional Egyptian.

كانت النصوص الهيروغليفية بوجه عام خلال الفترة من 404 ق.م : 394م تتكون من لغة ذات مرتبة رفيعة ومصطلحات متنوعة من الميراث المصري. وقد استخدم هذا حصريا في السياقات الدينية والكهنوتية وهو على هذا النحو متعارض مع الديموطيقية ، التي استخدمت على حد سواء كلغة منطوقة ومكتوبة. (اللغة) المصرية التقليدية هي انعكاس لإدراك وفهم كتابة العصور المتأخرة للغة الكلاسيكية (الفصحى). والنتيجة لغة فقيرة في التكوين (بالمقارنة مع اللغة الفصحى)، وبالمزج مع علم الأصوات فانها مماثلة إلى حد كبير إلى الديموطيقية. (اللغة) التقليدية المصرية كانت بمثابة وسيلة للحصول على العديد من التراكيب الجديدة، وبالأخص النقوش الدينية خاصة في المعابد وعلى أوراق البردي، وأيضا النصوص الجنائزية، والتاريخية، ونصوص السيرة الذاتية. وفي الوقت نفسه استمر نسخ النصوص القديمة في اللغة الكلاسيكية (الفصحى): طالما لم يكن هناك وسائل يمكن الاعتماد عليها في تأريخ النصوص بالنسبة للمعايير اللغوية، إلا أنه لا يزال من الصعب تحديد دقيق للنصوص المكتوبة باللغة المصرية التقليدية.



The term Traditional Egyptian refers to the high-status language used by the priestly elite for writing mainly in hieroglyphs. It stands in opposition to Demotic, which was the vernacular form of Egyptian, both spoken and written, during the period. This article treats only Traditional Egyptian after the First Persian Period until the demise of hieroglyphic writing, from 404 BCE - 394 CE. For the preceding periods and

terminology, see Vernus (2016); the division does not correspond to any major grammatical differences between the two periods and has been introduced here for practical reasons only. Grammar, orthography, and layout of hieroglyphic texts first follow Saite models closely, then evolve gradually away from these.

Traditional Egyptian refers to a linguistic phenomenon whereas Ptolemaic (Kurth 2007,

2008; Leitz 2009), with which the term is sometimes used interchangeably, is better reserved for the new orthographical style characteristic of temple inscriptions, in which new phonetic values developed for the hieroglyphic signs. Indeed, Traditional Egyptian in Ptolemaic temple inscriptions does not display a break in grammar with Traditional Egyptian from the preceding period, nor are systematic grammatical differences to contemporary hieroglyphic texts known. It is therefore ill-advised in language classification to use a term, which focuses solely on the Greek Period and on a single body of texts such as the temple inscriptions. In addition, “Ptolemaic” also means much more, namely the study of the interrelationships of text, image, and temple architecture, the so-called “temple grammar” (Kurth 2007: 7, 2011: 75-76), thus vastly transcending the domain of language study itself.

Corpus

Temple inscriptions make up the bulk of hieroglyphic texts preserved from the period. These come from the Ptolemaic and Roman temples of Dendara, Edfu, Esna, Kom Ombo, and Philae, to name but the most significant (overview of text editions in Leitz 2009: 2-5). Several different text types are attested showing a varying degree of grammatical complexity (in increasing order): captions, ritual texts, hymns, litanies, cult-topographical texts, and mythological ones. It is obvious that the temples incorporate much older material, as has often been pointed out (Sauneron 1974: 151-152; Quack 2008, 2010c: 80-82), but the embedding of the texts into the architecture speaks for a date of (final) redaction close to the time when the buildings were erected (e.g., the Myth of Horus in Edfu according to Kurth 2011: 69). *Historical stelae* are comparatively rare, fewer than a dozen in total. The last monolingual text of this kind, the Mendes Stela (Sethe 1904: 28-54), is dated to Ptolemy II Philadelphus (264 BCE). Not altogether dissimilar in purport are the *sacerdotal decrees* from the mid-Ptolemaic Period. These were set up, in the ideal case, in three versions: hieroglyphic, Demotic, and Greek (Clarysse 2000), whereby the hieroglyphic version

reflects Traditional Egyptian grammar strained to its limits. The best preserved of these is the Canopus Decree (238 BCE), the best known is the Memphis Decree (196 BCE), represented by the Rosetta Stone (Quirke and Andrews 1989).

