Papyrus Deir el-Medineh VII verso: 
A personal conflict in Deir el-Medineh

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I. Introduction

The text to be discussed (fig. 1) is found on the verso of Papyrus Deir el-Medineh VII of which a photograph and a hieroglyphic transcription have been previously published by Jaroslav Černý.3 The measurements of the mostly intact document, which contains eight lines on each side, are 18 cm in length and 22 cm in width. On the recto a previous text appears to have been obliterated which may well have constituted the now lost beginning of the text on the verso. The actual text on the recto, clearly written by another hand, is economic in nature and will not be dealt with here. The verso constitutes a private communication between two unnamed men. Edward Wente has provided hitherto the only transcription, which is however without commentary.5

The text is written in well developed Late Egyptian. Gutesgessl proposes with some reservations a placement in the reign of Ramses VII based on the grain prices mentioned on the recto.4 Wente5 hesitantly attributes the document to the reign of Ramses IX. The text shows no overt realizations of the preposition preceding the indefinite in the circumstantial of the present, but in four cases6 we can state a zero-

realization for certain. This also supports a dating not before the 20th dynasty.7

II. Transcription

(1) . . . (2) . . . w pĕs wtr ḫm rmt jw[j] n3 jw ḫm (3) . . . (4) . . . w ḫm . . . (5) . . . w ḫm . . . (6) . . . w ḫm . . . (7) . . . w ḫm . . . (8) . . . w ḫm . . . (9) . . . w ḫm . . . (10) . . . w ḫm . . .

8 There are several alternatives for interpreting this hieratic group:
1) ḫm. This would lead to a translation ‘the completed way’, which does not make very much sense.
2) ḫm. This does not allow a syntactically feasible interpretation.
3) ḫm which could be understood as part of a corruped orthography of the conjunction ḫm which would however make better sense than the other two suggestions. This is the opinion preferred by Wente, Letters, 152.
4) ḫm. In this case, there is a small difference in the reading of the conjunction ḫm and ḫm, cited by J. Černý and S. I. Groll 1984, A Late Egyptian Grammar, Rome 1984, 53f.
5) This is the solution we favor here.
6) Cf. WB 1, 130. We consider this interpretation preferable to the rendering ḫm (WB 1, 5, 76–77) apparently chosen by Wente, Letters, 152, based on the following: 1) The determinative supports our reading; 2) we cannot otherwise account for the j which is clearly visible in the hieratic, 3) it seems difficult to account for the numerals taking a translation as ‘manier’.

10 This is a difficult passage. We suggest an unusual orthography of ḫm understanding what J. Winand, Études de néo-égyptien (Lierre 1992), 1, 510ff, designates as construction analogique du futur III (see P. F. Frandson, An Outline of the Late Egyptian Verbal System [Copenhagen 1974], 227ff). Obviously, Wente, Letters, 152f also had this in mind. The writing of ḫm can be compared to the one cited by J. F. Quack, "Philologische Miscellen 2," Lingeg 3 (1993), 152, ex (11).
III. Translation

(1) ... when we saw our man repulsing me on (2) the way. Have you not made anything for me out of all the tamarisk wood of my (3) brothers? Am I not going to be among those for whom you make a feast any more? But you (4) went out and blasphemed my name in front of the people of the village/town (5) in which I live, and then he does not say anything. Did I not bring you (.) of(?!) which(?) he told(?) me (6) to bring them all (to you)16? And for this reason I did not take them from here, rather I came (7) to your house to take them and I found your having left (them)19 out for me. (8) So do not discuss that.

11 This writing of msw occurs also in A. H. Gardner, LJS, 38, 14. See ibid. for further examples.

12 We translate it in accordance with msw, Wb. I, 272 3, further cf. msw (Wb. I, 272, 9f., and discussed by J. F. Borghouts, "A Deputy of a Gang Knowes his Business," in: R. J. Demarée and J. J. Janssen [eds.], Gleanings from Deir el-Medina (Leiden 1982), 88). However, all other occurrences outside of this text are used intrasentively (Borghouts, Deputy, n. 56 on p. 94f.).

13 The pronoun ms is presumably coreferential with the person referred to as jfmr ntr above.

14 The traces at the beginning of the lacuna could correspond to a variety of possibilities, one of which is the reading ly as suggested by Wente, Letter, 153.

15 In jly we assume an infinitive used functionally as an imperative, cf. F. J. Frandsen, An Outline of the Late Egyptian Vocal System (Copenhagen 1974), 262.

16 See below, end of IV.

17 See below, V. 5.


19 There is no room for an object pronoun in the hieratic text.

20 For the various meanings of msw cf. A. G. McDowell, Jurisdiction in the Workmen's Community of Deir el-Medina (Leiden 1990), 206.
which I took away. But help me go ahead when I take them (to him)!  

IV. The Notion of Bringing and Taking  

Crucial for the understanding of the text are the vectorial verbs *jn*j and *dy* which supply important information as to the speech situation. In Late Egyptian, Demotic, and Coptic these verbs are semantically identical; however, their distribution is determined by pragmatic factors: *jn*j designates a motion towards either the locuteur (the actant referred to by first person pronouns) or the interlocuteur (who is referred to by second person pronouns) of the actual speech act, while *dy* expresses movements in any other direction.  

The use of *dy* in the section *h*j *jy*jy *dy* *jy*jy *dy* makes it clear that the objects involved in the transport cannot have been brought to the author of the transmission or to the house of the letter’s recipient respectively but to a location of a third party that we understand as being the aforementioned *dy* in *n* *ru*.  

Both instances of *dy* in l. 8 have to be understood by analogy. The expression [(j) *dy* *n* *ru*] does not render a concrete interpretation because there is no means of knowing the location of the speech act referred to by *d*j. In the interest of textual coherence we take the action as having taken place in the direction of the recipient of the communication.

V. Interpretation  

The text concerns the affairs of three unnamed persons: the author of the communication (A), its recipient (B), and an individual referred to as *dy* in line 1 (C). The exact relationship of C in respect to A is unknown to us. In the following, we will provide a possible reconstruction of what happened in chronological order.  

The proposed scenario is not the only possible one, but from the point of textual coherency and economy of assumption it seems to us the
most preferable. Since many of the presuppositions that the writer and the reader of the communication shared are inaccessible to us, we cannot be certain that this is the definite solution. The reconstruction of what actually happened is further hindered by the fact that we only have the subjective viewpoint of A.

1) C told A to take something referred to with a plural pronoun to B (ll. 5f.). We do not know what exactly was brought but the items appear to have been mentioned in the lacuna.

2) A brought these objects to B (l. 5).

3) Not necessarily connected with these events is an affair concerning tamarisk wood of which B failed to make something for A (ll. 2f.).

4) C insulted A (l. 1). It appears that C may have had expectations to receive certain items from A.

5) Because B was now under obligation to A, A did not take the goods from himself but retrieved goods stored by B’s house and took them to C (ll. 6–8).

6) After this had happened, B insulted A in the presence of the entire community (ll. 3–5).

7) C acted improperly regarding these insults; either he did not defend A or failed to inform A (l. 5).

This communication can be seen as an attempt by A to restore his strained relations with B and C but even more so a means to restore his damaged status in the entire community. His argumentation strategy involves justification for his action as well as attempts to point out inappropriate behavior on the part of both B and C.

The present text gives an indication of how important interpersonal relations were in the Egyptian community. Further investigations on documents of this type, which exist in abundance, would no doubt provide a wealth of information on the value and function of proper social bearing within that society.

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