FROM ORAL PRACTICE TO WRITTEN RECORD IN RAMESSIDE DEIR EL-MEDINA

BY

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Abstract

The thousands of hieratic ostraca and papyri from the Ramesside settlement of necropolis workmen at Deir el-Medina include many texts about private business and legal matters. The majority of standard formulas in these records did not develop before the first half of the 20th dynasty, whereas most of the formulas current in administrative texts of the necropolis already existed in the 19th dynasty. The later increase in and formalization of private and legal texts suggest that writing became only gradually popular in village life. Studies of similar processes in anthropological and historical literature help to explain this development in an exceptionally literate village community.

Parmi les milliers des ostraca et des papyrus hiératiques du village des ouvriers de la nécropole de Deir el-Medina, de l'époque ramesside, on trouve un grand nombre de textes relatifs aux affaires privées et juridiques. La plupart de ces textes comprennent des formules standardisées datant de la première moitié de la 20ième dynastie, tandis que la majorité des formules habituelles dans les textes administratifs de la nécropole existaient déjà plus tôt. L'accroissement et la formalisation tardifs des textes privés et juridiques suggère que l'écriture ne se répandait que lentement dans le village. Les études de procès similaires dans la littérature anthropologique et historique nous aident à expliquer ce développement dans une communauté exceptionellement lettrée.

Key words: administration, Deir el-Medina, jurisdiction, literacy, orality

INTRODUCTION

Administrative documents from Pharaonic Egypt constitute a field of study that can hardly be called virgin territory. Yet, although Egyptologists gratefully

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use them for the reconstruction of administrative structures, they tend to take their existence for granted, and show little concern with their form and purpose. Against many sophisticated discussions of religious and literary texts as instruments and expressions of spiritual and intellectual life, stands a mere handful of attempts to tackle the problems posed by the existence, or absence, of administrative writing.[1] Most of these concentrate on the major corpus of administrative texts from the Pharaonic period: the hieratic ostraca and papyri from the site presently known as Deir el-Medina. During the New Kingdom (dynasties 18-20; ca. 1550-1070 B.C.) this was the settlement of the workmen responsible for the construction and decoration of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens.[2] These men are justly called necropolis workmen: their organization was usually referred to as "The Tomb." The specialized character of their work (including the painting and chiseling of hieroglyphic texts) and close contact with government administration (the necropolis administrators were directly supervised by the vizier, the 'prime minister' of the Pharaonic government) account for a degree of literacy that must have been exceptional for an Ancient Egyptian village community.[3] Literates included professional scribes, chief workmen, draughtsmen, and the sons and assistants of these persons, amounting to 25-30% of the adult male necropolis personnel according to Baines and Eyre (1983: 86-91). If the 'service staff' (fishermen, woodcutters etc. who did not live in the village) are excluded from the personnel, the percentage increases to 40, and there may also have been a significant degree of literacy among the women of the village (Janssen 1992: 81-91). These figures reflect the situation in the 20th dynasty (McDowell 1999: 4); they were probably lower in earlier periods (see below, "Oral practice at Deir el-Medina"). The high rate of literacy correlates with the thousands of ostraca and papyri preserved at the site. Within this corpus, scholars commonly distinguish 'literary' texts (such as tales, codes of behaviour, poems, hymns, magical spells) and 'non-literary' ones (records of necropolis administration, private business, jurisdiction, and letters).[4] Needless to say, the corpus as a whole is representative of nothing but a particular village community at a particular period.

[1] That is, apart from commentaries to text editions. A general overview (though very selective) is Helck (1974). Megally (1977) concentrates on accounting terminology. Studies that focus on Deir el-Medina will be mentioned further on in this article.

[2] See for a general introduction Bierbrier (1982). The handbooks for the Egyptological reader are Černý (1973) and Valbelle (1985).

[3] For literacy in Ancient Egypt in general see Baines (1983) and Baines and Eyre (1983).

[4] These labels apply to the genres as well as to the languages in which they were written (Černý and Groll 1984, liv-lxviii): 'literary' Late Egyptian retains many Classical (i.e. Middle Egyptian) features, whereas 'non-literary' Late Egyptian is the spoken language of the period

THE ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS OF DEIR EL-MEDINA

At the time when the hieratic ostraca and papyri of Deir el-Medina were being produced, Egypt had known writing for about two thousand years, and it had a bureaucratic tradition that was presumably as long. Yet the remark has been made that it is difficult to distinguish between the formal and the incidental in New Kingdom administrative documents (Helck 1974: 1), and a significant increase in formalisation is thought to have followed only later, in the Third Intermediate Period (Eyre 1980: 15; Baines and Eyre 1983: 76). These statements are put in a slightly different perspective by the fact that the atypical Deir el-Medina is the main source of New Kingdom administrative documents. Its papyri and ostraca were produced during a period of over 200 years, and they cover a variety of subjects, both institutional (i.e. necropolis administration) and personal. This is in contrast with the main administrative text finds from previous periods: the Old Kingdom archives from Abusir, which together cover a long period but represent the administration of mortuary temples exclusively (Verner 2001), and the Middle Kingdom papyri from El-Lahun, which are more diverse but were produced during a shorter period (about a century; Kaplony-Heckel 1980). Most importantly, these archives mainly represent formal administration on papyrus, whereas at Deir el-Medina the papyri are greatly outnumbered by ostraca (which make up 95% or more of the documents), and these include both formal texts and casual notes.