Next to this state-sanctioned production of texts, *private inscriptions* abound on funerary equipment and private statuary. Original *autobiographies* are, however, comparatively rare (list in Rössler-Köhler 1991: 256-359), but are through their historical anchorage prime examples of newly composed texts and, consequently, of Traditional Egyptian (cf. Quack 2013: 49). Autobiographies are found on statuary and on funerary stelae, exceptionally also inscribed on the tomb wall as in Petosiris’ tomb in Tuna el-Gebel (Lefebvre 1923-1924). The writing of autobiographies came to a standstill in the early Roman Period with one notable exception from the reign of Hadrian (Scharff 1927). Inventive inscriptions are also found on obelisks (Erman 1896; Meyer 1994). Later inscriptions, such as the late stelae of the Buchis bull (Goldbrunner 2004: 75-77), are more formulaic in their language.

In addition, there is a large number of *religious papyri* written in cursive hieroglyphs or hieratic. Some of these, such as the *Book of the Dead*, have a long history of transmission and are largely reproductive, while others are new compositions, including mortuary texts such as the *Book of Traversing Eternity* (Herbin 1994) or the *Letter for Breathing which Isis Made for her Brother Osiris* (Coenen and Quaegebeur 1995). As with religious texts in general, it is difficult to determine to what extent such documents are copies of older religious texts. The conclusion that newly composed texts received a Demotic structure whereas older texts with an overall Middle Egyptian structure are old compositions (von Lieven 2007, 2010: 421) seems unwarranted (Jansen-Winkel 2011). For instance, it has been claimed on the basis of a grammatical analysis that Papyrus Jumilhac, a well-preserved cult-topographical text of late Ptolemaic date (Vandier 1961), reproduces now lost texts that would have originated between the Middle Kingdom and

the Saite Period (Quack 2008). However, Late Egyptian features, which have been cited in order to anchor one section of Papyrus Jumilhac to the 19th Dynasty (Quack 2008: 214-215; *jw* as converter, sequential *jw=f hr sdm*, =*sn* alongside =*w* for the 3rd person plural pronoun), are likewise found in the Canopus Decree showing that one still had command of these forms in the third century BCE (for the sequential *jw=f hr sdm*, Engsheden 2003: 243-250). As for other religious texts without known models, it is difficult to see why their simple grammatical design could not be recent. Our present ability to recognize a text as an ancient composition, therefore, still depends on the chance survival of older copies.

Grammatical Outlook

The grammatical structure of Traditional Egyptian seems by and large familiar from Middle Egyptian, but there are a number of features, which make it possible to differentiate Traditional Egyptian from its models (Jansen-Winkel 2011: 174-176). These elements are not limited to the temple inscriptions and are basically the same in other hieroglyphic inscriptions from the Saite Period on (Quack 2010: 74). A few features in common between the two groups (but not all texts) are: Old Egyptian deictics are found (Kurth 2008: 631; also, e.g., in the biographical text of Petosiris and in the Canopus Decree); definite articles are not uncommon with names and epithets and also appear in emotional contexts, such as the vocative, even with common nouns (Kurth 2008: 616). More significant are the deviations from Classical verbal morphology. Verbs have no inflectional markers on the stem (gemination, inflectional elements *-w*, *-t*); gender and number agreement is largely lost in participles, relative forms, and the stative; the distinction between the negations *nj* and *nn* is not upheld (Kurth 2008: 788-789). Nouns are sometimes used as verbs (Kurth 2008: 755-756) and intransitive verbs are commonly used transitively (Kurth 2008: 760-761), significantly more than in Old and Middle Egyptian. Noteworthy is the reanalysis of the former possessive construction *n-wj X* “I belong to X,” which led to a new independent pronoun “I” (Quack 2009: 274) found in nominal

sentences both in temple inscriptions (Kurth 2008: 610) and in private ones (Fairman 1934; el-Sayed 1980: 243).

Differences with respect to the classical language should not be seen as failed Middle Egyptian. Rather, the norm is different. A case in point is the loss of *-t* on the infinitive of weak verbs, except before suffix pronouns, which is exactly the pattern found in later Egyptian. This suggests that the norm in Traditional Egyptian followed the phonetic evolution whenever the categories were shared between earlier and contemporary varieties. One may say that it is precisely the combination of a grammar reproducing Middle Egyptian features with an evolved phonological system that makes up the specificity of Traditional Egyptian vis-à-vis Middle Egyptian. This also bears on the much reduced inflection in Traditional Egyptian. Phonetic changes may have led to a situation in which several forms of the *sdm=f*, which in earlier Egyptian were probably distinct through different vowels and prosody, were conflated into fewer patterns (cf. Osing 1976: 32-36). This reduced relevance of inflection is also seen in the *sdmt=f* (Engsheden 2003: 189; Kurth 2008: 739) and, perhaps, also the future participle *sdm.tj=ff*, to judge from the extreme rarity of the characteristic ending of this form outside set phrases after the Persian Period (Jansen-Winkel 1994b; Kurth 2008: 733).

