Demotic Accounts: Some Notes on the Form and Content

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Abstract

This essay aims at shedding some light on Demotic accounts as a vital administrative tool in the ancient Egyptian's everyday life in the Late and Greco-Roman Periods as evidenced by the large number of published accounts. Account documents belong to Demotic documentary texts and they usually record lists of various amounts of specific items that have been paid or received by certain individuals in different transactions. Such documents began to be recorded in Demotic from the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty. Among the abundant vocabulary of accounts in Demotic, "account" and "list" seem to be the only two words which were used to refer to accounts as a type of text. A full-structured account, which is not the case in most of Demotic accounts, normally contains a maximum number of three elements, that is, the heading, the main body, and the closing formula.

The Dawn of Demotic Accounts

Account documents have existed in Egypt since the Old Kingdom, when the foundations of the Egyptian state were established.1 The recently discovered accounts of the Wadi el-Jarf archive are reckoned to be the oldest account documents ever found in Egypt. This archive, discovered in 2013 by the French mission on the shore of the Red Sea, dates back to the reign of Khufu at the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty.2 In addition to this archive, there is also the well-known Abusir archive, which is dated to the Fifth Dynasty. As Posener-Kriéger and de Cenival noticed, accounts of the Abusir archive were recorded in a "so elaborate and highly developed" way, which suggests a long practice of recording accounts, from which the Fifth Dynasty scribes have benefited.3 By that time, the need for accounts increased and some developments in the art had been achieved; this series of developments manifested in the Late and Greco-Roman periods in the so-called Demotic accounts.

Scholars usually define Demotic accounts as a type of text that takes the form of a list, recording certain amounts of money, grain, or their like; such amounts were usually accompanied by the persons who have paid or

1 This article is based on my MA thesis, which was submitted to the Department of Egyptology, Faculty of Archaeology, Cairo University in May 2016, and supervised by Prof. Dr. Mahmoud Ebeid to whom I am very indebted. Many comments, corrections, amendments, and updates have been added to the work since then; see E. Nagy Eid, Demotic Accounts (MA Thesis, Cairo University, 2016). I should like to thank Prof. Dr. Janet H. Johnson who kindly read an earlier draft of this article and provided many valuable comments. I am also grateful to the JARCE reviewer, whose fruitful comments and suggestions have undoubtedly enriched the article.

2 According to Tallet, this archive is deemed to be the most ancient papyrus archive discovered in Egypt so far. The contents of this archive, which belongs to a crew of sailors, are mainly accounts of different commodities and registrations of the daily activities of the sailors; see P. Tallet, Les papyrus de la Mer Rouge I. Le "Journal de Merer" (Papyrus Jarf A et B) (Cairo, 17).


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