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LETTERS TO GODS

رسائل إلى المعبودات

Edward O. D. Love

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LETTERS TO GODS

رسائل إلى المعبودات

Edward O. D. Love

Briefe an Götter

Lettres aux dieux

The "Letters to Gods" comprise an etic analytical category of Egyptian- and Greek-language texts in which individuals petitioned deities, seeking divine intervention in their lives to bring about certain outcomes. Attested from the Late to Roman Periods, from Saqqara to Esna, and inscribed upon papyri, linen, ostraca, wooden tablets, and ceramic vessels, these textual sources are the written testament to ritual practices through which individuals were able to interact directly with the divine to effect change in their lives. Petitioning about a variety of matters (from physical abuse to theft or embezzlement, from cursing people to healing them), the Letters to Gods reveal multiple aspects of the lives of their petitioners—not only their hopes and fears but also their conceptualization of justice and of the divine.

تشمل "رسائل إلى المعبودات" فئة من النصوص المكتوبة باللغتين المصرية واليونانية من خلالها يقوم الأفراد بتقديم توسل مكتوب إلى الآلهة من أجل تحقيق أمني محددة في حياتهم. هذه النصوص مثبتة من العصر المتأخر وحتى العصر الروماني، من سقارة إلى إسنا، وكتبت على أوراق البردي والكتان والأوستراكا والألواح الخشبية والفخار، وهذه النصوص بمثابة شهادة مكتوبة على الممارسات الطقسية التي من خلالها يتمكن الأفراد من التفاعل مباشرة مع المعبود ليحدث التغيير المطلوب. من خلال تقديم توسل مكتوب حول مجموعة متنوعة من الأمور (من الإيذاء الجسدي إلى السرقة، ومن لعن الناس إلى شفاء المرضى)، تكشف رسائل إلى المعبودات عن جوانب متعددة من حياة مقدمي التوسلات - ليس فقط آمالهم ومخاوفهم، ولكن أيضًا تصورهم للعدالة وقدسيتها المعبود.



Of the 41 published Letters to Gods, 36 are written in Demotic, four in Greek, and one in Old Coptic (Love 2022). There are also 16 further unpublished manuscripts in Demotic that have been suggested by at least one observer to be Letters to Gods: 10 of these have been confirmed to be Letters to Gods, whereas the remaining six have not, and three of those have since been lost and so cannot be confirmed either way (Love 2022: §2.1.2). The Letters to Gods date from the Late to Roman Periods (seventh century BCE to second century CE) and are attested from Saqqara in the north to

Esna in the south (Love 2022). Unless otherwise stated, all data on and translations of the corpus of Letters to Gods provided here were compiled/produced by the author from a consultation of the original manuscripts and/or digital images thereof. See Tables 1-4 at the end of this discussion for data on these manuscripts.

The Letters to Gods succeed the tradition of Letters to the Dead (Donnat Beauquier 2014; Troche 2018; Hsieh 2019). The latter are attested principally during the Old Kingdom (from the twenty-fourth century BCE) and First Intermediate Period (until the twenty-first

century BCE), and only sparsely thereafter. The last extant, known example dates to the Late Period (seventh century BCE). Combined, these two corpora provide textual evidence that the ritual practice of petitioning the divine (whether a deceased or a deity) is attested at distinct intervals during the entirety of the temporal frame in which Egyptian textual culture was produced—from its emergence in the Old Kingdom to its obsolescence in the Roman Period. The latest known Letter to the Dead is (papyrus) P. Brooklyn 37.1799 E (Jasnow and Vittmann 1992 – 1993). Dated to the seventh century BCE, it was produced in a temporal frame similar to that of the earliest Letters to Gods, although within a distinct geographic area and scribal tradition—the “Abnormal Hieratic” of southern Egypt rather than Demotic of northern Egypt.

There are also texts that might be seen as potential predecessors to the Letters to Gods in Demotic: written in hieratic and dating from the twelfth to tenth centuries BCE, those texts evidence the emergence of the kind of direct human-divine interaction seen in the later Letters to Gods in Demotic, perhaps suggesting that they originated in the “Personal Piety” of the later New Kingdom (Love 2022: §2.2.2.5). Nonetheless, no Letters to the Dead in Demotic are known, and there is a temporal void of several centuries between the potential predecessors of the Letters to Gods in hieratic and those Letters to Gods in Demotic. Thus, the emergence of the Letters to Gods in Demotic instead appears to coincide with the instituting of Demotic throughout Egypt, part-and-parcel of wider changes that are seen at the beginning of the Late Period (664 – 332 BCE).

Material

Of the 36 published Demotic examples of Letters to Gods, 24 are papyrus (figs. 1a, b)—in both broad and high formats, depending on the period—seven are linen, two are ostraca (fig. 2), two are wooden tablets, and one is a ceramic vessel (fig. 3). The 10 certain but

unpublished examples comprise eight papyri, one ostrakon, and one ceramic vessel. Of the four Greek examples, three are ostraca and one is a papyrus (fig. 4). The one Old Coptic example is papyrus (fig. 5). Moreover, certain media cluster at certain sites: while linen is attested at both Hermopolis and Saqqara, seven of the eight known examples are from Hermopolis, and while ceramic vessels are only attested at Hermopolis, wooden tablets are only attested at Deir el-Bahri.

Provenance

The findspots of the published and unpublished Letters to Gods in Demotic are Saqqara, Hermopolis, Fayum, and Thebes, as follows:

The 17 manuscripts that are certainly, and two that are potentially, from Saqqara concern mostly the cults of the deities of the Sacred Animal Necropolis at North Saqqara: the cults of Osiris-Apis, Isis, the Mother of Apis, and the Ibis, the Falcon, and the Baboon. Two unpublished examples certainly, and two unpublished examples potentially, also come from Saqqara.

Four published manuscripts and one unpublished manuscript are certainly from Hermopolis. Nine manuscripts potentially are from there as well (seven published, two unpublished). These all concern the Ibis cult of Thoth there.

Three manuscripts come from temple institutions of the Fayum: one was found at Theadelphia (cult of an oracular baboon); one was found at Euhemeria (cults of numerous deities); and one was found at Tebtunis (cult of Sobek).

Two manuscripts very likely come from Thebes, since they relate to the cult of Amenhotep-son-of-Hapu, and an unpublished example was also found at Deir el-Bahri.

Additionally, there are three manuscripts that lack any proposed provenance (one published and two unpublished).

