

THE LAST STAND?

What remains Egyptian in Oxyrhynchus

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This article is based on a first-hand inspection of the papyri from Oxyrhynchus now housed at the EES papyrus collection in Oxford. While Egyptian-language texts are relatively rare, they are substantially attested, and a preliminary assessment of their genres can help establish which sorts of texts were still preserved in Egyptian language and script. Such observations have implications about canonicity. It seems that the Egyptian language was deemed most important for rituals, while for technical treatises (including divination) translation was already a viable option. “Belles-lettres,” especially narratives and wisdom texts, are no longer attested in the Egyptian language.

1. INTRODUCTION

The title of my contribution might raise questions on two counts. Firstly, to speak of a “last stand” smacks of the melodramatic. Was the situation really as dramatic as to require a last heroic but futile stand against overwhelming opposing forces? Secondly, is there anything at all which remains Egyptian at Oxyrhynchus? We all know the many thousand papyri in Greek from that site which make it the single most important source for papyrology.¹ But who has heard of papyri from Oxyrhynchus in Egyptian?

Perhaps some people will remember that there is one (in)famous text, the so-called “Late Egyptian” papyrus BM 10808 said to come from Oxyrhynchus, written in Greek letters plus some additional Egyptian demotic signs and containing a text in Egyptian even if its meaning proves to be quite hard to establish.² I will indeed come back later to that text, hoping to provide a new perspective on it.

¹ For an overview, see e.g. Parsons, *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish*, 2007, and Bowman, Coles, Gonis, Obbink and Parsons (eds.), *Oxyrhynchus. A City and its Texts*, 2007.

² See the divergent opinions in the studies by Osing, *Der spätägyptische Papyrus BM 10808*, 1976, and Sederholm, *Papyrus British Museum 10808 and Its Cultural and Religious Setting*, 2006 as well as my proposal at a substantial re-interpretation in Quack,

Those who have read very carefully in recent publications are even likely to have noticed mention made of “a handful of demotic papyri of (presumably) the early Roman period” by Bowman, and the statement that the Egyptian element died out in the 2nd century CE,³ or another remark by Coles that Demotic was “relatively rare” at this site.⁴

Now that is exactly the material I am bringing into the fore here, although it is slightly more than “a handful of” texts, and also not confined to demotic. The following contribution is based on my personal notes taken when looking through the collection of Oxyrhynchus papyri housed at Oxford.⁵ It is based on checking practically every box for which in the preliminary inventories the presence of any Egyptian language was mentioned,⁶ plus a good number of others. While there remain a number of uncatalogued boxes (mainly with smaller fragments), the material is not likely to increase substantially in the future. In principle, it should also be possible to add Oxyrhynchus papyri from other collections. In practice, this can sometimes run into problems. For example, in the Florence collection there are a number of unpublished papyri with at least one side in Egyptian writing which are labelled on the frame as coming from Oxyrhynchus. However, the hands in question look so much like Tebtunis material that we have to reckon with a possible mix-up of proveniences.

At the moment, there are fragments noted belonging to about 40 hieratic, 7 hieroglyphic and 90 demotic papyri, but given the problems inherent in recognising small fragments as belonging to the same manuscript, these numbers are still preliminary (and not every scrap has been counted).

‘Review of Sederholm, *Papyrus British Museum 10808*,’ 2009, col. 27-33. For an interpretation of the scant remnants of the first column, see Dieleman, ‘Ein spätägyptisches magisches Handbuch,’ 2004, p. 122-128 (partly problematic in view of the new readings and translations proposed in Quack, ‘Griechische und andere Dämonen in den demotischen magischen Texten,’ 2004, p. 428f. note 10).

³ Thus Bowman, ‘Roman Oxyrhynchus,’ p. 179f.; duly noted in Depauw and Hoffmann, ‘Demotische Literaturübersicht XXXI,’ 2008/2009, p. 165.

⁴ Coles, ‘Oxyrhynchus: A City and its Texts,’ 2007, p. 7.

⁵ I would like to express my special gratitude to Dirk Obbink who has made my work possible.

⁶ While the notes on the presence of Egyptian as such are relatively accurate (sometimes not quite complete), the distinction between Roman period hieratic and demotic indicated in them is generally not reliable.

2. THE MATERIAL EVIDENCE

2.1. Chronological problems

One crucial question which is still in need of further clarification concerns dating. Most of the demotic and all of the hieratic material does not preserve any exact dating formula, thus palaeography is the main resort. Unfortunately, the palaeography of Roman period Egyptian hands is a rather local affair with strong regional variation, probably because there was no dominating centre radiating out a calligraphic model to be emulated throughout the country.⁷ Given the paucity of securely dated material combined with the fact that the hands look quite different from Fayyumic hands, in spite of the rather short geographical distance, I am at the moment reluctant to give really precise dates for the material. Still I consider it practically certain that a substantial part of the material I am speaking about comes from the 2nd century CE – I am much less certain that there is anything which can be attributed to the third century. Actually, such a basic distribution could be paralleled from better known sites like Tebtunis and Soknopaiou Nesos where Egyptian material from the second century CE is quite numerous but for the third quite rare or even entirely unattested.