New Kingdom administration in general can hardly have been less formal or bureaucratic in character than the system represented by older or later archives. It is our misfortune that, apart from the Deir el-Medina documents, every type of administrative record from the New Kingdom is represented by one example only. We have only a few agricultural texts (e.g. the Wilbour and Amiens papyri),[5] although there must have existed numerous records of the same types. Registers like P. Wilbour represent the true bureaucratic tradition, which is definitely not to be found at Deir el-Medina. Bureaucracy means a system of administration that is to a considerable extent impersonal, in which formal structures

(with the exception of classical administrative formulas; see below). Middle Egyptian is the language of documents from the Middle Kingdom and the 18th dynasty (ca. 2000-1292 B.C.); it was still used after this period for scribal training and religious texts. Late Egyptian came to be employed regularly as a language of writing in the late 18th dynasty, but occasional older examples exist.

[5] P. Wilbour is an extensive field register covering part of Middle Egypt and dated in the reign of Ramesses V (Gardiner 1948). P. Amiens (+ Baldwin) is a record of Nile transports of grain belonging to various Theban temples, possibly from the reign of Ramesses VII (Gardiner 1941: 37-56; Janssen 1996).

reduce personal influence, and in which texts take the place of oral communications. All this is not likely to be found in a small settlement where the administrators were members of local families, and part of the social network of a village community.

Recent investigation, however, has shown that even the non-bureaucratic village administration of Deir el-Medina had a more standardized character than had been recognized—hitherto the emphasis has mainly been on the freedom of scribes in choosing their formulations (McDowell 1990: 13; Janssen 1997: 41, 98). The Deir el-Medina Database, which is being compiled at Leiden University, at present includes over 3,000 non-literary documents, and thus allows one to query a collection that is very representative of a total corpus that may be estimated at some 6,000 texts at the most. A survey of Egyptian administrative terminology that is based on this database is soon to be published as part of a book on scribal practice at Ramesside Deir el-Medina (Donker van Heel and Haring forthcoming). The terminology investigated there includes Egyptian document headings and names for categories of texts; the principal aim of that part of the study is to establish what types of records were distinguished by the Egyptian scribes. In the following paragraphs I concentrate on document headings, that is, the formulas that occur in the first lines of ostraca and papyri, and which characterize approximately the information given in the document as a whole. About one quarter of the documents presently included in the database have such headings. This number includes letters; their initial epistolary formulas are in a sense also 'headings,' but they are left out of consideration in the survey. Many headings occur in two or more of the documents preserved; these are set out in Tables 1-3.[6] By grouping the documents according to date and type of information, it is possible to establish which formulas were current as document headings at a given period.

The periods distinguished are the first and second halves of the 19th dynasty, and the first and second halves of the 20th dynasty (indicated in the tables as "19/1," "19/2," "20/1," "20/2"; documents of unknown date are grouped under "?"). The 19th dynasty is generally supposed to have started in 1292, its second half at about regnal year 40 of Ramesses II (1239); the 20th dynasty supposedly began in 1186 and ended in 1070; its second half started with the reign

[6] The tables are adapted from Donker van Heel and Haring (forthcoming). The reader is referred to that publication for details of, and references to the individual documents and their editions. Text editions can also be found through the Deir el-Medina Database: www.leidenuniv.nl/nino/dmd/dmd.html. Most documents discussed in this article have been translated; a list of translated texts can be found in the Appendix. I thought it better not to burden this article with numerous references to hieratic texts and their hieroglyphic transcriptions.

of Ramesses IX in 1125.[7] The Ramesside period is thus divided into four sections covering between 50 and 60 years each. The entire period covered is 225 years.

The clusters of identical document headings are organized in three main categories. The first category is that of necropolis administration (Table 1): supplies, distributions, deficits, work progress, absences. Figures represent the number of documents in each period; the second half of the 19th dynasty and the first half of the 20th dynasty are best represented. The second category (Table 2) is that of private business: debt, property transfer, payment, donkey hire. Here, clusters of identical document headings mainly date from the first half of the 20th dynasty. The same is true for the third category, that of jurisdiction (Table 3): court proceedings, oracles, depositions, oaths. It is clear that the majority of headings current in private and judicial documents is attested in the 20th dynasty only, whereas most of the administrative headings are already known from the 19th dynasty. This suggests that uniformity generally developed at a later date in the recording of private and judicial matters than in collective administration.

Another phenomenon to be noted is that headings current in necropolis administration are almost invariably in Classical (i.e. Middle) Egyptian: the predominant verbal forms are "what was given/brought/done . . ." (*rdy.t/ỉny.t/ỉry.t*); the definite article is seldom used. The formulas regularly employed in private business, on the other hand, often start with the classical phrase "to inform one of" (*r rdỉ.t rḫ=tw*), but continue with a relative form that is characteristic for the vernacular (Late Egyptian): "the money/all goods NN has given" (*pȝ ḥḏ/iḫ.t nb ỉ.dỉ* NN). Indeed, the introduction "to inform one of" may have been so popular because it enabled scribes to develop new formulas in the vernacular. Such headings generally make their appearance in the early 20th dynasty, although some slightly earlier variants may be noted.[8] The picture is clear: not only the date, but also the grammar of many private business formulas show that these types of record were developed later than collective documents.