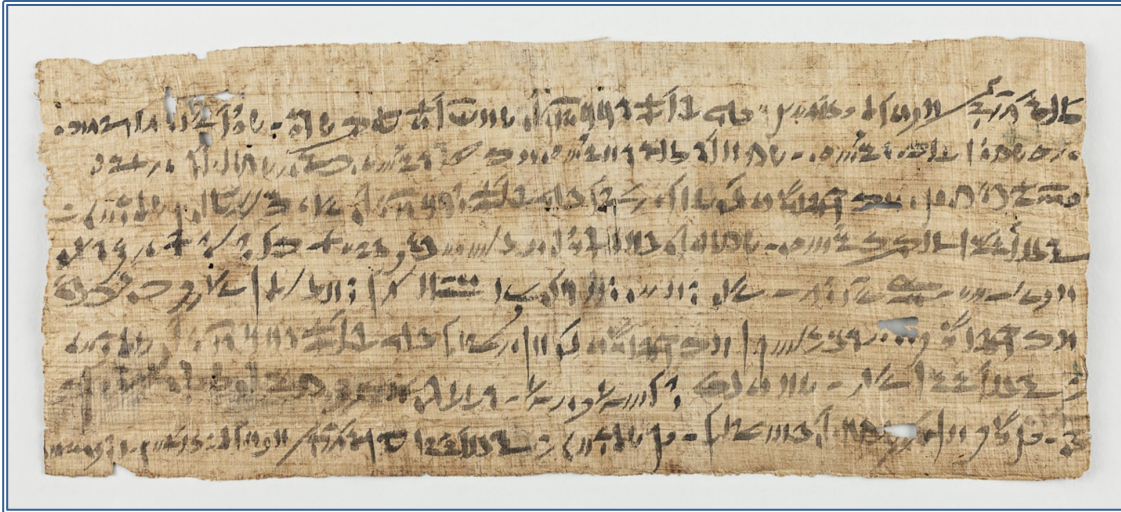


Figure 1a. Papyrus inscribed with a letter to a god in Demotic concerning abuse, theft, and embezzlement, and a subsequent request for protection. Hermopolis, 502 BCE (20th year of Darius I). P. Chicago OI E. 19422 (recto) (= D. 17992).



Figure 1b. Papyrus inscribed with a letter to a god in Demotic concerning abuse, theft, and embezzlement, and a subsequent request for protection. Hermopolis, 502 BCE (20th year of Darius I). P. Chicago OI D. 19422 (verso) (=D. 17993).

As for the four Greek examples, the three ostraca are from Esna (cult of Athena-Neith) and the one Greek papyrus is from Saqqara (cult of the deities of the Sacred Animal Necropolis; see fig. 4). The one Old Coptic papyrus is from Tehne/Akoris (cult of Osiris-Khentimentiu; see fig. 5).

There is a clear bias in the regional pattern of extant evidence, with nearly 60% of the corpus

certainly, and as much as 80% perhaps, coming from Saqqara and Hermopolis. Such a bias is also found in the temporal pattern of extant evidence: 16 date to the Late Period; 7 to the Late or Ptolemaic Periods; 12 to the Ptolemaic Period; and only 1 to the Roman Period. What's more, there is also a bias when the regional and temporal patterns of extant evidence are combined; while those from Saqqara are more or less equally spread

between the Late and Ptolemaic Periods, all but one of those from Hermopolis date exclusively to the Late Period.

Previous studies proposing that certain examples were found in private tombs have been shown to be unfounded speculations, and therefore erroneous (Love 2022: §2.2.2.2). In every case where a secure findspot equivalent to a historical context of deposition is known (eight examples), Letters to Gods that petitioned deities served by animal cults were deposited in the catacombs and cemeteries of those sacred animals, while those that petition-

ed deities without such a cult were deposited in their temple sanctuaries. Three manuscripts in Demotic to Thoth were found in the *Ibiotapheion* at Hermopolis. Three manuscripts in Greek to Athena-Neith were found in the Nile perch (*Iates niloticus*) necropolis at Esna. The one example in Old Coptic to a manifestation of Osiris was found in the sarcophagus of a corn mummy of Osiris-Khentiamenti in the eastern slope cemetery at Tehne/Akoris (see fig. 5). The one example in Demotic to Amenhotep-son-of-Hapu was found in a niche of the main sanctuary used as a chapel for that god at Deir el-Bahri.

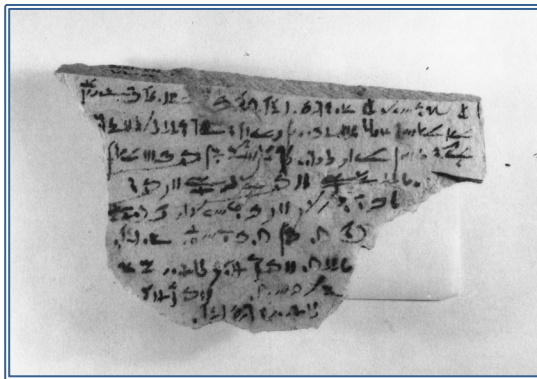


Figure 2. Limestone ostracon inscribed with a letter to a god in Demotic concerning unreturned property. Saqqara, 450 – 332 BCE. H5-1316 [3068] (DO Saqqara 1).

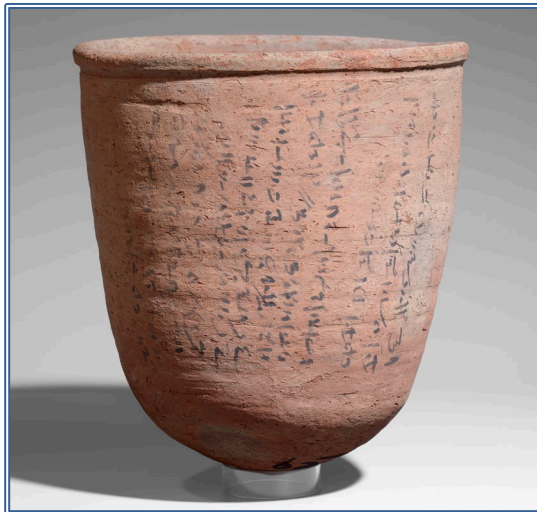


Figure 3. Ceramic vessel inscribed with a letter to a god in Demotic concerning robbery. Hermopolis, c. 570 – 526 BCE (reign of Amasis II or Darius I). ÄM 31206.

Textual Analysis

No single emic term is found in Egyptian for the etic analytical category of “Letters to Gods.” However, in combination with the content and contexts of the manuscripts themselves, a variety of textual characteristics are found within the corpus through which it seems justified to construct and maintain that category.

Some examples refer to themselves: two as an *n-smy* “report,” comparable in use to *καταβολή* “accusation”; at least one as a *b3k* “document/letter”; one as a *š.t n šll* “letter/document of lament,” comparable to *ικετήριος* “supplication”; and one as a *mkmk* “memorandum.” In around 30% of cases the text is described as the *hrw-b3k* “voice of the servant/humble voice” (i.e., of the petitioner), while nearly 60% of cases describe how their petitions are being made “before” (*m-b3h* or *j-jr-hr*) the petitioned deity.