The chronological distribution has also its implications when it comes to comparing the relative relevance of Egyptian and Greek writing for different areas of life. Obviously, it would distort the picture if we employed a statistical model that set the number of Egyptian texts against the totality of Greek Oxyrhynchus texts. We have to limit the Greek to the end of the 2nd century CE also. Furthermore, we should not forget that the bulk of Greek texts from Oxyrhynchus are non-literary, especially administrative and economic. But there is ample evidence that the use of demotic Egyptian for administrative documents dropped dramatically in the Roman period also elsewhere in the country.⁸ Thus, having rather few Egyptian-language documentary texts from a find-place with mainly Roman period material is hardly surprising.

2.2. Egyptian administrative texts

Still, we do have demotic administrative documents from Oxyrhynchus. On the one hand, there are a number of contracts, especially annuity contracts and documents about real estate, which are written in demotic

⁷ See Quack, 'On the regionalisation of Roman period Egyptian hands,' in press.

⁸ See e.g. Muhs, 'The Grapheion and the Disappearance of Demotic Contracts in Early Roman Tebtunis and Soknopaiou Nesos,' 2005, p. 93-104; Lippert et Schentuleit, *Demotische Dokumente aus Dime III*, p. 4-5.

Egyptian, normally with a Greek version below them on the same page – similar to the Roman period contracts from Soknopaiou Nesos. The Oxyrhynchus material dates mainly to the late Ptolemaic and early Roman time, but there is at least one document with the name of Trajan preserved.

Equally, there are a number of accounts in demotic Egyptian from Oxyrhynchus. None of them has a preserved date, and I would be a bit reluctant to assign a very specific date to them, but most likely they are from the first century CE.

Also, we have a few letters in Egyptian script from Oxyrhynchus. The most surprising thing about them is that they are not all in demotic. As a matter of fact, no less than three different letters are written completely or largely (with a few demotic groups) in hieratic, even though their language is certainly demotic, not classical or late Egyptian. As an explanation for this strange use of the writing system, I would propose that they were written by priests who were equally at home in both writing systems.⁹ There is also one scarcely legible small piece which might be an oracular question addressed at Osiris and Serapis, but the decipherment has still to be verified.

2.3. Egyptian literary and subliterate texts

More important for our actual question, however, are certainly the literary and subliterate texts in the Egyptian language from Oxyrhynchus. They exist in both hieratic and demotic script, and there are also some examples of hieroglyphic script on papyrus. In some cases, we also have to reckon with drawings. A major difficulty for all analysis is that the fragments are normally quite small and unsubstantial, thus the identification of their genre can pose serious problems; at the moment it is often impossible to say more than that the fragment is not documentary. The discussion that follows is focused on those cases where enough keywords are preserved to make a proposal about the textual genre.

Probably the best attested genre in the demotic texts is divinatory compositions. There are about two or three which can be globally attributed to that category without a more specific determination. At least three more, perhaps even four different manuscripts can be specifically recognised as astrological treatises. The best preserved of them is written on the verso of a commentary on Aristotle, *De anima*.

⁹ See Quack, 'Demotische Verwaltungstexte in hieratischer Schrift,' in press.

There is one text which mainly consists of dates; I suspect it to be astronomical in nature.

Some demotic papyri are of a religious nature; some perhaps mythological, others rather incantations or invocations to deities, in one case a list of forms of Hathor. One text is written stichically, so it might consist of religious poetry.

Furthermore, there are two fragments which might come from law collections, one text is perhaps mathematical, another one medical in nature. One text which is very difficult to read shows a mixture of demotic and hieratic writing; I have not yet been able to pinpoint its content more closely.

Finally, in the line of scholastic texts, there is a relatively well preserved fragment of accounts to which parts of a "schoolbook" were glued subsequently (the recto of it is joined with the verso of the account); it shows a list of the birds used for memorising the Late-Egyptian alphabetic sequence,¹⁰ plus a list of metal objects.

Among the hieratic papyri, the best attested composition is the Book of the Temple, of which there are about three or four different manuscripts preserved. Of course we have to take into account that this is a composition where I am in a rather good position to identify even rather small fragments with the help of the many parallel manuscripts from other places, thus the composition might be a bit numerically overrepresented. As representative of fundamental religious knowledge, we have a text with religious geography where place-names are listed and defined.

Furthermore, we have ritual texts, e.g., one from an offering ritual and another one from the Ritual of Opening the Mouth, in the latter case with Sokar-Osiris as the beneficiary.¹¹ To be noted is one fragment from Florence where we have an offering liturgy (water libation) for a private beneficiary designated as *mn pn* "this NN".¹² There is one ritual against enemies which mentions the country *ḥhy*, a well-known New Kingdom term for the Asian regions. Among the ritual texts there are also several, unfortunately all quite badly preserved, which show a Greek interlinear version. From a preliminary analysis, I suppose that this is more likely

¹⁰ For that, see especially Quack, 'Die spätägyptische Alphabetreihenfolge und das 'südsemitische' Alphabet,' 2003, p. 163-184; F. Gaudard, 'Le P. Berlin 8278 et ses fragments,' 2009, p. 165-169.

¹¹ This is the most frequent beneficiary in temple manuscripts of the ritual in general, see Quack, 'Fragmente des Mundöffnungsrituals aus Tebtynis,' 2006, p. 136-140 (recent research makes it possible to even augment the number of cases presented there).