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[7] Years B.C. according to the 'low' chronology for New Kingdom Egypt; see Beckerath 1997: 103-129.

[8] Headings of documents on private matters from the late 19th dynasty: "To inform one of the money NN has given to NN as the price for (. . .)" (O. Brunner); "To inform one of all equipment of my father which has been entrusted(?) to NN" (O. DeM 319); "Informing (one) the court of the payments of NN which [. . .]" (O. Prague 12). The latter two examples may render depositions made in court, which was the background of many records of private transactions; see Haring forthcoming. The heading "to inform one of" and its variants were used in the necropolis administration of the 19th dynasty (earliest examples: O. DeM 352, reign of Ramesses II; O. Gardiner 64, reign of Merenptah), but became especially popular in private texts of the 20th dynasty.

The reader should be aware of limitations inherent to the method followed in selecting and organizing the source material in the tables:

(1) Not all types of documents are represented; brief 'notes' (dates followed by one-sentence entries) and 'journals' (series of similar dated entries) were tremendously popular types of records in necropolis administration, but by their nature lack any sort of heading; hence they do not appear in the table.
(2) Headings are not always easy to isolate; sometimes they cover only part of a document, the remaining sections of which are introduced by other formulas that may or may not be categorized as sub-headings. Moreover, the formulas that are used as headings in some documents may be used differently elsewhere, that is, in other positions in the text, or even without following text. In the latter case, they assume the character of 'notes' (see above, 1). A case in point is presented by the donkey hires (Table 2.d), in which formulas rendered here as document headings may also occur as brief dated entries; in fact, that is their most frequent use. Only if further information is added does such a 'note' become a 'heading,' and has been included as such, but the distinction between note and heading is unlikely to have been felt by the ancient scribes. Such different uses of formulas are in any case usually found in the same periods as those indicated for the headings in the tables.
(3) The headings clustered in the tables must be truly identical. Allowance has been made only for minimal grammatical differences, such as the use of direct or indirect genitive, or the presence or absence of the definite article. This procedure excludes unique formulas that are different, some of which could be regarded as variants of the more frequent expressions. The material collected here is therefore far from exhaustive, and can only be used as a general indication. The degree of uniformity within the entire corpus of non-literary texts is considerably lower than is suggested by the tables.
(4) Ultimately the value of a survey like this depends on the amount of material preserved. The surviving documents are not evenly distributed over the entire Ramesside period. There is little material from the first half of the 19th dynasty; much more from its second half; a peak in the first half of the 20th dynasty, and then again very little from the second half of that dynasty.[9] The argument made here, however, is not based on the amounts of texts preserved from the

[9] Egyptological datings of the documents presently included in the Deir el-Medina Database: as yet undated 41%, 19th dynasty 17%, 20th dynasty 31%, 19th or 20th dynasty 10%, 18th and 21st dynasties 1%. 19th dynasty mainly means the second half of the 19th dynasty, 20th dynasty mainly the first half of that dynasty. I assume that the chronological distribution of the undated texts is similar to that of the dated ones.

periods considered, but on the clusters of uniform document headings. These naturally depend on the amount of material preserved, but they represent an intermediate selection.[10] Moreover, it has already been suggested that the proportions of written material from different periods at Deir el-Medina are not determined only by chances of survival (Eyre 1980: 4-5). The fact that far fewer texts have survived from the first half of the 19th dynasty than from later periods probably indicates that less writing was going on. It seems likely to me that the rapid increase from the late 19th dynasty onwards was caused mainly by the growing numbers of texts that were being written on private and judicial matters. The sudden decline in the number of documents in the later 20th dynasty may be explained, and has been explained, by the fact that the scribes turned to papyrus as their main writing material.[11] Unfortunately, fewer of these more fragile documents have been preserved.

One other sort of information that might put the reconstruction of recording practices at Deir el-Medina into perspective is evidence for such practices outside the village. Legal and business documents from other places in Ramesside Egypt are extremely scarce, but the surviving examples do show that models were available at the time.[12] Some Ramesside papyri dealing with personal and judicial matters contain formulas that are also known from Deir el-Medina. Hence it is clear that these formulas were not invented by the necropolis scribes; indeed, some of them are older than their first occurrences at Deir el-Medina would suggest.[13] Nonetheless, much of the process outlined here may in

[10] Selecting documents with headings reduces the corpus of over 3,000 documents to one quarter of that number, or about 750 documents; of these, 231 are represented in the tables because they share identical headings.

[11] Eyre 1980: 44-47. The author suggests that this was a consequence of the resettlement of the workmen to the nearby temple of Ramesses III, the present site of Medinet Habu. This resettlement is generally thought to have occurred, but its exact date and circumstances remain difficult to establish. There seems to be no compelling evidence for it that dates from the period before year 12 of Ramesses XI (Valbelle 1985: 123-125).