With the exception of *š.t n šll*, all these terms are found in other types of textual culture, especially in: letters to worldly recipients (Depauw 2006, compared in Love 2022: §2.2.2.4.1); petitions to worldly recipients (Baetens 2014 and 2020, compared in Love 2022: §2.2.2.4.3); and oracle/oracular questions/petitions (Ryholt 1993, compared in Love 2022: §2.2.2.4.4). There is also some overlap in textual characteristics with documents of self-dedication (Ryholt 2015, compared in Love 2022: §2.2.2.4.2).

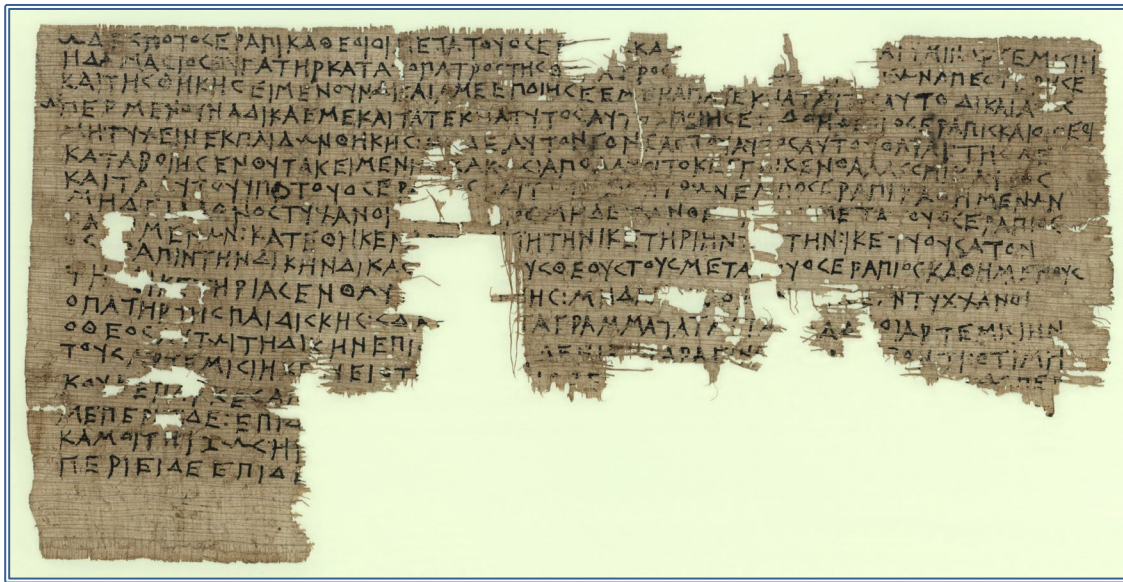


Figure 4. Papyrus inscribed with a letter to a god containing a curse, the so-called Curse of Artemisia. Saqqara(?), c. 350 – 326 BCE. Papyrus Vindob G1.

By contrast, dating formulae, which are common to letters and petitions to worldly recipients, are rare (Love 2022: §2.2.1). Rather at odds with the conventional term “Letters to Gods,” barely a simple majority utilize a direct address to a deity, while only three examples have anything inscribed on their verso, and in only one case does this resemble an address (see fig. 1; Love 2022: §2.2.1).

More specific to the human-divine interaction they evidence, around 30% of petitioners supplicate before a deity by describing that deity as “my (great) lord” (*pzy=j nb* [ʕʕ]) and nearly 25% as “his (wise) master” (*pzy=f hr.j* [rmt-rh]), while several petitioners also refer to themselves as “the” or “your” “servant” (*p3/pzy=k b3k*).

When described, the practices undertaken by the petitioners encompass *šrr* “pleading,” *ḏd* “speaking,” *smj* “petitioning” (CME in Old Coptic), and *tbh* “entreating” before the deity, comparable to ἐντυγχάνειν “petitioning,” ἰκετεύειν “supplicating,” παρακαλεῖν “entreating,” and perhaps [εὔχομαι] (i.e., εὔχεσθαι) “praying” (Love 2022: §2.2.1).

The circumstances the petitioners find themselves in are also usually described, most commonly utilizing the tropes of *ʕ(ty)t* “misery” and *hbr/hbl(ʕ)* “suffering”—among a host of other terms describing abuse and deprivation (Love 2022: §2.2.3.1).

In order to overcome such circumstances, petitioners commonly entreat the deity for “protection” (*nhṯ/nhṯ*) against, “mercy” (*hṯp*) regarding, or “rescue” (*nhm*) from the aforementioned threat—i.e., future abuse, thefts, and the like (Love 2022: §2.1.2).

In more specific cases of dispute, petitioners instead entreat that the deity “fulfill” (*jrj*) their “right” (*pzy=PN hp*) (PN = pronoun) and “deliver” (*jrj*) “judgment” (*tzy=PN wpy[.t]*) for them to the accused.

A notable subset of Letters to Gods is one in which individuals are cursed, enumerating the retributive rather than restitutive punishment to be delivered upon the accused—disgrace, illness, and deprivation of livelihood (Love 2022: §2.2.3.1; see, e.g., fig. 4). Another subset seeks to heal patients, specifying that they should not die from the suffered illness (Love 2022: §2.2.3.1).