¹² The text is on the recto of a papyrus of which the verso (a Greek letter) was published as PSI III 177.

to be a phonetic rendering of the text than a translation as such. A few more compositions are hymns or lists of deities. Another text is about inspecting a house for possible infections; it seems similar in scope to a text about the priest of Sakhmet and his activities from Tebtunis published by Osing,¹³ and some parts can even be identified as direct parallels to the Florence papyrus.

Among the hieroglyphic texts, we have one that is dated under a king whose name, unfortunately, is largely lost. This seems to be purely textual, as far as can be discerned from the surviving fragment. Other papyri with hieroglyphic writing also carry drawings, which means with some likelihood that they were sketches for temple decoration. Thus, we have a figure of a deity with remnants of a typical divine speech promising the king millions of jubilees. Another drawing shows a bull, and the text actually mentions the Apis-bull. We also have drawings in Egyptian style without any preserved writing, like a high-quality image of the Egyptian god Bes (pOxy 4841),¹⁴ and another one of a headless god with eight uraei instead of a head. While drawings are made in an Egyptian style, this does not necessarily imply that the Egyptian script was the writing medium used; as a matter of fact there are fragments combining Egyptian iconography with Greek writing.

2.4. Greek texts based on Egyptian models

This should be the fitting cue to pass over to the other side, namely to texts that are transmitted in Greek but are likely translations or free adaptations of Egyptian texts, or at least concerned with Egyptian religious life. Obviously, there are quite a few of them. Some scholars have supposed that they derive mainly from an antiquarian interest of Greeks in Egyptian religion.¹⁵ In light of the material I have presented, such a position is obviously inadequate. We should not forget that the most important sanctuary of Roman-period Oxyrhynchus was one for Thoueris, an Egyptian goddess.¹⁶ Another important sanctuary seems to have been the temple of Sarapis, of which substantial architectural remains have been pointed out¹⁷ – even if for the cult of Sarapis we should expect Greek rather than the Egyptian religious texts. Also, we

¹³ Osing and Rosati, *Papiri geroglifici e ieratici da Tebtynis*, 1998, p. 189-215, pl. 22-23.

¹⁴ Published in Whitehouse, 'Drawing a Fine Line in Oxyrhynchus,' 2007, p. 299, 304, pl. xxix.

¹⁵ Thus Whitehorne, 'The Pagan Cults of Roman Oxyrhynchus,' 1995, p. 3071.

¹⁶ Krüger, *Oxyrhynchus in der Kaiserzeit*, 1990, p. 101-105; Whitehorne, 'The Pagan Cults of Roman Oxyrhynchus,' 1995, p. 3050-3091.

¹⁷ Parlasca, 'Ein Sarapistempel in Oxyrhynchus,' 2006, p. 253-275.

should keep in mind that recent archaeological fieldwork has uncovered substantial religious buildings in Egyptian tradition, like the Osirian catacombs from the Ptolemaic period.¹⁸ There are also Roman period tombs with decoration in typically Egyptian religious motifs.¹⁹

The best-known case of Egyptian religious ideas in Greek is probably the papyrus carrying on the recto the praise of Isis (pOxy. 1380),²⁰ on the verso the aretology of Asklepios-Imouthes (pOxy. 1381).²¹ Especially the first one can be profitably compared with an Egyptian demotic composition attested in probably at least three different manuscripts, calling for worship of Isis to the exclusion of any other deity and enumerating identifications of deities with Isis at different places in topographical order.²² There is even an unpublished demotic papyrus that, like the Greek text, extends the equation of Isis with local deities to non-Egyptian ones.²³ For the second one, there is even a possibility that we might have remnants of the actual demotic composition.²⁴

A further example is pOxy. 2552, a papyrus with drawings of gods in Egyptian style, combined with scanty remains of a Greek text that might describe these deities.²⁵ Perhaps rather closely related is pWashington University inv. 139.²⁶ It was originally understood as magical, but

¹⁸ See Mascot, 'L'Osireion d'Oxyrhynchos,' 2008, p. 77-85; Coulon, 'Les inscriptions des catacombes osiriennes d'Oxyrhynchus. Témoignages du culte d'Osiris sous les règnes de Ptolémée VI et Ptolémée VIII,' 2011, p. 71-91.

¹⁹ Padro, 'Recent Archeological Work,' 2007, esp. p. 130-133.

²⁰ Editio princeps Grenfell and Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, XI, 1915, p. 190-220; see especially the indications of Totti, *Ausgewählte Texte der Isis- und Sarapis-Religion*, 1985, p. 62-75; the epithets are used in Bricault, *Myrionymi*, 1996, p. 11-75.

²¹ Editio princeps Grenfell and Hunt, *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, XI, p. 221-234; French translation Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès trismégiste*, I, p. 52-55; commentary with bibliography Wildung, *Imhotep und Amenhotep*, p. 93-98; new edition Totti, *Ausgewählte Texte der Isis- und Sarapis-Religion*, 1985, p. 36-45; German translation by Jördens, 'Griechische Texte aus Ägypten,' 2010, p. 318-321.

²² See Kockelmann, *Praising the Goddess*, 2008; Quack, *Einführung in die altägyptische Literaturgeschichte III*, 2009, p. 107-108.