[12] P. Cairo JE 65739 (court protocol about the purchase of slaves, early reign of Ramesses II, from private tomb TT 48 on the Theban west bank; Gardiner 1935); P. Berlin P 3047 (court protocol, year 46 of Ramesses II, of uncertain provenance; Helck 1963); P. BM EA 10335 (oracle protocol, reign of Ramesses IV; Lieven 1999: 81-82) as well as P. Mallet (memorandum and letters, same reign; Peden 1994a: 117-119; Wente 1990: 127-128), both from Western Thebes but not related to Deir el-Medina; P. Turin Cat. 1887 ('Indictment Papyrus,' list of charges against temple employees at Elephantine, reigns of Ramesses IV and V; Peden 1994a: 109-116); P. Ashmolean Museum 1945.96 ('Adoption Papyrus,' will from a town in Middle Egypt, reign of Ramesses XI; Allam 1973: 258-267). To this list may be added the tomb inscription of Mose (see note 15 below).

[13] E.g. "the court of this day" (cf. table 3.a): P. Berlin P 3047 line 4; "what NN has said" (cf. table 3.c/d): P. Cairo JE 65739 line 1; P. Berlin P 3047 lines 8, 13, 18, 33, 35; "oath of the Lord l.p.h. which NN has pronounced" (cf. table 3.d): P. Cairo JE 65739 line 17.

fact have been restricted to Deir el-Medina because the rate of literacy there was exceptional.

Written Record Versus Oral Practice: A Model

The above speculations on the chronological development of recording practices agree nicely with the survey of uniform document headings, but we are left with the question: why was this the pattern? Why was the recording of private and judicial matters considered more important in the early 20th dynasty than it had been a hundred years earlier? An answer to this question must be sought in case-studies and theories on the spread of literacy and writing in general, and of administrative writing in particular. My points of departure are the anthropological studies by Jack Goody (1968; 1977; 1986), Walter Ong's (1982) discussion of the concepts of orality and literacy, and the tremendously useful study by Michael Clanchy (1993) of the development of written administration in medieval England.[14]

Of course, all of these studies are concerned with cultures and periods that are far removed from the Ancient Egyptian context, and the historical and cultural parameters, as well as the language situation, vary greatly in the cases described by Goody, Ong and Clanchy. Isolating observed details from their social or historical context and to compare them directly with with Egyptian phenomena is indeed unsound. It is possible, however, to reconstruct a general model with the help of these observations, and to see if such a model applies to the particular ancient Egyptian context of Deir el-Medina. This model may be outlined as follows.

The general point of departure is that in oral culture there exist fixed ways of expression that are felt to be 'correct' by their users (Ong 1982: 24). The impact of the spoken word in an oral context is not to be underestimated. An utterance may be seen as an event in itself that has, as it were, magical power (Ong 1982: 32). Moreover, contrary to what the word 'oral' suggests, information is by no means restricted to words, but includes gestures, such as facial expressions and movements of the hands, as well as circumstances, such as the presence of witnesses. Much of this information disappears when words are put down in writing. This is referred to as the "decontextualization of knowledge,"

[14] These references would seem to represent no more than a selection from numerous works that address the topic of orality and literacy. They are among the very few, however, that deal with administration, jurisdiction, and business, and not exclusively with literature, learning, and religion.

a concept developed by Max Weber that plays a key role in the definition of bureaucracy (Goody 1977: 13).

This decontextualization is felt as a loss by those who are accustomed to oral modes of expression. This loss is seen clearly in Michael Clanchy's description of England during the 12th and 13th centuries: whereas the royal court endeavoured to introduce written records in the countryside, the inhabitants, including the gentry, resisted it because their familiar instruments were oral agreements and symbolic gifts (Clanchy 1993: 35-43, 253-266). There, people were simply not inclined to trust written records. Another obstacle was the language associated with writing, with which locals were insufficiently familiar. In the case of medieval England the language of writing was Latin; the spoken languages were English and French. In sub-Saharan Africa during the 18th and 19th centuries, Arabic writing spread among illiterate native speakers of African languages in the context of conversion to Islam (Goody 1968). In colonial administrations in Africa and South Asia, English and French were imposed as written languages on literate or illiterate speakers of native tongues (Goody 1986: 114-116). Such linguistic distinctions must have been felt strongly in administrative writing, with its fixed expressions so far removed from the spoken language (Goody 1986: 94).

In spite of resistance, writing does spread once it has been introduced. This is not necessarily true for the associated language. Although Latin was the preferred language for documents composed by the royal administration in medieval England, the spread of writing and literacy resulted in the adoption of French and English as additional languages of writing (Clanchy 1993: 206-223, 231-234; a very similar case is the adoption of Late Egyptian in Ramesside business documents; see above, The Administrative Records of Deir el-Medina). In other cases writing and language seem to be inseparable, especially when part and parcel with major religious and cultural changes (e.g. the spread of Arabic in sub-Saharan Africa). As a new language of writing, the vernacular lacks the fixed forms required for the systematic production of documents (Clanchy 1993: 206-211).

