

Preface

The Old Coptic Schmidt Papyrus (OCSF) was first made known to me during a third year Coptic reading course. The syllabus for Undergraduates of Oriental Studies (Egyptology) at the University of Oxford who choose Coptic as their Second Subject includes the option to read the OCSF, and students were always encouraged to do so. Since attempting to read its text for the first time (2012), the OCSF has been both a source of fascination and frustration for me as an emerging ‘Demotist’.¹ Motivated to understand the *textual content* of the OCSF more exactly than past treatments, as my familiarity with, and thus understanding of, the Egyptian language developed, I have revisited the text on numerous occasions, and received the help of several colleagues – principally Gesa Schenke and Joachim Friedrich Quack – in order to improve my reading of the text.

Following research into the so-called Demotic and Greek Magical Papyri (*PDM* and *PGM*, aka Graeco-Egyptian Magical Papyri), culminating in the monograph *Code-switching with the Gods*, which re-edited the bilingual magical texts of *PGM IV* (Love 2016), I undertook a wider research project on the phenomenon of Old Coptic in its own right. That project began in earnest during two research years spent at the *Ägyptologisches Institut* of the *Ruprecht-Karls-Universität* Heidelberg, under the supervision of Joachim Quack. The first of these (2014–15) was made possible by the support of the *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst* through the Michael Foster Memorial Scholarship, and the second (2015–16) was made possible by the Leverhulme Trust through a Study Abroad Studentship. During those two years I prepared a re-edition of the OCSF, compiling the corpus of known and unknown, published and unpublished, Letters to Gods in Demotic in order to have the largest possible source of comparanda that might aid the decipherment, and inform an interpretation and understanding, of the OCSF. This led to my first engagement with the Curse of Artemisia (CA), the academic discourse thereon, and its incorporation into the corpus of Letters to Gods from Egypt as one of several examples that happened to be written in Greek, rather than a written form of Egyptian – Demotic or Old Coptic.

My project on the “nature” of Old Coptic developed subsequently into my Doctoral research on script shift and obsolescence in Roman Egypt under the supervision of Mark Smith at the University of Oxford in 2016–19, made possible by the Oxford-Nicholas Bratt-St John’s Graduate Scholarship, which was completed as a DPhil thesis entitled *Innovative Scripts and Spellings in Roman Egypt*, and culminated in the monograph *Script Switching in Roman Egypt* (Love 2021a). That Doctoral research began as a study of Old Coptic in its own right, in which I analysed every

¹ Coined by the Demotists of the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg for a Demotist-Coptacist.

known and unknown, published and unpublished, source exhibiting the use of so-called Old Coptic scripts, their content, context, and the implications of these for the “nature”, i.e., the emergence, utilisation, and transmission, of Old Coptic. As part of this research, I returned to the OCSP, and wrote a chapter on it, but because my doctoral research developed into a contextualised study of Old Coptic script use among the innovative scripts and spellings attested in the priestly script communities of Roman Egypt, whereas the OCSP stood alone, I decided to omit it from that study.

Since then, I have revisited the OCSP on numerous occasions, not only in order to try to understand its *textual content* more accurately, but also its *context* of production and deposition, and the *concept* behind it as the product of both the *textual tradition* of Letters to Gods and *ritual tradition* of Petitioning the Divine from Egypt. That is to say, the *motivation* behind why Esmpe petitioned Osiris, and the *mechanism* through which she conceptualised she could bring about that desired outcome in her lived experience by engaging divine agency.

The revelations, rethinks, and rewrites that occurred during these few years are described in the first chapter.

Petitioning the Divine in the Letters to Gods from Egypt constitutes my ongoing research project at the *Julius-Maximilians-Universität* Würzburg, which aims to incorporate not only (re-)editions of all the published and unpublished Letters to Gods in Demotic, Greek, and Old Coptic, but also a study of the *ritual tradition* of Petitioning the Divine evidenced by the *textual tradition* of Letters to Gods, and the insights they provide for understanding the conceptualisation of, and interactions with, the divine in Egypt during the Late to Roman Period. While providing a springboard for that further work of mine, my aim is that this study will provide colleagues and readers with the first comprehensive summary and study of the Letters to Gods in Demotic, Greek, and Old Coptic alongside case studies on two women, Esmpe and Artemisia, who once petitioned Osiris.

Limitations and Outlook

Given the length of this study and the number of years it has taken to compile, it may come as no surprise to readers that I find it rather dissatisfying how many questions could not be given definitive or even confident answers, and how many questions could be given precisely no answers. Some of these limitations will relate to my approach, my skill set, and my knowledge base, but others relate to the simply limited pattern of extant evidence. As readers will see in the course of this study, however, I nevertheless advocate a minimalist approach, and where I have sought to fill gaps, I have endeavoured to do so with as much appreciation of my own biases and perceptions as possible, and ensured to label my conjectures and speculations as precisely such.

Indeed, colleagues must not take my word for it. This study contains a host of counter-points, counter-argumentations, and criticisms – some of which could be taken as polemic, in the academic sense –, leading to interrogations, deconstructions, and refutations of received wisdom, and the interpretations and understandings therefrom that comprise the current consensus on certain sources, their corpora, and their proposed analytical categories. However, those conclusions, in my judgement, derive principally from the pattern of extant evidence, which colleagues can in turn study for themselves. From evident selection and confirmation bias in sources studied, to untenable hellenocentric approaches and the framing of sources in studies that turns facts into artifacts, I have sought to highlight analytical failures in prior studies, and thereby acknowledge my own answerability in the course of this work. Readers may also find dissatisfying that many deconstructions are left without something (re)constructed in its place – a plot being demolished where walls and a roof once stood. However, where evidence is lacking, where sources are scarce, and where assertion therefore appears to often fill the void, I would argue that dealing with a plot strewn with bricks and tiles is preferable to living inside a house built on sand. These bricks and tiles are, after all, not rubble, but building blocks to be used or discarded ready for a viable reconstruction, one with structural integrity. After all, that this study has been rethought and rewritten over the course of several years is precisely because new evidence, such as previously unknown or newly reinterpreted sources, has been revelatory and revisionist for any interpretation and understanding of the *textual tradition* of Letters to Gods and the *ritual tradition* of Petitioning the Divine. At times over these past years, I have only been able to ensure I still have a mind by changing it, and as the evidence has changed, so have my interpretations and understandings of that evidence. Thus, I fully expect that (some of) the findings of this study will be refined and others refuted in the course of time, and, in the meantime, I hope that this study will serve as a reliable starting point for colleagues interested in the *textual tradition* of Letters to Gods from Egypt.