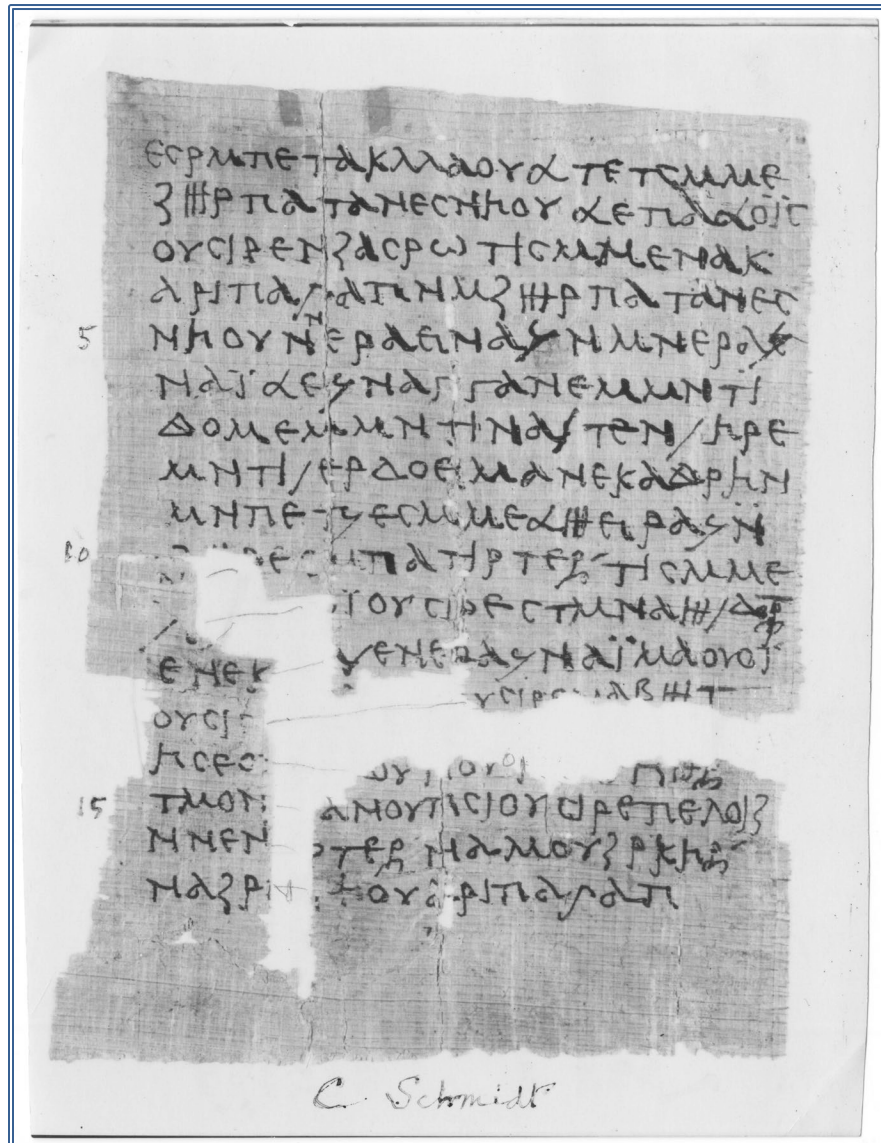


Figure 5. Papyrus inscribed with a letter to a god in Old Coptic concerning a dispute over a (legal) right. Tehne/Akoris, c. 76 – 200 CE. Crum MS XII.10 (also known as “The Old Coptic Schmidt Papyrus”).

Ultimately, the structure and content of these petitions can vary substantially. This variation ranges from elaborate examples encompassing 30 lines of supplication before a deity with a host of flattering epithets, rhetorical pleas, and a detailed elaboration of the petitioner’s case, to relatively terse addresses and declarations of the outcome sought that span only a few lines.

While the Letters to Gods are varied enough in concern that they do not necessarily include what could be deemed a “typical” example, the

text of (linen) L. BM EA 73786, dating to the Late Period (664 – 332 BCE) and presumably from Hermopolis (given provenanced comparanda), highlights some of the principal aspects of these petitions:

Our great lord, O, Thoth, may you punish Wsh-jb-r-mn retributively! Hear(?) the suffering (of [?]) T3-tj-p3-hwtj-nfr with Wsh-jb-r-mn. Suffering, O, Thoth, at the hand of Wsh-jb-r-mn. (I) gave him wheat (and) barley (but) he has not given it back to

me, saying: "(I) have protection!" There is no protection for a small man other than Thoth.

In this short example, an opening address to the god Thoth is followed by the request to "punish" a named accused "retributively." The petitioner complains that he gave wheat and barley to the accused, *W3ḥ-jb-rꜥ-mn*, but that it has not been returned. The accused is cited as shrugging off this charge because he "has protection," whereas the petitioner, being a "small man," has no such protection, and therefore only Thoth can protect him. Note, however, that the "protection" the petitioner sought is in fact retributive punishment upon the accused!

Letters to Gods share an underlying concept of human-divine interaction with the aforementioned oracle questions. However, while oracle questioners ask a deity for advice upon which to base their future decision-making, Letters to Gods petition a deity to bring about a specific outcome in a petitioner's life. This is also the process found in petitions to worldly recipients. Unlike letter writers and oracle questioners, however, petitioners did not expect a direct answer. Instead, they expected that the petitioned authority (whether human or divine) would consider their case and act upon it accordingly. This was often while also making the case as to why it was in the interest of that authority to act in the petitioner's interest (evidencing a reciprocal relationship). In both cases, petitions, unlike letters, were handed in person to their addressee (Baetens 2014: 54), thereby explaining the aforementioned common absence of addresses in Letters to Gods. There was, however, a distinction between worldly and otherworldly petitions. Those who petitioned worldly superiors may at least have had an opportunity to make their case during an audience with an authority, whereas those petitioning an otherworldly agent had to overcome the agent's physical absence. This explains why examples from the corpus of Letters to Gods can be both concise and formal like worldly petitions and also elaborate and familiar like letters: it was only through their written, and possibly also recited, petition

that any petitioner might expect a hearing by the petitioned deity.

Sociological Analysis

Notwithstanding that they were composed and inscribed by literate, or commissioned by illiterate, petitioners before perhaps being recited and then being deposited in catacombs or cemeteries of sacred animal mummies, or in temple sanctuaries, little more can be stated with much certainty about the Letters to Gods. It is unclear what proportion of petitioners wrote their own texts, and whether all petitions were commissioned and inscribed at the site where they were subsequently deposited by priests who would have had access to those catacombs, cemeteries, and temple sanctuaries. It is also unclear whether the petitioners were local, or traveled from afar; whether those individuals petitioning particular deities were doing so because they worked within the temple institutions of that particular deity; whether the deity petitioned was the petitioner's local deity; or whether the deity's cult center was a center of pilgrimage.

Three different petitioners do refer to themselves as holding priestly titles (albeit not necessarily titles relating to the deity they petitioned), and three groups of petitioners refer to themselves as the "servants" (*sdm.w*) of a particular deity (and thereby as individuals working for their cult) (Love 2022: §2.2.1). Otherwise, the identity of the petitioners is known only through their names, where given or extant. Nevertheless, there is unambiguous evidence from the surviving corpus that adult men and women, as well as underage children (presumably through an advocating guardian), could commission Letters to Gods (Love 2022: §2.2.1).

In every case concerning abuses and disputes, petitioners appear to be individuals whose socioeconomic and legal status vis-à-vis their abusers prevented them from resolving their disputes themselves. After all, the abuses and disputes described could hardly have been unknown to their families, friends, and colleagues. Yet, the Letters to Gods evidence cases in which secular justice was absent, limited, or could not be exercised by the

petitioners—even when those petitioners were servants or priests of a temple cult, and therefore hardly of negligible socioeconomic status and means. Nevertheless, it seems that their abusers were of even higher status.

There is no reason to assume that petitioners produced their written petitions themselves. This is not only because Letters to Gods contain formulaic elements indicative of production by a scribal class trained in Egyptian textual culture, but also because the contrary would exclude the illiterate majority of the population from the petitioning practice. Instead, as was always the case in a scribal society such as that of ancient Egypt, scribes could be commissioned to produce documents for illiterate clients. This thereby explains the appearance of textual characteristics within the Letters to Gods that are shared with those found among letters and petitions to worldly recipients, because all of these were produced by scribes trained in the same textual traditions (Love 2022: §2.2.2.4).

If the text was to be recited, a priestly scribe would have recited it, or perhaps led the petitioner's recitation of it according to the "repeat after me" principle. When and where the recitation took place is, however, hard to establish. Given that senders of letters and worldly petitioners were named, perhaps the practice of a priestly scribe reciting the text on a petitioner's behalf might explain why petitioners were named in Letters to Gods—that is, because they would not, themselves, have recited the text. Yet, in some cases neither the petitioner nor accused were named.