The spread of writing is usually stimulated by government pressure, as is clear for medieval England, as well as for colonial administrations in Africa and South Asia. In addition, writing has its own tendency to spread. Familiarity with writing, even to a very small degree, strongly influences thinking (Ong 1982: 49-50). This is very much a subconscious process, but people may also actively realize the advantages of writing, or consider it prestigious, since it is associated with higher social classes or with learning. The latter phenomenon played an important part in the spread of Arabic writing in sub-Saharan Africa, although

pragmatic factors were at work there as well. Goody (1968: 208, n. 2) explained the success of Arab merchants in Northern Ghana over the illiterate native population by the fact that the use of writing extends the number of economic transactions one can engage in or, to put it differently: if one does not write, and thus places stress on the capability of one's memory, this poses severe restrictions on the number of transactions possible. Pragmatics prevail in the spread of writing for economic and administrative purposes. Clanchy noted that in medieval England writing was necessary but not prestigious (Clanchy 1993: 193-194). Both prestige and pragmatics, however, result in the belief that something is more important or official when written down.

The use of writing thus becomes more and more common, the numbers of texts increase, and at the same time they start to show a tendency towards uniformity. The number of charters issued in medieval England sharply increased in the 13th century, and as a consequence became much more uniform in that period (Clanchy 1993: 85). One can easily imagine that an increase in the number of documents stimulates scribes and readers to systematize, and this is exactly what happened in the production of medieval manuscripts. Clanchy repeatedly observed that there is a certain time lapse between the start of substantial document production and the systematic use of documents (Clanchy 1993: 76-77): Domesday Book was produced shortly after the Norman conquest but not regularly consulted until the middle of the 12th century (32-35); the registration of charters issued for future reference started a century later than the writing of the charters themselves (92). Clanchy's description of a royal chancellery stacked with written information, but with no one able to retrieve it, is as illustrative as it may seem bizarre (162-172).

It is the systematization and uniformity that finally convince people that written records have their own fixed forms, and in this way reduce the barrier between oral practice and written record. People start to trust texts; if texts are provided with a generally recognized mark of authority (seal or signature), they are accepted or even required as legal evidence (that is, the notion of proof changes through the use of documents, Goody 1986: 154). In other words, oral practice partly gives way to writing when fixed written forms have developed (validity depends on the correct documentary form, Clanchy 1993: 254). The change is 'partly' because oral practice never entirely disappears: even in our highly literate western culture, oral conventions remain, especially in the judicial domain. Well-known examples are the oath, and the word-as-act: two people can be *pronounced* husband and wife, people are convicted in court by hearing a verdict *pronounced.*

The outline just given can be summarized as follows: (1) oral culture with its own fixed forms resists the use of writing; (2) in spite of this resistance,

writing does appear and its use spreads for various reasons; (3) the increasing number and use of documents lead to the development of fixed forms in writing; (4) fixed forms make written records acceptable as sources of information and as evidence. The development as reconstructed by Clanchy for medieval England took more than two centuries starting with the Norman conquest.

I believe that the general development as presented here can be observed at any level of society and at different times in history (as a national development, it has repercussions on a local level, but one can also imagine similar processes that are purely regional or local). I am convinced that elements of it can be detected in Ancient Egypt, even at Deir el-Medina. The paradox of this ancient village community is that the oral background clearly transpires from its numerous written records. Yet it would not have occurred to me to see a development in the production of its non-literary texts, if the survey of document headings did not strongly suggest that, rather than a continuing practice that changed relatively little. This observation is hardly surprising: the period of over 200 years covered by the Ramesside documentation from the site is too long for there to be no change in scribal habits.

Oral Practice at Deir el-Medina

The necropolis workmen's village was part of a society that as a whole had been familiar with writing for many centuries. There was, however, a huge difference in literacy between government administrators and the inhabitants of the smallest rural village. The latter may still have been characterized by primary orality (i.e. being totally unfamiliar with writing, see Ong 1982: 6). Baines and Eyre (1983: 69-70) consider the possible presence of one or two literate administrators in every village community, but also allow for more remote places where no literate person was permanently present. We may therefore reckon with a scale of literacy from full to zero. Somewhere, probably high on this scale, was Deir el-Medina, which was not a rural village but a settlement created by the government to house specialized craftsmen and their administrators. With all its ties to government administration, however, Deir el-Medina remained a village community—an administrative and judicial microcosmos. Higher authorities might have been keen on keeping track of the workmen's progress and supplies, but they were presumably much less interested in the family problems and personal doings and dealings of all men, women, and children of the village. We have every reason to expect that such matters were embedded in a village mentality, of which orality is a prime characteristic.

One way in which the texts reflect oral culture is in the predominant use of the narrative style, even in administration and jurisdiction (cf. Ong 1982:

140-141). Texts were either recorded as pronounced, or they were paraphrased by the scribes, but in both cases the result was an account in grammatically full sentences. Exceptions to this practice are recurrent formulas—as headings or otherwise—and lists. These reflect a certain degree of formality and routinization, and hence decontextualization (Goody 1977: 87; 1986: 123-124), but they usually occur as introductions or additions to narrative texts. Even very brief texts usually consist of full sentences. Replacing narrative text by compact formulas and economizing by using grammatically incomplete phrases (as in telegrams and newspaper headlines) are developments inherent to writing and printing.