An interesting guiding principle for Traditional Egyptian is the avoidance of constructions that were identical to Demotic. This is seen, for example, in the occasional use of the conjunctive with an impersonal subject pronoun, *mtw=tw sdm*, “and one will hear,” corresponding to Demotic *mtw=w sdm* (Engsheden 2003: 278; Kurth 2008: 749). Remarkably, the conjunctive is but rarely attested in other grammatical persons. This is hardly accidental: in *mtw=tw sdm*, the use of *=tw* instead of *=w* suffices to make the overall form, *mtw=tw sdm*, different and thus distinctive from the form in use in Demotic, *mtw=w sdm*. A similar principle of partial dissimilation is observed in the choice between the Classical past *sdm.n=f* and the more recent past *sdm=f* “he heard,” characteristic of Late Egyptian/

Demotic. Here as well, the observed distribution is partly according to the subject (Engsheden 2003: 160-166; Kurth 2008: 737). When the subject is a third person plural pronoun specifically, *sdm=sn* is mostly found, not Middle Egyptian *sdm.n=sn*. The older tense marker (*-n-*) is thus left out, the differentiation from the contemporary Demotic (*sdm=w*) being already realized by the different suffix pronoun (Classical *=sn* vs. later *=w*). With other grammatical persons, for which the differentiation from Demotic cannot be realized at the level of suffix pronouns, the older form of the verb, the *sdm.n=f*, predominates. As these examples illustrate, Traditional Egyptian often aims at a (partial) dissimilation from Demotic, rather than at a comprehensive imitation of the classical language.

Despite features such as those mentioned above, the heterogeneity of Traditional Egyptian grammar should not be overestimated. Spellings are considerably more heterogeneous than grammar.

Socio-Linguistic Situation

The very existence of Traditional Egyptian implies a situation of diglossia in which it was used as a high-standard variety for written expression within a narrow range of functions in the sacred sphere, in contrast to Demotic, which was both spoken and written. Traditional Egyptian was the privileged variety in the sacred sphere, for communication with gods and for display, whereas Demotic was used primarily for communication involving humans (Jansen-Winkeln 1994a: 207), even though its use extended gradually into the religious sphere over time. In bi- or trilingual inscriptions, the status of the hieroglyphic text resorts clearly from the fact that it was always placed in the topmost position although its communicative efficiency must have been low in strict linguistic terms (Thiers 2009: 54). In the second half of the Ptolemaic Period, an increasing permeability between registers and languages is observed so that Demotic also came to be used in funerary contexts, a trend which grew stronger in the Roman Period and is noticeable both in mortuary texts on papyri

(Smith 2009) and in funerary inscriptions (Farid 1995). From about the same time, there are even a few religious texts on various materials, which represent attempts to render Traditional Egyptian in the Demotic script (e.g., Legrain 1890; Smith 1977; Widmer 2004).

Whether Traditional Egyptian could actually serve as a medium of spoken communication remains the subject of speculation (Kurth 2007: 6, 2011: 77). At any rate, Traditional Egyptian must have been pronounceable as it had an oral realization in ritual (Quack 2013: 50). How it actually sounded may be gleaned from one unique text from the second century CE (Papyrus BM 10808) with a column written in Greek letters, but reflecting a text in Traditional Egyptian (Osing 1976: 14-44; Quack 2010b: 238). Despite the many uncertainties surrounding its interpretation, this papyrus demonstrates that Traditional Egyptian when spoken out was more or less on a par with the contemporary vernacular as regards phonological matters. This is also seen in different spellings in the temple inscriptions, which reflect phonetic change, e.g., the confusion of the dentals *t* and *d* (Kurth 2007: 62-66). The importance of preserving a normative pronunciation is further demonstrated by hieratic papyri from the second century CE, with glosses in the Demotic script or in the Greek alphabet (“Old Coptic”) indicating the pronunciation for selected lexical items (Osing 1998: 40-64). Another device to secure the pronunciation is words represented by unetymological group writing in Traditional Egyptian texts in the Demotic script (Stadler 2008: 170-172; Quack 2010a: 335, 2010b: 226-233).

Linguistic Models and Sources

Traditional Egyptian is not the product of a regular linguistic evolution in which grammar and lexicon are passed over from one generation to the next, changing as a result of ongoing linguistic interaction in society, and with no chance of return for lost morphological and grammatical patterns. Traditional Egyptian, in other words, is not a language stage like historical stages of Egyptian

such as Middle or Late Egyptian (Quack 2010c: 72).