²³ Described briefly by M. Stadler *apud* Kockelmann, *Praising the Goddess*, 2008, p. 86; more fully idem, 'New Light on the Universality of Isis,' in press.

²⁴ Quack, *Einführung in die altägyptische Literaturgeschichte III*, 2009, p. 169f.

²⁵ Edition Barns, in: Barns, Parsons, Rea et Turner, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, XXXI, 1966, p. 71.

²⁶ Editio princeps Packman, 'Three Magical Texts from the Washington University Collection,' 1976, p. 177-179; new edition by Maresch et Packman, *Papyri from the Washington University Collection, St. Louis, Missouri, Part II*, 1990, p. 47-51 (Text 74); Daniel et Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum*, II, 1992, p. 90-94 (text 70).

Thissen has plausibly suggested that it should be interpreted as an Egyptian cosmogonic text.²⁷

Also describing Egyptian deities, especially chronocratoric ones, is pOxy. 465.²⁸ It contains Egyptian names with sometimes Greek explanations of the meaning. The form of the deities is clearly within the range of polymorphic Egyptian iconography, they even can be compared very convincingly with the Egyptian concept of the hippopotamus deities and their children as deities of the months.

pOxy. 470 expounds an astral allegorization of a board game.²⁹ To judge from the genuine Egyptian words preserved in it, it is likely to be translated from Egyptian.

pOxy. 2332 is one manuscript of the Oracle of the Potter.³⁰ This text directly confirms that it is translated from the Egyptian, and even if there is still no fragment of such a version identified, the claim does not seem unlikely. In any case, the genre is well attested in Egyptian Demotic.³¹

Among the juridical texts, one can mention pOxy. 3285³² which is a direct translation of the Demotic legal manual of which the best preserved copy (directly paralleled in the Greek fragment) comes from Hermopolis.³³

²⁷ Thissen, 'Κμηφ – ein verkannter Gott,' 1996, p. 156. Already Turner, *apud* Maresch et Packman, *Papyri from the Washington University Collection, St. Louis, Missouri, Part II*, 1990, p. 47 proposed to see it as a cosmology and not as a magical text.

²⁸ Grenfell et Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, III, 1903, p. 126-137; photograph of a part in Gundel et Gundel, *Astrologumena*, 1966, pl. III. I should stress that the identification of this text as part of the Salmeschiniaka, as already proposed in the editio princeps and further elaborated by Gundel, *Dekane und Dekansternbilder*, 1936, p. 39-41 and 413f. is likely to be wrong. For a more detailed discussion, see Quack, *Beiträge zu den ägyptischen Dekanen und ihrer Rezeption in der griechisch-römischen Welt*, 2002; idem, 'The Naos of the Decades and its Place in Egyptian Astrology,' 2010, p. 178f.

²⁹ Editio princeps Grenfell et Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, III, p. 141-146; see especially Pieper, 'Ein Text über das ägyptische Brettspiel,' 1931, p. 29-32; idem, 'Zum astronomischen Papyrus von Oslo,' 1934, p. 65-67; Gundel et Gundel, *Astrologumena*, p. 37 u. 168f.

³⁰ Editio princeps Lobel et Roberts, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Part XXII*, 1954, p. 89-99; for the text, see Koenen, 'Die Apologie des Töpfers an König Amenophis oder das Töpferorakel,' 2002, p. 139-187; Quack, *Einführung in die altägyptische Literaturgeschichte III*, 2009, p. 178-181; idem, 'Ist der Meder an allem schuld?,' 2011, p. 103-131.

³¹ Quack, *Einführung in die altägyptische Literaturgeschichte III*, 2009, p. 174-188.

³² Editio princeps Rea, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, XLVI, 1978, p. 30-38.

³³ Study of the parallel sections by Pestman, 'Le manuel de droit égyptien de Hermopolis,' 1985, p. 116-143; handy edition of the Demotic as well as Greek texts by van Heel, *The Legal Manual of Hermopolis*, 1990.

And of course, there is the case of pWashington University inv. 138 + pOslo 2 which constitutes a Greek translation of the Book of the Temple on the recto, and probably the translation of a collection of temple rules and priestly law on the verso.³⁴

Furthermore, we have literary compositions like the Sesostri/Sesonchosis romance preserved in pOxy. 1826³⁵ and pOxy. 2466+3319.³⁶ They are not necessarily direct translations of Egyptian compositions, but by now genuine demotic fragments of a story about prince Sesostri are known.³⁷ Also a tale about Amen[o]ph[thi] in pOxy. 3011³⁸ is at least under suspicion of being based on an Egyptian model.³⁹ Very recent discoveries enhance this idea since they brought to light demotic Egyptian fragments from Tebtunis (pCarlsberg 621 + PSI Inv. D 81, and probably a parallel manuscript in pCarlsberg 79 + PSI Inv. D 80) which present Isis and Thot in search of Osiris, a motif actually attested in pOxy 3011.⁴⁰

3. EVALUATION

3.1. The different categories of texts

Summing up, we can now proceed to a new evaluation of the respective roles of the Egyptian and Greek languages and writing at Oxyrhynchus and how this relates to the question of canon constitution. Basically, I see three different categories. The first is one where the Egyptian language retains its full rank as the one and only medium appropriate for

³⁴ See Quack, 'Translating the realities of cult,' in press.