In the one source that does suggest where such recitation was to take place (P. BM EA 10845), the suggested location may have been the entrance(s) to the catacomb in which that Letter to a God was most likely to be deposited (Love 2022: §2.2.3.3). Thus, even scribes who could have written their own petitions would nevertheless have had to rely upon initiated and purified members of the relevant priesthood for the recitation and deposition of their petition in the relevant sacred, secluded context—in catacombs or cemeteries of sacred animal mummies, or in temple sanctuaries.

Regarding the concerns about which petitions were issued, of the 27 unambiguous cases (Love 2022: §2.2.1):

- c. 60% relate to (ongoing) injustice, where the petitioners complain about the conduct of other individuals, the embezzlement of workers or of the ibis cult, maltreatment, robbery, an unreturned document, reneged loans, and even the conscription of a petitioner's son;
- c. 30% pertain to (imminent) threat, such as that of illness, abduction, or abuse by others;
- c. 10% express apprehension regarding a future act, such as the requirement of a guarantee or protection, or the assurance of the conception and safe delivery of a child.

In many cases the concern that is petitioned about is one and the same as the outcome sought, while in others the outcome is notably different. In the 502 BCE P. Chicago OI E. 19422 from Hermopolis (see figs. 1a, b), the petition first describes the physical abuse and theft suffered: "He has been doing me violence since year 17. He has stolen my money and my wheat. He has had my servants murdered. He has taken for himself everything that (I) have." (l. 5). Subsequently, the petitioner implores: "Let (me) be protected from *P3-šrj-t3-jh(.t)*!" (l. 8). In P. BM EA 10845, dating to the late Ptolemaic Period and from Hermopolis or Saqqara, the two "underage children" petitioning the Ibis, the Falcon, and the Baboon about their father, who threw them out of their family home after their mother's death and his subsequent remarriage, entreat: "You should judge us with him" (l. 23) and ultimately "Have our right be fulfilled!" (l. 26). Their "right" concerns the maintenance they are entitled to from the dowry of their deceased mother, yet they are receiving neither "rations, clothes, nor oil" (l. 9) from their neglectful father.

By comparison, petitions concerning embezzlement and/or theft rarely appear to concern *restitution*, that is, the return of the stolen property, but rather *retribution*, that is, the punishment of the accused. This is demonstrated in L. BM EA 73784, dating to the Late Period and presumably from

Hermopolis (given provenanced comparanda): in response to *Nh.tj-hnsw-r=w* partitioning land from the feeding place of the ibises at Hermopolis—thereby stealing from Thoth by embezzling from his cult—*Hr-w3h-jb-r* petitions: “Give his livelihood to me! ... May you have his enemy (i.e., him) fall (and) his livelihood cut off!” (lines 4, 6). What’s more, justification is not always provided in Letters to Gods that enact a curse, with the unnamed petitioner of P. Cairo 31045, dating to the second half of the sixth century BCE and excavated at Saqqara, almost commanding Osiris-Apis simply to “Protect (me)! Enact retribution against him!” (l. 1); “Protect me! Have <me> see retribution!” (l. 4).

What practices might have been undertaken?

Very little can be said with certainty about the ritual practices that accompanied the deposition of Letters to Gods. As with letters and petitions to worldly recipients, at least the terminology and formulae found in the Letters to Gods suggest that they were written testaments to oral practices, and also that they were brought to their recipients before being recited.

There is limited direct evidence of *where* deities were petitioned. Oracle questions were asked before a divine manifestation, whether cult statue or sacred animal, such as the “Living Apis” (*Hp ꜥnh*) at Saqqara, i.e., the Apis Bull, whereupon attending priests would “answer” the questions orally, “interpret” a sacred animal’s movements and gestures, or manipulate a deity’s cult statue (Smith 2002: 368-369; Love 2022: §2.2.2.4.4). Yet, the latter is not a viable hypothesis for the Letters to Gods because it was not actually the living sacred animals that were petitioned, but the deities of whom they were a divine manifestation, e.g., the deceased, transfigured, and deified “Osiris-Apis” (*Wsjr-hp*) at Saqqara.

Although supported by no positive evidence, Smith (2002: 239) suggested that at Saqqara a location of recitation and deposition similar to that of the oracle questions could be envisaged for the Letters to Gods—that is, before a cult statue of Osiris-Apis and/or Isis, the Mother of Apis, in the Main Sanctuary of the Sacred

Animal Necropolis. In his publication of the fourth century BCE L. EES H5-1660 [3545], excavated at the Northern Enclosure of the Sacred Animal Necropolis, Ray (2005: 171) asserted that the bracket attached to that linen example “was no doubt to enable the text to be inserted into the mud-brick wall of a shrine or chapel, or into the frame of a gate or door, so that the text would face inwards towards the shrine, where it could be read by the god Osorapis as it fluttered in the breeze.” Ray supported this conjecture with a misreading of the closing lines of P. Carlsberg 67, a c. 5 CE Letter to a God from Tebtunis (1975, corrected in Love 2022: §2.2.2.2)—an interpretation that can therefore not be maintained. Regardless, it need not have been assumed that the bracketed linen example could only have been attached to the wall of a sanctuary. Given that the fill in which that example was found also contained debris from the Mother of Apis Catacombs, it is a more parsimonious, and therefore more convincing, conclusion that the wall to which it was affixed was one in those very catacombs (Love 2022: §2.2.3.3; §7.3.1). This, in turn, would be consistent with the secure findspots of Letters to Gods that petitioned deities served by a cult of sacred animals, which was without exception the catacombs or cemeteries of those sacred animals.

Where evidence is found of *when* deities were petitioned, it appears to indicate particular times and/or days that were auspicious to the petitioned deity. For example, (ostrakon) O. EES H5-1316 [3068], from Saqqara (see fig. 2), refers directly to the day of the death or burial of the Mother of Apis Cow. This would then accord with the offerings, either directly to the cult or in the form of dedicatory votives or even mummies of sacred animals, provided by petitioners themselves so that they could access the reciprocal relationship they shared with their divine patron(s) (Love 2022: §2.2.3.2). Such collaborative human-divine interaction is made explicit in certain examples, with offerings being made on condition of fulfilment of the outcome sought. In the 279/218 BCE (tablet) T. Cambridge University Library Michaelides x4, perhaps from Thebes (given the petitioned deity), *Wsjr-wr*, a priest of

Amun-Ra, petitions Amenhotep-son-of-Hapu: “If it happens that *Tꜣy-pꜣ* becomes pregnant: I will give 1 *deben* (a type of weight measure) of silver, equivalent to 5 staters (a type of Greek coin). If it happens that she gives birth: I will give 1 more *deben* of silver, equivalent to 5 staters, making 1 *deben* in turn, in order to fulfill 2 *deben* for the expenditure (i.e., temple maintenance costs)” (lines 3-8). Similarly, in the third-century BCE P. BM EA 10857, perhaps from Hermopolis (given provenanced comparanda), *Dḥw.tj-nḥt* petitions the Ibis: “If it happens that *Gm-w-ḥp*, your servant, is well, in that he has not died [from] the illness in which he is; [I] will give [X] silver (i.e., *deben*) [making Y staters making Z silver (i.e., *deben*) in turn for the] burial of the Ibis, respectively” (lines 3-7). In other cases, offerings are implied by the media of the Letters to Gods themselves—e.g., ceramic vessels could have been filled with offerings, and linen sheets could have been wrapped around, or deposited alongside, animal mummies (Hughes 1968: 176; Ray 2005: 177-178).

