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Fresh goose-fat to cure a nightmare?

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Résumé

Les problèmes de santé du dessinateur Nebre impliquant l'intervention des divinités sont bien connus dans la littérature égyptologique. Plusieurs stèles érigées par lui témoignent de sa gratitude face à la bienveillance des dieux qui ont soigné les maladies de sa famille.

Les textes de deux ostraca — dont un inédit — offrent une nouvelle perspective sur les difficultés mentales de cet éminent membre de la communauté de Deir el-Medina et sur une remarquable prescription médicale.

Mots-clés : 19^e dynastie ; Deir el-Medina ; Nebre ; cauchemar ; graisse d'oie ; la femme sage

Abstract

The health problems of the draughtsman Nebre involving the intervention of deities are well-known in Egyptological literature. Several stelae set up by him bear witness of his gratitude for the benevolence shown by deities in curing sicknesses within his family.

The texts of two ostraca – one of which unknown so far – present more insight into the mental difficulties of this prominent member of the Deir el-Medina community and the remarkable proposed medical prescription.

Keywords: 19th Dynasty; Deir el-Medina; Nebre; nightmare; goose fat; the wise woman

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Fresh goose-fat to cure a nightmare?

Rob DEMARÉE*

Habent sua fata ostraca

Many years ago, when the ostraca from the collection of the Berlin Museum became consultable via Demonline¹, my attention was caught by one badly legible limestone ostrakon that contained a brief note with a request for an amount of goose-fat and, with a corrected reading, also mentioned a cat.

Usually, such brief notes do not tell us much about the reason or the background of the request.

Years later, however, I received an image of an unprovenanced ostrakon (“possibly somewhere in England”) with a text of a letter likewise mentioning an amount of goose-fat. For a long time, my search for the location of this ostrakon remained unsuccessful, until finally early 2023 an email from a colleague brought the answer.² This ostrakon proved to be part of the collection of the Harrogate Museum that was temporarily on loan for study reasons at The Egypt Centre of Swansea University. The text of the letter on this ostrakon is intriguing enough to merit a publication, and even more in combination with the clearly related text on the Berlin ostrakon.³

O. HARGM10823 (Fig. 1)

Limestone ostrakon, measuring h. 12.2 x w. 10.2 cm. Inscribed in black on one side only with 10 lines hieratic text. This is one of the objects donated to the Harrogate Museum by James Roberts Ogdon (1866-1940) in the 1930s.

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¹ <https://dem-online.gwi.uni-muenchen.de>.

² Email 26/03/2023 from Dr. Ken Griffin, to whom I am most grateful for providing me with information and images.

³ My thanks go to Dr. Jan Moje for providing me with the images of O. Berlin P. 14841, and to Dr. Matthias Müller for his help in composing the hieroglyphic transcriptions and his comments on an earlier version of this contribution.