In addition, explicit references to oral practice in Deir el-Medina documents are plentiful, especially in the judicial domain. Court cases usually started with oral depositions and ended with oaths. Jurisdiction meant hearing and solving problems, rather than applying codified rules, and no reference is ever made to the consultation of documents.[15] The evidence available suggests that court cases were not systematically recorded in writing before the second half of the 19th dynasty. There must have been court cases in the village in the earlier 19th dynasty, but no records of them seem to be preserved, and they may never have been produced. Interestingly, Clanchy notes that in England records of court proceedings represent a later stage in the development of judicial texts (Clanchy 1993: 96 and 97).

Oral procedure was, however, not confined to jurisdiction. Records of transactions between individuals often refer to the presence of witnesses and to taking oaths. One of the rare texts about private transactions from the first half of the 19th dynasty, O. Varille 20 from the reign of Ramesses II, runs as follows:

> (1) Regnal year 32, month 4 of *shemu*, day 29. (2) This day of giving the goods to (3) Pendua by Rehotep: (4) two beams, and again one. Month 2 of *akhet*, day 26. (5) What is given to him: 50 bricks, 3 *khar* and 3 *oipe* of water, (6) in the presence of Haremwia and Penbuy.

This simple formula "giving the goods to" (*dì.t pȝ nkt n*) is unique in the Deir el-Medina corpus, and so this text may be illustrative of a stage before the more widespread development of texts about private business. Most important, however, is the reference to witnesses. This is still found in texts on private trans-

[15] McDowell 1990: 7; such procedure is itself a characteristic of oral culture, Goody 1986: 110, 153. The few certain references to the consultation of documents at Deir el-Medina seem to be confined to letters (e.g. P. Bankes II) and records of the necropolis administration (P. Abbott VI 22-23; P. Turin Cat. 1978/208). One possible reference to the consultation of judicial or private texts (*hry.t*) is O. Turin suppl. 9751 rev. Elsewhere in Egypt the consultation of legal documents was common, as in a long-running dispute about land ownership in the tomb inscription of Mose (see Gaballa 1977: 22-32).

actions from the first half of the 20th dynasty, for instance in O. DeM 62 from year 28 of Ramesses III, a damaged donkey hire:

> (1) Regnal year 28, month [. . .], day 15. This day: (2) handing over the donkey of the workman Menna (3) [to] the water-[carrier] Tji'a [for] its [rent . . .] being(?) one *deben* of copper for (4) [. . .] Menna as from tomorrow [. . .]. He took (5) [an oath of the Lord l.p.h.][16] saying: "No man will contest it as from tomorrow (6) [. . .] replace it again!" so he said in the presence of (7) [. . .].

This text records the hire of a donkey belonging to one of the workmen to a water-carrier, which was common practice at Deir el-Medina. In the first half of the 20th dynasty, fixed formulas had been developed for this sort of text: the numerous texts containing formulas of the type "handing over (or giving) the donkey of NN to NN" all date from the 20th dynasty (some are listed in table 2.d: donkey hires). There are a few texts on donkey hire from the late 19th dynasty, but their formulas are different. The early 20th dynasty thus saw the rise of a formal type of text for donkey hires, but O. Deir el-Medina 62 proves that oral practices (oaths and witnesses) remained.

Oral depositions and oaths emerged as regular types of text in the second half of the 19th dynasty, and became more numerous in the first half of the 20th (see table 3). Five ostraca bear the texts of oral depositions and start with "deposition of NN." Two other texts of the same type start with "what NN has said." This heading is still found in the first half of the 20th dynasty, which otherwise has its own characteristic heading: "hearing the deposition of NN," an extension of the earlier "deposition of NN." Such formulas can be seen as scribal introductions to the written versions of oral statements. Similar observations can be made for the oath. The earliest type of heading for texts that record nothing but the text of an oath as pronounced is: "Oath of the Lord l.p.h. which NN has taken (or: pronounced)." There is one example from the second half of the 19th dynasty and there are two from the first half of the 20th. Again, the latter period seems to have had its own convention: no fewer than eight ostraca start with the old deposition formula "what NN has said" (*dd.t.n* NN). It is unlikely that these were all made by the same scribe. Two of them[17] share a number of palaeographical features, and they both end with a sort of colophon, one of which says: "made by the chief workman Nekhemmut." Two other oath ostraca with the same heading may also have been written by a single scribe, but not Nekhemmut.[18] They show some similarities in handwriting, and they

[16] The word "Lord" (*nb*) refers to the king; "l.p.h." is for "life, prosperity, health," a phrase added by the scribes in abbreviated form to royal names and titles.

[17] O. Gardiner 104 and O. Petrie 67.