As for *what* the practice was through which deities were petitioned, the latest extant Letter to the Dead, the aforementioned Abnormal Hieratic P. Brooklyn 37.1799 E (Jasnow and Vittmann 1992–1993), features on its verso an instruction to “recite it at the door of/entrance to the tomb” (*š-sw rꜣ=f [n] tꜣ ḥw.t*), which has been conjectured as representative of both the Letters to the Dead and Letters to Gods (problematized in Love 2022: §3.1.6.3). Among the Letters to Gods, only the second- or first-century BCE P. BM EA 10845, from Hermopolis or Saqqara, implies recitation: “Do not let him go forth from upon our plea. Have him recite it from its beginning to its end. [Have them make] the aforementioned man recite it (before/at) the south entrance, the north entrance, the west entrance, (and) the east entrance of the place in which the gods rest” (lines 28-30). In that example, “the place in which the gods rest” refers to the catacombs of the petitioned deity/deities. However, it must not be overlooked that Hughes’ suggested reconstruction (given in brackets) of this essentially illegible passage is—in his own words—“conjecture only” (1969: 54). Thus,

while this example does instruct for the passage to be recited, whether the recitation is indeed to be performed at the entrance of those catacombs, and by whom, is uncertain. Furthermore, this example is ambiguous not only because of its state of preservation but also because it is an outlier in the corpus of Letters to Gods, just as the Abnormal Hieratic example is in the corpus of Letters to the Dead. Therefore it cannot be taken as representative of all Letters to Gods any more than the Abnormal Hieratic example can be for the Letters to the Dead. Notwithstanding the limited direct evidence, the “orality” of Letters to the Dead, i.e., that they were recited, has appeared often in the history of their treatment (Baines and Lacovara 2002; Verhoeven 2003; Troche 2018; Hsieh 2019).

Historical Significance

The Letters to Gods offer unique insights into the needs and demands, hopes and fears, of (often named) individuals, as well as how they conceptualized that they could bring about desired outcomes in their lives by engaging divine agency. As a result, they constitute primary-source evidence for Egyptian social and religious history, true for one person, in one place, and at one time—from Saqqara to Esna, and spanning the Late through Roman Periods. The variety of concerns petitioned about, the complexity of options available and utilized (e.g., medium, composition, and deposition), and the transmission of this bilingual and trigraphic tradition suggest both that the ritual practice of petitioning deities had regional traditions and that these changed over space and time.

Given that this corpus has been so chronically understudied, the potential for novel insights into all manner of socio-cultural factors, ritual practices, and religious conceptions is considerable. Despite the wealth of textual sources for ritual practices from pharaonic, Ptolemaic, and Roman Egypt, these invariably cluster in the spheres of temple and afterlife rituals. Thus, the Letters to Gods are a considerable contribution to the body of sources that inform the mechanisms through which rituals were conceptualized as facilitating

interaction with the divine at the individual level and subsequently bringing about certain outcomes in the lives of living persons. Notably, the practice of petitioning manifestations of the divine persisted into the late Roman and Byzantine Periods, with examples in Coptic petitioning martyrs and saints (Schenke 2018; Love 2022: §2.3.3.4), while examples in Arabic continued to evidence a tradition that persists in Egypt today (el-Leithy 2003).

Scholarship

A corpus of 13 Letters to Gods in Demotic were edited and studied in a published doctoral thesis by Migahid (1986); similarly treated in an unpublished doctoral thesis by Endreffy (2016) were 33 examples in Demotic, seven in Greek, and one in Old Coptic. Love (2022) provides the first comprehensive overview of the entire corpus of published, and known but unpublished, examples, with a detailed case study of two particular examples.

Bibliographic Notes

Studies of selected Letters to Gods have been undertaken by Seidl (1966), Endreffy (2009, 2010), and Love (fc. b), and examples from the corpus have been published by Spiegelberg (1932), Hughes (1958, 1968, 1969), Malinine (1962), Ray (1975, 2005), Gallazzi (1985), Migahid (1986), Zauzich (1992–1993), Vittmann (1995), Migahid and Vittmann (2003), Smith and Davies (2014), and Love (2022). A comprehensive bibliography on the Letters to Gods is found in Love (2022), and a study thereof is found in Love (2022: §2.1–2.3), which also incorporates a treatment of curses in Greek and Coptic with justification and judicial features—that is, the putative and so-called Prayers for Justice from Egypt of Versnel (e.g., in 1991, 2002, and 2010), reconsidered by Love (2022: §2.3). In addition to the Letters to the Dead, treated by Gardiner and Sethe (1928), Donnat Beauquier (2014), Troche (2018), and Hsieh (2019), the most important comparanda are petitions (Baetens 2014, 2020) and letters (Depauw 2006) to worldly recipients, as well as oracle questions (bibliography in Ryholt 1993: 190 n. 11) and documents of self-dedication (Ryholt 2015).

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- Figure 1a. Papyrus inscribed with a letter to a god in Demotic concerning abuse, theft, and embezzlement, and a subsequent request for protection. Hermopolis, 502 BCE (20th year of Darius I). P. Chicago OI E. 19422 (recto) (= D. 17992). (Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago [<https://oi-idb.uchicago.edu/>].)
- Figure 1b. Papyrus inscribed with a letter to a god in Demotic concerning abuse, theft, and embezzlement, and a subsequent request for protection. Hermopolis, 502 BCE (20th year of Darius I). P. Chicago OI D. 19422 (verso) (= D. 17993). (Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago [<https://oi-idb.uchicago.edu/>].)
- Figure 2. Limestone ostrakon inscribed with a letter to a god in Demotic concerning unreturned property. Saqqara, 450 – 332 BCE. H5-1316 [3068] (DO Saqqara 1). (© and courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.)
- Figure 3. Ceramic vessel inscribed with a letter to a god in Demotic concerning robbery. Hermopolis, c. 570 – 526 BCE (reign of Amasis II or Darius I). ÄM 31206. (© SMB Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin. Photograph: Sandra Steiß.)
- Figure 4. Papyrus inscribed with a letter to a god containing a curse, the so-called Curse of Artemisia. Saqqara(?), c. 350 – 326 BCE. Papyrus Vindob G1. (© Die Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.)
- Figure 5. Papyrus inscribed with a letter to a god in Old Coptic concerning a dispute over a (legal) right. Tehne/Akoris, c. 76 – 200 CE. Crum MS XII.10 (also known as “The Old Coptic Schmidt Papyrus”). (© Griffith Institute, University of Oxford.)
- Table 1. Letters to Gods: secure and published. Sorted by language, site, date, and medium. (All data stem from the cited literature or the author's research. Table rendered by the author.)
- Table 2. Letters to Gods: secure and unpublished. (All data stem from the cited literature or the author's research. Table rendered by the author.)
- Table 3. Letters to Gods: insecure and unpublished. (All data stem from the cited literature or the author's research. Table rendered by the author.)