³⁵ Editio princeps Grenfell and Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, XV, 1922, p. 228f.

³⁶ Editio princeps Rea, in: Turner, Rea, Koenen and Fernandez Pomar (eds.), *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, XXVII, 1962, p. 130-136 and West in Coles et Haslam, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, XLVII, 1980, p. 11-19. See further Luppe, 'Das neue Bruchstück aus dem Sesonchosis-Roman,' 1981, p. 63-66; O'Sullivan et Beck, 'P. Oxy. 3319: The Sesonchosis Romance,' 1982, p. 71-83; O'Sullivan, 'The Sesonchosis' Romance,' 1984, p. 39-44; Ruiz-Montero, 'P. Oxy. 2466: The Sesonchosis Romance,' 1989, p. 51-57; Stephens and Winkler, *Ancient Greek Novels. The Fragments. Introduction, Text, Translation, and Commentary*, 1994, p. 246-266.

³⁷ Gh. Widmer, 'Pharao Maâ-Rê, Pharao Amenemhat and Sesostri,' 2002, p. 377-393; Quack, *Einführung in die altägyptische Literaturgeschichte III*, 2009, p. 32f.; A. Jones, M. Perale, 'Two Astronomical Tables from the Tebtunis Temple Library,' 2011, p. 42f. note 5.

³⁸ Parsons, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, XLII, 1974, p. 41-43; Quaegebeur, 'Amenophis, nom royal et nom divin,' 1986, p. 101; Kussl, *Papyrusfragmente griechischer Romane*, 1991, p. 178f., who also discusses whether pFreiburg 47 belongs to the same composition.

³⁹ Quack, *Einführung in die altägyptische Literaturgeschichte III*, 2009, p. 34f.

⁴⁰ See Quack, 'Resting in pieces and integrating the Oikoumene,' in press.

the texts. The second is that where Egyptian and Greek can both be viable options. The third is where Egyptian language is abandoned and we have only Greek fragments. As a yardstick to measure the evidence from Oxyrhynchus I will use Tebtunis. From there we have very full documentation of the respective frequency of different genres which is by now available in preliminary inventories.⁴¹

3.2. Genres not present in Egyptian language at Oxyrhynchus

Perhaps it is easiest to speak of those genres not represented at Oxyrhynchus. The most obvious absences are the narrative texts which constitute about a quarter of the Tebtunis material. Perhaps a bit less obvious but also noticeable are the wisdom texts, a genre showing normally significantly fewer different compositions but a higher number of copies per composition than narrative texts. These two genres which make up the most evident part of what can be termed “belles-lettres” in demotic Egyptian literature are completely unattested in Oxyrhynchus according to the actual evidence. At least for the narratives, we can even propose with some degree of plausibility that they were not completely abandoned but that some were translated or freely adapted in Greek texts. We could also link the prophetic texts to this model, where the fact of translation is even explicitly claimed for the oracle of the potter, although I am not quite sure if this genre had the same standing within “belles-lettres”.

However, this is not yet the complete picture, which can only be restored if we take into consideration also the many literary texts from Oxyrhynchus that do not go back to any Egyptian model whatsoever: Greek epics, Greek lyrics, Greek drama, Greek romance. Their preserved fragments outnumber by far those literary texts in the close sense for which derivation from Egyptian models can be claimed with any degree of plausibility. Obviously, literary taste at Oxyrhynchus was quite different from that of Tebtunis.⁴²

Of course this fact does not yet answer some important questions. The first is which of the two models is actually more typical for an Egyptian town of the Roman period, and the second is the reason for the respective attitudes towards literary compositions. Is there, for example,

⁴¹ Ryholt, ‘On the Contents and Nature of the Tebtunis Temple Library,’ 2005, p. 141-170.

⁴² The fact that the Oxyrhynchus papyri come from dump heaps while the Tebtunis material is more specifically related to priests (as stressed by an anonymous reviewer), is not sufficient to explain the picture – the complete absence of demotic narratives coupled with the definite presence of Egyptian priestly texts at Oxyrhynchus remains significant.

a correlation between the percentage of people claiming Greek origin (and being recognised as “Greeks” according to civil status) and the preferences for Greek literary models? For Oxyrhynchus we certainly should also take into account that it was graced by a Greek-style theatre with a capacity of some 11.000 people, disproportionally large for a city of its size.⁴³

Unfortunately, I doubt that we have enough cities at our disposal to answer the first question – I might be able to show that Soknopaiou Nesos had a disproportionally high number of inhabitants with a priestly Egyptian background⁴⁴ and that this probably had repercussions for the literary taste, but I am less clearly in a position to prove this for Tebtunis as well. Moreover, for the Fayyum in general, it is still necessary to work out the relative percentage of Egyptian priests by means of evidence that can be considered statistically valid.