As seen above, Traditional Egyptian can accommodate distinctive elements of all earlier stages (Old, Middle, and Late Egyptian) as well as occasional Demoticisms. In the fourth century BCE, a more regular Demotic structure in hieroglyphic texts seems to have been limited to the legal register as on the Sais Decree (Naukratis and Thonis Stelae, cf. von Bomhard 2012: 74-76) and the Satrap Stela (Schäfer 2011: 162-166), in a way similar to the situation already observed in the Third Intermediate Period (Jansen-Winkel 1994a: 209). A mid-Ptolemaic example is the lengthy text from Edfu defining the extent of land donations (Meeks 1972). For the temple inscriptions, the similar phenomenon, which was not widespread, has been termed “monumental Demotic” (Quack 1995, 2010a: 332). Examples include the ritual for the feast of Khoiak in one of the Osiris chapels in Dendara, and a few hymns from Esna. Demotic influence is more pronounced in the hieroglyphic inscriptions from the Napatan kingdom (Peust 1999). This contrast is revealing in itself: to begin with, Napatan scribes or elites would not have had the same access to the scribal practice and historically deep written tradition as in Egypt itself. Furthermore, Demotic and Meroitic, the native language in Napata, belonged to entirely different language families, so that the distance between sacred and vernacular language was already clearly established.

It is unlikely that there existed a clear understanding of the historical evolution of Egyptian. Rather, grammatical differences were probably attributed to different text types. If Middle Egyptian had served as a model in a way similar to how Renaissance humanists strove to write Classical Latin—a case sometimes invoked as a parallel—it seems illogical that one would have used a system of writing (Ptolemaic), which contained so many signs of an obviously recent date and had ancient texts recast in this mold. Here, the structure of Traditional Egyptian was secondary to the display of craftsmanship in writing. The grammatical makeup of

Traditional Egyptian, in which elements of Middle Egyptian are the ones most prominent yet by no means exclusive, is then the natural effect of a practice of working with ancient textual models that happened to be for the most part in Middle Egyptian.

Levels of Competence

Knowledge was transmitted through the practice of copying texts on papyrus, stored in temple libraries. Any hieroglyphic text, except for standard phrases, must have required a draft or original. During the Persian Period, text transmission and artisanal traditions must have continued uninterrupted on papyrus documents, even if there were few great commands by the central government. This follows from the fact that any real break between the late Saite Period and the revival of cultural patterns in the fourth century BCE is hard to pinpoint. The intense building activity in the Greek and early Roman Periods signified that there must have been a constant demand for qualified scribes and sculptors. Inventive text production only knows a significant drop after about a century into Roman rule. The last significant corpus of continuous temple inscriptions stem from the temples of Esna during the reign of Trajan (98-117 CE). Philae has even later specimens (Junker 1913), but as they lack references to contemporary events their date of composition is unclear. Later inscriptions show a more restricted competence in Egyptian. Even so, assembling traditional phraseology in a meaningful way needed qualified expertise. The value of such inscriptions is slight for the study of grammar, despite their historical or theological importance, which is, at times, considerable.

Traditional Egyptian was passed on through teaching in the temple school, the “House of Life,” but almost nothing is known about instruction methods. There must have been different levels of competence according to age and individuals even among the literate few. The funerary sphere with its many fixed phrases would have demanded less competence than theology-ridden texts in the temple that were newly composed or reworked from earlier models. The competence ranged

from easy reproductive inscriptions to syntactically complex texts such as the sacerdotal decrees. Most energy was spent on the Ptolemaic graphical system, leading to inscriptions such as in the temple of Esna, which is exclusively composed of crocodile signs (Hallof 2011: 10), but is grammatically simple. The immense amount of texts that has been lost is suggested by what is left from the

archive of a priest in Tebtunis in the second century CE (Osing 1998; Osing and Rosati 1998). This includes, among other things, a list of Middle Egyptian words divided into word classes, and a list of synonyms. It seems likely that both had a didactic purpose similar to other material such as hieroglyphic sign lists (Iversen 1958).

Bibliographic Notes

For a long time, the only work concerning Traditional Egyptian during the period covered in this article was a study of the grammar in texts from the temple of Dendara (Junker 1906). In recent years, things have been improving through corpus-based studies (Engsheden 2003 for decrees, historical texts, and autobiographies). A major step forward is the grammar of temple inscriptions by Kurth (2008), based primarily on the temple of Edfu. Elements of verbal morphology in the temple of Opet in Karnak are described by Paulet (2006). Among the papyri of the period, only the Papyrus Bremner-Rhind (late fourth century BCE) has been the subject of a full grammatical study (Lustman 1999). The publication of Kurth's grammar has sparked a much needed debate on terminology and how Ptolemaic should be defined (Quack 2010c, 2013; Kurth 2011).

The only specialized dictionary (Wilson 1997) concerns the temple of Edfu; although not covering the whole temple, this remains useful. Few articles have been devoted specifically to the vocabulary (Fairman 1964; Smith 1979; Budde and Kurth 1994). Much is to be learned from the contrastive study of Daumas (1952), which compares the native Egyptian versions (hieroglyphic, Demotic) with the Greek of the sacerdotal decrees.

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