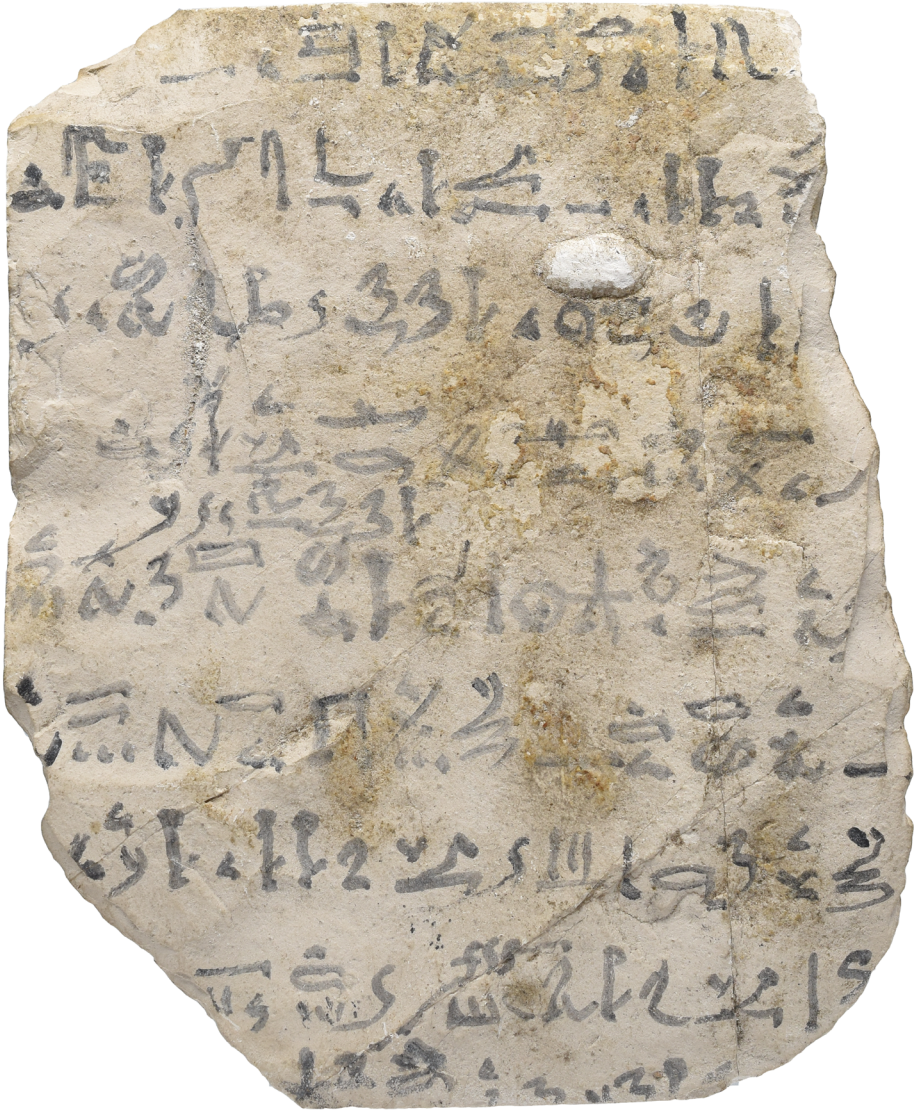


Fig. 1. O.HARGM10823

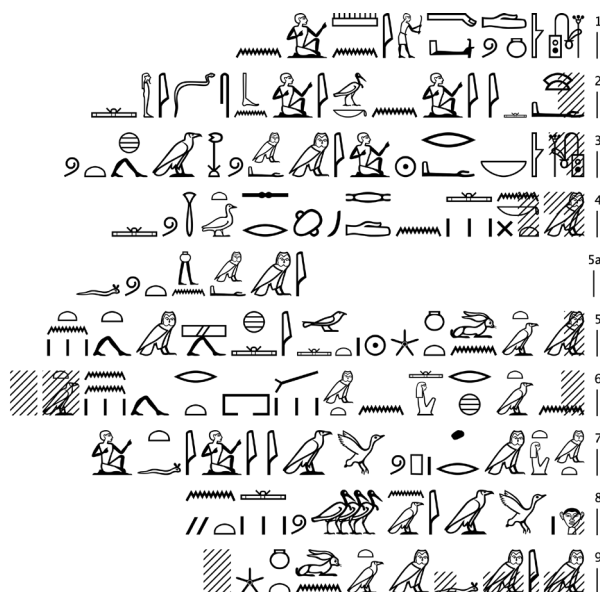


Fig. 2. Transcription of O.HARGM10823

Transliteration (Fig. 2)

- 1 *sš-qd Nḥt-Īmn n*
- 2 *Ḥ'y n B3ki bn sḏi*
- 3 *sš-qd Nb-R' imy wh3.tw*
- 4 *m nkt n 'd sri.t w3d*
- 5 *imy in.tw=f*
- 6 *m t3 wnw.t šri.t iḥ šm=tn*
- 7 *n t3 rh n mw.wt pri n=n t3[y=i]*
- 8 *mw.t m r-pw p3y=i it*
- 9 *hr p3i n3 b3w nty*
- 10 *m-īm=f m t3 wnw.t*

Translation

(From) draughtsman Nakhtamun to Khay (and) to Baki. Draughtsman Nebre cannot not sleep well. Let someone look for some fresh goose-fat and let it be brought at once. Please go to the woman who knows about deaths. May m[y] mother or my father come out because of this. It is the *b3w* which are within him at this moment.

Notes

- 3 The spelling of the verb *sdr* – to sleep – is enigmatic. The scribe wrote first *sd* phonetically, omitted the sign Gardiner M36, and then wrote an *i* instead of a *r* which had phonetically disappeared in the final position of a word. For the determinative Möller A10 (Gardiner A53), see Dimitri MEEKS, “Hiératique et hiéroglyphes”, in: Simone GERHARDS, a.o. (eds.), *Schöne Denkmäler sind entstanden, Studien zu Ehren von Ursula Verhoeven*, Heidelberg 2023, pp. 369-370.

Since according to the grammar, the negation used here –*bn sdm.f*– is a negated prospective, I have opted for a translation “he cannot sleep well”. If the scribe had wanted to tell that Nebre did not sleep well, he should have used the negation *bw sdm.f*.

- 4-6 The position of *imy in.tw=f* in the middle of the line seems to point to the fact that the writer meant *m t3 wnw.t šri.t* to be part of the initial request “Let someone look for some fresh goose-fat at once” and later added “and let it be brought”. For *wnw.t šri.t* – in a moment, at once – see *Urk. IV*, 691,10 and *Two Brothers* 12,7.