3.3. Genres present in both languages at Oxyrhynchus

Now I come to the second category, namely genres where the two languages are equally used. The major part of them can be characterized as technical treatises where for the Egyptian side, demotic is the vehicle. Here we have astrological, medical, mathematical and juridical manuals. Especially for the juridical manuals, Greek-language papyri can sometimes be shown to be direct translations of Egyptian models. For other genres, especially the medical texts, it will remain a question for future research to which degree the Greek-language treatises can be related to Egyptian models.⁴⁵

A most interesting group are the astronomical and astrological texts. Here, I think that we have enough data for drawing some preliminary conclusions. There is an enormous amount of astronomical tables as well as actual horoscopes (with positions of the planets) in Greek script.⁴⁶ Compared to them, at most one (not quite certain) example of an astronomical text and no single horoscope in demotic might seem negligible. If we turn, however, to the theoretical manuals on astrology, the picture changes significantly. Here, the amount of treatises in

⁴³ See Bailey, ‘The Great Theatre,’ 2007, p. 70-90.

⁴⁴ For the very high percentage of priests at Soknopaiou Nesos, see Jördens, ‘Griechische Papyri in Soknopaiou Nesos,’ 2005, p. 46 and 50-51.

⁴⁵ See Andorlini, ‘Prescription and Practice in Greek Medical Papyri from Egypt,’ 2007, p. 24. It is probably worth considering that at Tebtunis, medical papyri are attested in Greek as well as demotic Egyptian.

⁴⁶ See Jones, ‘The Place of Astronomy in Roman Egypt,’ 1994, p. 25-51; idem, *Astronomical Papyri from Oxyrhynchus*, 1999; idem, ‘Astrologers and their Astronomy,’ 2007, p. 307-314.

Greek⁴⁷ is limited and not that much higher than that of the demotic Egyptian ones. Especially if we consider the time span covered, we end up with a serious imbalance for the earlier Roman period, with “mathematical” astronomical-astrological texts almost exclusively written in Greek, but theoretical treatises on astrology well represented in demotic. It is not plausible that this distribution corresponds to a real difference in ethnicity, with Greeks practicing and Egyptians contemplating the theory. Rather, we should understand a practical use of the manuscripts quite a bit more subtly. Probably the very same people who had their theoretical treatises in Egyptian would write out tables and horoscopes in Greek.⁴⁸ This is a first serious warning that questions of ethnicity and identity are a bit more complicated than a simple dichotomy of Greek versus Egyptian.

Beyond astrology, divinatory texts in general can turn up in both languages. They are also to be counted as technical treatises which in the mind of the ancient users were not fundamentally different from technical treatises on medicine or mathematics.

The one text for which bilingual attestations do not cover demotic is the Book of the Temple. All Oxyrhynchus fragments known to me are in hieratic. Of course we know from other find spots, especially Tebtunis and Soknopaiou Nesos, that there was a demotic version of the composition in actual use, even if less well attested than the hieratic one in classical Egyptian. Still we can ask ourselves whether its apparent absence at Oxyrhynchus is only due to chances of preservation or if it has a deeper meaning. After all, the reason for its existence was to help with understanding the rules of the temple, rules still considered valid but no longer easily accessible in their original formulation because of the linguistic distance from the form of Egyptian spoken in the Late and Graeco-Roman period. Such a function could, however, equally be fulfilled by a Greek version, if the local community was bilingual or even more at home in Greek. Thus, I would propose as a working hypothesis that the normal distribution of a translated text at Oxyrhynchus would be binary at most – either demotic and Greek, or classical Egyptian and Greek, but not all three languages.

The Book of the Temple, which is at the same time a technical treatise as well as connected with religion, brings up one important point concerning my second category of texts. For parts of the religious texts,

⁴⁷ Published in Jones, in: Haslam et al., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri LXXV*, 1998, p. 130-146.

⁴⁸ This also corresponds to other evidence that the Greek-language “astronomical” tables were actually used by Egyptians; see Quack, ‘Egypt as an Astronomical-Astrological Centre between Mesopotamia, Greece, and India,’ in press.

transmission in Egyptian as well as Greek language was an option. What kinds of religious texts are they? We have texts which serve to enhance the prestige of the gods, be it mythological compositions or aretalogical compositions. There are also parts of the normative religious knowledge amenable to Greek versions, at least if we classify the treatise on the chronocratorial deities (pOxy. 465) as such and not as a more directly divinatory text.

For reasons which will become clear immediately, I would like to classify those religious texts where switching to the Greek language is a valid option as texts for which the semantics were the primary part of the message. In the case of the aretalogy of Imouthes, it is even claimed explicitly that the translation was done in order to make Greek tongues proclaim the power of the god Imouthes and to have Greeks venerate him. Obviously, this brings up the contrasting category of religious texts where the semantics are not the primary part of the message. I claim that such a category exists and that it is coequal with my third category of texts, namely those which were not translated into Greek but remained Egyptian in language.

3.4. Genres present only in Egyptian language at Oxyrhynchus

The one category that is quite well represented among the (mainly hieratic) Egyptian material but, to my knowledge, not paralleled by anything in Greek, is ritual, especially the classical rituals of consecrating divine images and presenting offerings. They are obviously linked to an Egyptian temple cult.⁴⁹ Especially the ritual of opening the mouth in its specific form with Sokar-Osiris as beneficiary can be understood as testimony for the Khoiak rituals on Osirian figurines,⁵⁰ rituals which are well established at Oxyrhynchus as evidenced by the recent discovery of a subterranean complex for their deposition.