Table 4. Letters to Gods: insecure, unpublished, or lost. (All data stem from the cited literature or the author's research. Table rendered by the author.)

Table 1. Letters to Gods: secure and published. Sorted by site, date, and medium.

| Inventory | Language, Script | TM | Date, Temporal Context | Findspot, Provenance, Spatial Context | Medium, Material Context | Concern, Textual Content | Bibliography |
|------------------------------------|------------------|---------------|--|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| H5-DP 222 [1820] | Demotic | 113562 | 500-251 BCE | Saqqara (Northern Enclosure) | Papyrus | Unclear (damaged) | Smith and Davies 2014: pp. 279-280; pl. 7 |
| H5-DP 230 [1828] | Demotic | 69688 | 500-251 BCE | Saqqara (Northern Enclosure) | Papyrus | Blessing | Smith and Davies 2014: pp. 270-272; pl. 3 |
| H5-DP 282 [1880] | Demotic | 69691 | 500-251 BCE | Saqqara (Northern Enclosure) | Papyrus | Theft (property not returned) | Smith and Davies 2014: pp. 272-275; pls. 4 A, B |
| H5-DP 4 [1602] | Demotic | 69693 | 500-251 BCE | Saqqara (Northern Enclosure) | Papyrus | Theft (robbery) | Smith and Davies 2014: pp. 264-267; pl. 1 |
| H5-DP 413 [2334] | Demotic | 113563 | 500-251 BCE | Saqqara (Northern Enclosure) | Papyrus | Unclear (damaged) | Smith and Davies 2014: pp. 280-281; pl. 8 |
| H5-DP 52 [1650] | Demotic | 113561 | 500-251 BCE | Saqqara (Northern Enclosure) | Papyrus | Unclear (damaged) | Smith and Davies 2014: pp. 277-279; pl. 6 |
| H5-1316 [3068] | Demotic | 316331 | 450-332 BCE | Saqqara (Northern Enclosure) | Ostrakon (limestone) | Theft (property not returned) | Ray 2013: pp. 11-16 |
| H5-DP 195+256+276 [1793+1854+1874] | Demotic | 69689 | 450-351 BCE | Saqqara (Northern Enclosure) | Papyrus | Curse | Davies 2014: pp. 267-270; pl. 2 |
| H5-1660 [3545] | Demotic | 48702 | 404-305 BCE | Saqqara (Northern Enclosure) | Linen | Abduction | Ray 2005 |
| P. Cairo 50072 | Demotic | 92339 | 404-305 BCE | Saqqara | Papyrus | Conscription | Spiegelberg 1932: pp. 60-61; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: p. 22 |
| 71/2-DP 92 | Demotic | NA | c. 380-343 BCE | Saqqara (Sector 7 West Dump) | Papyrus | Unclear (damaged) | Smith 2002: p. 370 |
| 71/2-DP 146 [5832] | Demotic | 69690 | 364/363 BCE (1 st /2 nd year of Theos) | Saqqara (Sector 7 surface finds) | Papyrus | Conscription, Theft (embezzlement) | Smith and Davies 2014: pp. 275-277 |
| P. Vindob. G 1 | Greek | 65797 | 350-326 BCE | Saqqara (?) | Papyrus | Curse | Wilcken 1922: pp. 97-104; Love 2022: §1, 6-8 |
| H6-198 [1994] | Demotic | 145281 | 332-201 BCE | Saqqara (Sector 3) | Ostrakon (ceramic) | Guarantee | Ray 2011: pp. 310-312 |
| P. BM EA 10857 | Demotic | 48780 | 332-201 BCE | Saqqara | Papyrus | Healing | Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 122-129, #10 |
| P. Cairo 50110 | Demotic | 48698 & 48715 | 332-30 BCE | Saqqara | Papyrus | Abuse (physical) | Spiegelberg 1932: 78; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 89-96, #6 |

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|--|------------|--------|---|---------------------------------------|------------------|---|--|
| P. Cairo 50111 | Demotic | 48716 | 332-30 BCE | Saqqara | Papyrus | Unclear (damaged) Protection? | Spiegelberg 1932: pp. 78-79; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 93-96, #7 |
| P. Cairo 50117 | Demotic | 48719 | 332-30 BCE | Saqqara | Papyrus | Unclear (damaged) Protection? | Spiegelberg 1932: p. 81; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: p. 22 |
| P. Cairo 50114 | Demotic | 44488 | 100-1 BCE | Saqqara (?) | Papyrus | Healing | Spiegelberg 1932: 80; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: p. 24; Zauzich 2000: pp. 20-21 |
| P. Cairo 31045 | Demotic | 48672 | 550-501 BCE | Saqqara (North) (Persian/Saite Tombs) | Papyrus | Protection & Request for retribution | Spiegelberg 1932: 237; Hughes 1958: pp. 4-5; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 45-53, #3 |
| L. BM EA 73782 | Demotic | 113543 | 664-332 BCE (Late Period) | Hermopolis (?) | Linen | Unclear (illegible) | Unpublished, KYP XXXX |
| L. BM EA 73784 | Demotic | 100205 | 664-332 BCE (Late Period) | Hermopolis (?) | Linen | Theft (emb.) recompense | Migahid and Vittmann 2003: pp. 47-53, 57-58, pls. 6-7 |
| L. BM EA 73786 | Demotic | 100206 | 664-332 BCE (Late Period) | Hermopolis (?) | Linen | Theft (loan not repaid) | Migahid and Vittmann 2003: pp. 53-56, 58, pls. 7-8 |
| P. Mallawi 485 | Demotic | 48790 | 664-526 BCE (Saite) | Hermopolis (Ibiotapheion) | Papyrus | Theft (embezzlem.) | Zaghloul 1985: pp. 50-55 #4 |
| Berlin 5/66 ÄM 31206 | Demotic | 48776 | c. 570-526 BCE (Amasis II) | Hermopolis | Vessel (ceramic) | Theft (robbery) | Hughes 1968: p. 176; Lüdeckens 1971; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 31-37, #1 |
| L. BM EA 73785 | Demotic | 48783 | c. 570-486 BCE (Amasis II or Darius I) | Hermopolis | Linen | Protection | Hughes 1968: pp. 176-182; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 137-139, #13 |
| L. Mallawi 489 | Demotic | 48792 | 525-404 BCE (Saite or Persian) | Hermopolis (Ibiotapheion) | Linen | Theft (loan not repaid) | Zaghloul 1985: pp. 56-63, #5 |
| P. Chicago OI E 19422 (=D 17922 & 17923) | Demotic | 48777 | 502 BCE (20 th year of Darius I) | Hermopolis | Papyrus | Abuse (physical) Theft (embezzlem. robbery), protection | Hughes 1958; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 38-44, #2 |
| Leinwand Michaelides | Demotic | 81172 | c. 500 BCE | Hermopolis | Linen | Theft (embezzlem-) | Vittmann 1995: pp. 169-176; 179-181 |
| P. Vienna D 12026 | Demotic | 81174 | c. 500 BCE | Hermopolis | Papyrus | Theft (embezzlem.) | Vittmann 1995: pp. 176-178; 180 |
| Crum MS XII.10 | Old Coptic | 92845 | 76-200 CE | Tehne/Akoris (Eastern Slope Cemetery) | Papyrus | Fulfilment of (legal) right | Satzinger 1975; Love 2022: §1, 3-5; fc. a |
| P. Cairo 50015 | Demotic | 44369 | 332-30 BCE | Theadelphia | Papyrus | Fulfilment of (legal) right (including "Negative Confession") | Spiegelberg 1932: p. 332; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 74-88, #5 |
| P. Carlsberg 67 | Demotic | 48778 | | Tebtunis | Papyrus | Healing | Ray 1975: pp. 181-188; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 97-114, #8 |