- 9 The scribe seems to have been confused here, maybe caused by the stressful situation. He probably meant to write *p3y* – this, followed by a cleft sentence. For the *b3w* which are within someone, see already J.F. BORGHOUTS, “Divine Intervention in Ancient Egypt and its Manifestation”, in: R.J. DEMARÉE and Jac.J. JANSSEN, *Gleanings from Deir el-Medîna*, Leiden 1982, pp. 25-35; and O.DeM 1690, rt. X+2-x+3, in Annie GASSE, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques littéraires de Deir el-Médinéh*, Tome IV, Le Caire 1990.

O.Berlin P. 14841 (Fig. 3)

Limestone ostrakon, measuring h. 5.5 x w. 12.5 cm. Inscribed in black on one side only with 4 lines hieratic text. The writing is severely damaged in places, but almost completely legible. In view of some pencil strokes on the verso, this ostrakon was probably found at Deir el-Medina in 1913 by the German mission led by Georg Möller.



Fig. 3. O.Berlin P.14841.

SMB - Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Foto: Sandra Steiß.



Fig. 4. Transcription of O.Berlin P.14841

Transliteration (Fig. 4)

- 1 [n] Ḥ'y imy in.tw m nkt n ḏ
- 2 šri[.t] w3ḏ m t3 wnw.t [ʒ]is sp-sn
- 3 p3 wn wnm t3 mīw p3 inī n=i
- 4 m sf[...]

Translation

To Khay. Let there be brought some fresh
goose-fat directly, very, very quickly
because the cat has eaten that what was
brought to me
yesterday.

Notes

- 1 Brief notes like this one, sometimes called memoranda, usually mention only the addressee as the contents immediately tell the identity of the sender who must have been his brother Nakhtamun (iii), the author of the ostrakon discussed above. Although the text of this ostrakon is much degraded, the handwriting is very similar to that on the Harrogate ostrakon, see for example the phrase *imy in.tw* in this line (1) and in line (5) on the latter ostrakon.

Commentary

The draughtsman Nakhtamun (iii) is a son of the draughtsman Nebre (i), as is his elder brother Khay (i). Baki (iv) is his own son. They were all most active during the mid-19th dynasty. For this family see Benedict DAVIES, *Who's Who at Deir el-Medina*, Leiden 1999, pp. 153-155 and charts 10 and 24. Khay (i) is the addressee of O. Berlin P. 14841. Nakhtamun (iii) also wrote the fragmentary letter O. DeM 972 to his father Nebre (i).⁴ His handwriting has much in common with that of his father, his elder brother and contemporary fellow-workmen.⁵ Louvre ostrakon E 27679 may also have been written by him to his brother Khay.⁶ In this letter the scribe asks for some beans to be used in the libation offering for his mother. Whether there is a relation between this note concerning the funeral of the mother and the remark in line 8 of O.HARGM10823, is hard to say.

The request for fresh goose-fat seems a little odd⁷, but it may initially have been meant for anointing the eyes, like in P. Ebers 401 and P. Ebers 417, or as a remedy for the treatment of a headache, like in P. Ebers 250.⁸

⁴ Pierre GRANDET, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques non littéraires de Deir el-Médinéh*, Tome IX, Le Caire 2003, pp. 142 and 427.

⁵ See e.g. Rob DEMARÉE, Kathrin GABLER and Stéphane POLIS, “A family affair in the community of Deir el-Medina: gossip girls in two 19th dynasty letters”, in: Svenja GÜLDEN, Tobias KONRAD, Ursula VERHOEVEN, *Ägyptische “Binsen”-Weisheiten IV*, Stuttgart, 2019, 43-126; Stéphane POLIS, “The messy scribe from Deir el-Medina”, in: Svenja GÜLDEN, Tobias KONRAD, Ursula VERHOEVEN, *Ägyptologische “Binsen”-Weisheiten IV*, Stuttgart, 2019, pp. 405-453.

⁶ Pierre GRANDET, “Cinq ostraca hiératiques du musée du Louvre : E 27676, 27677, 27678, 27679”, in: C. GALLOIS, P. GRANDET et L. PANTALACCI, *Mélanges offerts à François Neveu*, Le Caire 2008, pp. 161-177.

⁷ I am grateful to Jonny Russell MA for providing me with the following general information. Goose fat has been predominantly used as a stabilizer for other ingredients topically applied to the body for diverse conditions including fevers. It also finds its way into various drinks and edibles for treating the inner structures of the body.