My claim that it was not the semantics which were the primary part of their message is obviously in need of some elucidation, so I will present the evidence. One first point, evidenced by the Oxyrhynchus manuscripts themselves, is the fact that there are several texts that present an interlinear version in Greek script which seems to serve to transmit the phonetic information. Another point is deducible from the treatment of such rituals at Soknopaiou Nesos where quite often they are

⁴⁹ The material present here shows that the conception of Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt. Assimilation and Resistance*, p. 236, that an Egyptian priest at Oxyrhynchus would have seemed rather exotic is quite off the mark at least for the first two centuries CE.

⁵⁰ See Quack, 'Fragmente des Mundöffnungsrituals aus Tebtynis,' 2006, p. 136-143.

transmitted graphically in demotic script while, however, remaining classical Egyptian in language. This leads to orthographical solutions which favour phonetic precision over the transparency of the semantics of the content.⁵¹ We can adduce here the well-known testimony of Jamblich, *De mysteriis* VII, 4 where he clarifies that according to Egyptian and Assyrian conceptions, the gods are honoured by the sacred language of the ancient formulations with which they were first addressed, and that this should be preserved unchanged.⁵²

Finally, this is the obvious point for bringing in again the text I mentioned at the beginning of my contribution, namely the papyrus BM 10808, a text written in the Egyptian language but Greek script. The discrepancies in interpretation by different Egyptologists are probably a good sign that the semantics are not very clear whereas the phonetic realisation is.

A lucky discovery permits me to add to that picture. There is an unpublished papyrus fragment at Oxford which almost certainly forms part of the second column of the BM text.⁵³ It preserves a spell for accomplishing whatever you want by the help of an angel.⁵⁴ The title and the indications for the actions to be performed are written in late demotic, so they should have been clear and easily understandable to the user of the manuscript. The invocation itself, however, is written mostly with Greek letters, and that part seems to be gibberish – the absence of any demotic sign for those sounds not capable of being rendered in Greek script as well as the presence of sounds like *d* and *z* which did not form part of the contemporary Egyptian phonetic system militates against its analysis as Egyptian. Only short sections at the beginning and end of the incantation are written in demotic and are easily understandable.

While unfortunately the lower part of the page is still largely missing, and with it the demotic title which might help solve many of the mysteries still connected with it, I think, the overall structure of the manuscript now becomes sufficiently clear. Ritual texts have two different components. The one is the indication of the aims achieved by

⁵¹ See Quack, 'Old Wine in new Wineskins?', 2011, p. 219–243.

⁵² See for the relevance of this passage for the Egyptian evidence Quack, 'Ein kleines Fragment der großen Litanei des Geb,' 1999, p. 310 with note 18; von Lieven, *Grundriß des Laufes der Sterne*, p. 234 with note 1270.

⁵³ The text actually uses *ἰngylws* as a phonetic transcription of the Greek word, otherwise attested only in pLouvre E 3229, vs. 4, see Johnson, 'Louvre E3229,' 1977, p. 86.

⁵⁴ To be published in one of the next volumes of the *Oxyrhynchus papyri*. Also a small fragment in Old Coptic was discovered showing parts of some lines and the lower margin. This probably belongs to the same manuscript although its exact position could not be determined.

it as well as performance guidelines. For both, semantic clarity is imperative, and in this manuscript, this is guaranteed by the use of the contemporary vernacular. The second one is the spell, and that functions by the power of its sound, not by its meaning. Thus, it does not matter whether it is gibberish or semantic information still transparent to the user, and a writing system that fixed the pronunciation as much as possible was a real advantage, even if it further diminished the possibilities for understanding.

4. ATTITUDES TOWARDS TRANSLATING EGYPTIAN TEXTS

The general picture emerging for Oxyrhynchus from this evidence shows a milieu of cultural mixture and translations from Egyptian to Greek which is quite typical for Roman-period Egypt in general.⁵⁵ Still, I have tried to show that there are different treatments of texts and that the kind of treatment applied to them was differentiated according to the textual genre and its place in society. Some could be translated and were actually translated into Greek, for others the most that was really acceptable was a phonetic transposition into Greek script.

Was there any open discourse in Egyptian society about how to treat these texts? I think there was, and I can bring in two well-known passages from the Corpus Hermeticum.⁵⁶ The first one is CH XVI, 1-2 where it is said that the discourses would become completely obscure when the Greeks would later translate them into their language. Only in their original Egyptian language would they preserve the clarity and the sense of the words; and actually the sound and intonation of the Egyptian vocabulary would retain the power of the things. The poignancy of this statement is, of course, somewhat diluted by its being actually transmitted in Greek form.⁵⁷ The other one is CH XII, 13: there it is stressed that speech is common to all human beings, and while

⁵⁵ Cf. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt. Assimilation and Resistance*, 1998, p. 238-248; Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*, esp. p. 103-144.

⁵⁶ For both, see von Lieven, *Grundriß des Laufes der Sterne*, p. 235.