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|--|---------|--------|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--|---|
| P. Cairo 31255 | Demotic | 44002 | 166-123 BCE | Euhemeria | Papyrus | Abuse (physical) & Theft (robbery) | Spiegelberg 1932: pp. 323-324; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 54-73, #4 |
| T. BM EA 50145 | Demotic | 48781 | 332-30 BCE | Deir el-Bahari (?) | Tablet (wood) | Unclear (damaged) | Brunsch 1982-1983: pp. 37-38; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 130-133, #11 |
| T. Cambridge University Library Michaelides x4 | Demotic | 48782 | 219/218 BCE | Deir el-Bahari (?) | Tablet (wood) | Conception & Childbirth | Malinine 1962: pp. 37-43; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 134-136, #12 |
| P. BM EA 10845 | Demotic | 48779 | 150-30 BCE | Saqqara or Hermopolis | Papyrus | Abuse (physical) | Hughes 1968: p. 176; 1969: pp. 43-54; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: pp. 115-121, #9 |
| P. Berlin P 15660 | Demotic | 80872 | 100-1 BCE | Unprovenanced (?) | Papyrus | Theft (robbery) | Zauzich 1992-1993 |
| O. Cairo JdE 38622 | Greek | 25385 | 76-125 CE | Esna (Fish Cemetery) | Ostrakon (ceramic) | Curse | Gallazzi 1985; Gascou 2008: pp. 31-32 |
| O. Garstang 1 P. L. Bat. 33 7 | Greek | 115545 | 1-200 CE | Esna (Fish Cemetery) | Ostrakon (ceramic) | Curse | Gascou 2008: pp. 32-34 |
| O. Garstang 2 P. L. Bat. 33 8 | Greek | 115546 | 1-200 CE | Esna (Fish Cemetery) | Ostrakon (ceramic) | Unclear (damaged), yet likely also a curse (as previous) | Gascou 2008: pp. 34-36 |

Table 2: Letters to Gods, secure and unpublished.

| Letters to Gods – Secure, Unpublished | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------------|------------------|---|--|
| Inventory | TM | Date | Provenance | Medium | Bibliography | |
| P. Saqqara 52 | 91321 | 100-1 BCE | Saqqara (East of the Serapeum) | Papyrus | el-Khouly 1973: pp. 151-152; pl. 40,1 | |
| P. Saqqara 57 | 91325 | 100-1 BCE | Saqqara (East of the Serapeum) | Papyrus | el-Khouly 1973: pp. 152-153; pl. 40,3 | |
| P. Berlin P. 23833 | 113544 | 332-30 BCE | Saqqara (?) | Papyrus | Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: p. 25; Consultation by the author. | |
| P. BM EA 10233 | 48744 | 200-101 BCE (?) | Saqqara (?) | Papyrus | Revillout 1883; 1888a: p. 4, #5; pl. 5; 1888b: p. 33; pl. 5; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: p. 22; Consultation by the author. | |
| P. BM EA 10854 | 107429 | 664-332 BCE | Hermopolis (?) | Papyrus | Bourriau 1979: 154, #67; Consultation by the author. | |
| P. Brux. Dem. E 8232 | 56437 | 664-332 BCE | Hermopolis (?) | Papyrus | Consultation by the author. | |
| MB 1458 (“Tuna Topf”) | - | 664-332 BCE | Hermopolis (Ibiotapheion) | Vessel (ceramic) | Endreffy 2010: p. 49 n. 1; 52 | |

| | | | | | |
|--|-------|-------------|---|-------------------------|--|
| Deir el-Bahri Ostrakon | - | 200-151 BCE | Deir el-Bahri (Chapel of Amenhotep-son- of-Hapu) | Ostrakon (limestone) | Karkowski and Winnicki 1983: p. 102; Wysocki 1985: pp. 366-367, pl. 2; Łajtar 2006: pp. 19, 51; 2008: p. 121; Lang 2013: p. 91 |
| P. Heidelberg D 27 | - | 664-332 BCE | Unprovenanced | Papyrus | Consultation by the author. |
| Princeton University Library AM 8974 | 56090 | 101-200 CE | Unprovenanced | Papyrus | In preparation by Joachim F. Quack. |

Table 3. Letters to Gods: insecure and unpublished.

| Letters to Gods – Insecure, Unpublished | | |
|--|--------|---|
| Inventory | TM | Bibliography |
| P. BM EA 10424 | 381169 | Consultation by the author. |
| P. BM EA 10855 | - | Bourriau 1979: p. 154, #66; consultation by the author. |
| P. Köln inv. 2068 | - | Consultation by the author. |

Table 4. Letters to Gods: insecure, unpublished, or lost.

| Letters to Gods – Insecure, Unpublished, Lost | | |
|--|--------|---|
| Inventory | TM | Bibliography |
| P. Saqqara 51 | 91320 | Smith in el-Khouly 1973: pp. 151, 155; Migahid 1986, Vol. 1: p. 25, n. 29 |
| O. Saqqara 70 | 113551 | " |
| O. Saqqara 77 | 113552 | " |
| O. Saqqara 88 | 113553 | " |
| O. Saqqara 89 | 113554 | " |
| O. Saqqara 92 | 113555 | " |
| O. Saqqara 106 | 113556 | " |
| O. Saqqara 110 | 113557 | " |
| Michaelides Linen '3' | - | Hughes 1968: p. 176 |
| Michaelides Linen '4' | - | " |
| Michaelides Linen '5' | - | " |