⁸ Cf. A.KARENBERG & C. LEITZ, “Headache in magical and medical papyri of Ancient Egypt”, *Cephalalgia* 2001, 21, pp. 914-1915.

In view of the next and more serious and urgent request in lines 6-10 of the text, the bad sleep of Nebre (i) was clearly caused by an anxiety dream or a nightmare.⁹ Consultation of a wise woman on matters of life and death is widely attested in texts from Deir el-Medina.¹⁰ In O. DeM 1688 someone went to *t3 rh.t n mw.t* – the lady who has knowledge of death¹¹, and in the ostracon Letellier¹² someone is asked to consult with the wise woman about the death of two boys.

Nebre (i) and his family seem to have struggled more often with health problems involving the intervention of deities. He erected several stelae (Fig. 5) within Deir el-Medina¹³, the most remarkable of which is Berlin 20377 (Fig. 6) set up by Nebre (i) and his son Khay (i) in commemoration of the benevolence shown by Amun to his son Nakhtamun (iii) whose sickness was reputedly the result of his wrongdoing.¹⁴ In the first half of the text on this stela Nebre (i) addresses Amun as the “who comes at the cry of the poor; when I cry out to you in affliction, you come and I am saved”, thereby probably referring to his own time of need.¹⁵

⁹ For the role of dreams see H. BONNET, *Reallexikon der ägyptische Religionsgeschichte*, pp. 835-838, the lemma ‘Traum’ by P. VERNUS in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* 6, 745-749, and Kasia SZAPOWSKA, *Behind Closed Eyes: Dreams and Nightmares in Ancient Egypt*, Swansea 2003, esp. pp. 26-33.

¹⁰ J.F. BORGHOUTS, “Divine Intervention in Ancient Egypt and its Manifestation”, in: R.J. DEMARÉE and Jac.J. JANSSEN, *Gleanings from Deir el-Medina*, Leiden 1982, pp. 24-27; Doris KARL, “Funktion und Bedeutung einer weisen Frau im alten Ägypten”, *SÄK* 28 (2000), pp. 131-160; Jaana TOIVARI-VIITALA, *Women at Deir el-Medina: A Study of the Status and Roles of the Female Inhabitants in the Workmen’s Community during the Ramesside Period*, Leiden 2001, pp. 228-231; Anne AUSTIN, *Contending with Illness in ancient Egypt: A textual and osteological study of health and health care at Deir el-Medina* (diss. University of California), 2014, pp. 97-102.

¹¹ Annie GASSE, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques littéraires de Deir el-Médinéh*, Tome IV, Le Caire 1990, with corrections to this text by Hans-W. FISCHER-ELFERT in *BiOr* L, Leiden 1993, p. 126.

¹² Bernadette LETELLIER, “La destinée de deux enfants, un ostracon Ramesside inédit”, in: Jean VERCOUTTER (ed.), *Livre du Centenaire 1880-1980*, Le Caire 1908, pp. 127-131. The text of this ostracon bears no relation with the letter on O.OIM 16974 as suggested in Mohammed A. NASSAR, “The Wise Woman and the Healing Practice”, *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 24, 2019, pp. 41-48. This suggestion is based on a faulty reading: the text of the latter ostracon speaks of two errors/sins (*‘d3.w*) and not of two boys (*‘dd.w*).

¹³ BM EA 276 dedicated to Haroeris, Turin N.50036 dedicated to Meretseger, Turin N.50036 dedicated to Khonsu-Neferhotep by Nebre (i) and his son Amenemope (iv), Turin N.50056 dedicated by Nebre (i) and his sons Khay (i) and Nakhtamun (iii) dedicated to the good swallow and the good cat, and BMFA 09.290 dedicated to Re-Horakhte, the great god, the merciful one.

¹⁴ Cf. John BAINES and Elizabeth FROOD, “Piety, Change and Display in the New Kingdom”, in: Mark COLLIER and Steven SNAPE (eds.), *Ramesside Studies in Honour of K.A. Kitchen*, Bolton 2011, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵ *KRI* III, 654, 2-4.

In conclusion it may be said that the Harrogate ostrakon is a welcome addition to the corpus of attestations for the wise woman¹⁶, and in combination with the Berlin ostrakon gives us another interesting insight into the private life of the members of the Deir el-Medina community.

¹⁶ O.Cairo CG25674, O.DeM 1688, O.DeM 1690, O.ANashm.Mus.H.O.149 (ex O.Gardiner), O.Letellier and O.OIM 16974.



Fig. 5. Stela British Museum 276 dedicated by Nebre (i) to Haroeris.



Fig. 6. Stela Berlin Museum 20377
(after A. Erman, “Denksteine aus der thebanischen Gräberstadt”, *SPAW*,
1991, pl. xvi).