⁵⁷ See also Thissen, “..... αἰγυπτιαίων τῇ φωνῇ,” 1993, p. 252; and especially idem, ‘Homerischer Einfluß im Inaros-Petubastis-Zyklus,’ 1999, p. 380 note 55 with reference to Grafton, *Fälscher und Kritiker. Der Betrug in der Wissenschaft*, 1995, p. 22f. and Broze, ‘Temps réel, temps imaginaire et temps fictionnel dans la révélation hermétique,’ 1997, p. 117-119, who doubts the veracity of that statement. Grafton’s book, while brilliantly written, presupposes as proven previous ideas of classical scholars about things like the genesis of hermetic literature and thus cannot constitute an argument of its own. Broze’s idea that the passage in reality serves to validate the expression of Egyptian cosmological ideas in Greek seems a bit too twisted to me – the risk of being misunderstood by a reader who might reject the Greek version of something which claims to be only capable of expression in Egyptian is quite high.

individual languages differed according to race, they are translatable, and one could discover this to be the same in Egypt, Persia and Greece.

I would propose to understand these two points of view not simply as two contradictory stances within Hermetism, however inhomogeneous that "movement" might have been,⁵⁸ but basically as attitudes towards different categories of texts. The one is the group where sound matters primarily, and thus translation is not a viable option. The other is concerned with semantic content, and translatability for that was not disputed. So, they correspond to my categories one and two, where Greek can in one case be used, if at all, strictly as a script, but in the other case is an accepted alternative to the Egyptian language.

5. QUESTIONS OF CANONICITY

Finally, where does all this lead us to concerning canons and canonicity? Does it have any relation at all to the establishment of a canon? Several remarks are in order. Firstly, the material from Oxyrhynchus is definitely not substantial enough for defining what exactly the range of Egyptian texts in use at that site actually was. At most, it gives us some glimpses at the most common genres.

Secondly, from my experience with quite a number of Roman-period Egyptian sites and their texts on papyrus (Tebtunis, Soknopaiou Nesos, Oxyrhynchus, Elephantine, Tanis) I rather doubt that there actually was a closed and fixed canon of Egyptian texts in the Late Period. There are some compositions which occur in most of them (like the Book of the Temple) or in some (geographical papyrus), but there are also cases like the Book of Nut which is frequent at Tebtunis but unattested elsewhere. We have traditional texts endued with authority, and in some cases even normative prescriptions for behaviour, but they cannot be raised to the rank of canonical scriptures the way this term is used nowadays.

This brings up the question of the list of compositions enumerated by Clemens of Alexandria, *Stromateis* VI, 4, 35, 3-37, 3 as canonical Egyptian texts which have already been discussed before in the context of their relation to attested contents of temple libraries of the Roman period.⁵⁹ My personal impression is that there was no absolutely fixed group of exactly 42 books canonical for all places of Egypt. We have to consider to which degree the report of Clemens is specifically tuned to the realities of Alexandria (or, more probably, nearby Canopus), or

⁵⁸ The heterogeneity of hermetic thought was stressed especially by Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, 1944-1950.

⁵⁹ See e.g. Osing, 'La science sacerdotale,' 1999, p. 127-140; Ryholt, 'On the Content and Nature of the Tebtunis Temple Library,' 2005, p. 159-162.

maybe to the largest centres (nome capitals). The realities of the papyrus finds (mostly from smaller centres) show certain similarities in the spectrum of genres covered, but no exact correspondence.

Thirdly, as the case of Oxyrhynchus shows, a community which has Egyptian identity as far as religious affiliation is concerned does not necessarily have it the same way as far as belles-lettres or philosophy are concerned. In any case, I do not see any evidence for super-regional standards for what Egyptian compositions exactly had to be present at a religious center. If there was any determination at all, it can only have come about locally. We could even discuss to which degree it was due to active agency and not to the sheer availability of material.

Fourthly, it can be noted that the deemed importance of keeping the texts in their original language does not at all correspond to ingrained evaluations of relative merit within modern Egyptology. The literary texts, normally ranked highest, are obviously considered much less central to an Egyptian identity than the rituals, and even the divinatory texts, hardly appreciated by most Egyptologists, rank noticeably better in the mind of the Egyptians.

Fifthly, it has been proposed that the tales of the Egyptian past played an important part in the formation of a cultural identity.⁶⁰ The fact that these historical romances were completely abandoned in their original language – and even in Greek are only attested as relatively free rewritings that cede much to Hellenistic literary taste – does not bode too well for such an idea.

Finally, the question of a canon is not necessarily linked to the preservation of the text in the same language. Thus, the Septuagint Greek version of the Hebrew Tanakh served for centuries as a valid form of the Jewish canon, and only its use by Christian apologetics led to its dismissal. We could theoretically imagine a situation at Oxyrhynchus with a stable Egyptian cultural element which switched to Greek, except for liturgical formulae; and perhaps even for those a translation would in the end have seemed acceptable. That would have been a bit like the takeover of Arabic in Coptic Christianity.

However, this never came about because a new religion arose that had a totally different idea of what the canonical religious texts were, and its ultimate success led to the complete decanonization of every traditional Egyptian religious text. If there was any last stand against this, it did not originate from the Egyptian religious and cultural group.

⁶⁰ Ryholt, 'The Assyrian Invasion of Egypt in Egyptian Literary Tradition,' 2004, p. 506; idem, 'On the Contents and Nature of the Tebtunis Temple Library,' 2005, p. 163; idem, 'Late Period Literature,' 2010, p. 716.

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