[18] O. DeM 564 and O. Turin suppl. 9754.

further share the feature that they contain nothing but the text of the oath, while the other ostraca include colophons or lists of witnesses. It is clear that there was room for individual scribal habits, but at the same time the same characteristic heading was used by at least two scribes.[19]

Thus oaths and depositions had developed into more or less formal types of documents, but these same documents testify to current oral practice at Deir el-Medina. In addition to scribal formulas, such as "oath of the Lord l.p.h. which NN has taken," "deposition of NN" and "what NN has said," which turn oral oaths and depositions into written texts, they show us the oral formulas themselves. Depositions as speech often start with the formula "as for me" (*ir ỉnk*). Thus, a narrative introduced by this formula was about injustice, some wrong that had been done to the speaker and was to be investigated by the village court. Another oral deposition formula was "I inform" (*twỉ dỉ.t rḫ*). O. Cairo CG 25612 starts with "deposition of NN" (the scribal formula), followed by "I inform" (the oral formula). This is the only surviving document that quotes this oral formula, which does not introduce reports of injustice, but decisions with regard to property. Other texts refer obliquely to this oral formula as "deposition of NN to NN to inform you (or: her)."[20] Scribes did not feel obliged to render the oral formulas literally. I have argued elsewhere (Haring forthcoming) that the oral formula "I inform" (*twỉ dỉ.t rḫ*) and its oblique renderings may very well have stimulated the introduction of the scribal formula "to inform one" (*r rdỉ.t rḫ=tw*) in texts about private transactions. Indeed, the use of headings composed with *r rdỉ.t rḫ=tw* "to inform one" was restricted at Deir el-Medina to the private domain with very few exceptions, although it seems to have been used first in records of the necropolis administration (see note 8). The similarity between the scribal formula "to inform one" and the oral formula "I inform" suggests that private transactions were first and foremost oral affairs: statements made by one person to "inform" another person in public, that is, with witnesses present. Such statements could also be made in the presence of a committee.[21]

So far, we have seen some important oral expressions relating to judicial matters and private transactions. In the case of depositions, the formulas "as for

[19] Similar observations can be made for other clusters represented in the tables, although any attempt towards such an analysis must be preliminary because little palaeographical research has been done on Deir el-Medina documents. Donker van Heel and van den Berg (2000) present the state of research together with an example of meticulous palaeographical analysis.

[20] O. Gardiner 166, O. DeM 239.

[21] Cf. also "I say (. . .) in front of the officials" (*twỉ ḥr ḏd* [. . .] *m bȝḥ nȝ sr.w*) in P. Cairo JE 65739 line 6 (not from Deir el-Medina; see note 12).

me" and "I inform" seem to have been the 'magic' words. With oaths, the effective formula was "As Amun endures, as the Ruler l.p.h. endures" (*wꜣḥ ʾImn wꜣḥ qꜣ ḥqꜣ ʿnḫ wḏꜣ snb*). There were other oath formulas composed with the names of the gods Re and Ptah, but they were rare. We have seen that depositions and oaths were important components of court sessions, but they also served to effect and confirm transactions. Together with court and oracle proceedings, they were transformed into formal types of text in the second half of the 19th dynasty and early 20th dynasty.

At the same time, private transactions—loans, property transfers and divisions, payments, and donkey hires—became the subject of more or less formalized types of text (that is, if the transactions were expensive ones, see Janssen 1975: 510-514). This is not to say that no private transactions were recorded in the first half of the 19th dynasty. Some are included in table 2 because they contain formulas that may have been current at the time: "copy of the goods NN has given to NN"[22] and "what NN has given to NN in exchange for (. . .)."[23] Examples are very few. There are other ostraca recording private property divisions, transfers, and payments, and for which an early 19th dynasty date has been proposed.[24] These do not have uniform document headings, but they share a preference for the use of the infinitive, which is otherwise characteristic for the style of administrative notes and journals. This style is absent in the later types of record used for private business (with the single exception of donkey hires).[25] This suggests that private business documents as a genre still lacked their own specific forms, that is, that they were not yet a true genre.

Meanwhile, the reader may have noticed some elements of the general process from oral practice to written record as outlined earlier in this article: (1) for the first half of the 19th dynasty, indications of dominant oral practice in the private and judicial domains, with a limited number of texts on private business without much uniformity; (2) for the second half of the 19th dynasty and for the first half of the 20th dynasty, an increase of such texts, as well as the appearance of judicial records; (3) for the 20th dynasty especially, the use of

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[22] *mỉ.t.y n pꜣ nkt rdỉ.n* NN *n* NN; O. Gardiner 228, O. DeM 233.

[23] *rdy.t.n* NN *n* NN *r ḏbꜣ*; O. Gardiner 133.

[24] O. Gardiner 89 ("memorandum of the hides," *sḫꜣ.w n nꜣ dḥr.w*), O. DeM 31 ("giving the coffins to NN," *rdỉ.t nꜣ n wt.w n* NN), O. DeM 108 ("giving his goods by NN," *rdỉ.t iḫ.t=f in* NN), O. Nims (no heading preserved), O. Varille 20 ("giving the goods to NN by NN(?)," *dỉ.t pꜣ nkt n* NN *m ḏr.t* NN; see the translation given earlier in this article).

[25] These, although personal transactions, were usually contracted by water-carriers for the regular water-supply of the workmen's village, and so were of immediate collective interest (Eyre 1980: 56).

typical headings (i.e. more uniformity) for both groups. These headings were partly formed in the vernacular.

THE PURPOSES OF TEXTS

What was the function of these ever more formal records? So far, we have been dealing exclusively with ostraca. Potsherds, and especially limestone flakes, were available in indefinite quantity; the particularly smooth surfaces of the latter may be one reason for the widespread use of writing in the village (Eyre 1980: 9-10). At the same time, the material has its limitations: the use of texts as evidence requires some sort of certifying device. In Ancient Egypt that device was the seal. It would be difficult to seal ostraca and it seems never to have been done. Clay seals were commonly used with papyri, letters as well as business documents. Yet even references to the sealing of papyri are rare at Deir el-Medina. Indeed, the single mention of a sealed papyrus from Deir el-Medina refers to a document sent by the vizier.[26] The only papyri from the site that have been found with the seal attached are three letters of the late 20th dynasty, which were rolled up and tied together by a linen strap with a clay seal.[27] There can be no doubt that Deir el-Medina administrators had seals: signet rings were traded as commodities,[28] and necropolis authorities used seals in order to close boxes and doors.[29] It seems likely that letters sent by the necropolis scribes to the vizier and the few extant judicial papyri from the village were sealed as well, but no proof for this exists.

One way of authenticating ostraca was the addition of colophons mentioning the scribe or listing witnesses, such as occur on some of the ostraca recording oaths (see above). But if this was successful, it remained rare: only a few examples are known, including some uncertain ones, all dating from the 20th dynasty.[30] It is possible that judicial and business texts were produced by a limited number of scribes (such a hypothesis requires testing by palaeographical research), and that texts derived their authority from this practice. Indeed, it has been suggested that scribes acted as guarantors by composing and keeping texts (Baines

[26] P. Deir el-Medina 28 rt. 9.

[27] P. Berlin P 10487, 10488, 10489 (Erman 1913: 3, 14-15).

[28] O. Cairo CG 25677 obv. 20, 25678 obv. 22 and rev. 1.

[29] O. DeM 828 + Vienna H. 1 line 14, P. BM EA 10375 vs. 10, P. DeM 26 B rt. 1, P. Geneva D 191 vs. 3.

[30] Hieratic non-literary ostraca: O. Gardiner 104, 137, 159(?), O. Berlin P 1268(?), O. Cairo CG 25233, 25364, O. Michaelides 3, O. Petrie 4(?), 67. Papyrus: P. Ashmolean Museum 1945.97 (rt. V 8). See also Eyre 1980: 300, n. 295; McDowell 1990: 6, n. 17 (also mentioning O. Berlin P 10633 obv. 1, which cannot be a colophon).

and Eyre 1983: 74-75). If that is the case, this practice may have been more important in the village than seals or colophons. It may be asked, however, whether the recording of personal and judicial matters normally required certification in a village community. As Goody (1986: 151) noted, certification has little added value in villages, where all inhabitants more or less know one another, unlike the inhabitants of bigger, 'anonymous' towns.

It has often been assumed, and is still assumed by some, that ostraca were nothing but drafts for official texts on papyri. Although ostraca could definitely be used as drafts, evidence for their exclusive use as such is lacking (Allam 1968: 121-128; Eyre 1980: 42-44; Donker van Heel and Haring forthcoming). There is no single papyrus text that precisely matches the text on an ostracon, although this is no surprise because most papyri are probably lost. The papyri preserved, however, mainly date from the second half of the 20th dynasty, and the number of ostraca from the same period is surprisingly low. It would seem, therefore, that the use of papyrus increased in that period, whereas before the middle of the 20th dynasty much of the bookkeeping at Deir el-Medina was ostracon-keeping. This in turn implies a very limited use of texts as evidence, since ostraca appear to have been certified very seldom.

If it is true that papyri came to be used more often in the later 20th dynasty, the inhabitants of the village may finally have recognized the potential of texts as evidence. That such a development took place in the private and judicial domains is plausible, and seems to be exemplified by the protocol of a dispute about private tombs from the reign of Ramesses III, as well as by the will of Naunakhte from the reign of Ramesses V.[31] Both papyri were labelled 'dated document' (*hry.t*), and may be the first extant examples of a type of record that became more and more popular in the village.

An important pointer to the limited character of the use of texts as sources of information and as evidence is the reference made to extra-textual information in almost every single Deir el-Medina document. By this I mean the use of the first person singular without mention of the name of the writer, as well as the use of the definite article and of demonstratives without foregoing specification. This means that texts could not be understood properly unless some context was provided. In other words, decontextualization was far from complete. One example is O. DeM 400:

> Regnal year 31, month 2 of *shemu*, day 19: giving the donkey to (*dì.t pȝ ʿȝ n*) the scribe Hori of The Tomb.

[31] P. Berlin P 10496 (the same case is recorded on two ostraca, see Donker van Heel and Haring forthcoming); P. Ashmolean Museum 1945.97.

Parallels for the formula *dì.t pȝ ʿȝ n* NN in more elaborate texts (which are presented in table 2.d) support the translation given here, and show that the single specified individual was the recipient. Then who was the giver? This we are not told, but it was presumably known by the person who kept the text; very probably the giver himself. After all, the giver would be the one most interested in remembering the date of transfer. The formula is common with donkey hire, which was to be paid by the day by the person using the donkey (the text does not make explicit if the donkey was hired out to Hori or given back to him). If we imagine this ostracon being in the possession of the anonymous giver, no information is lacking at all: he knew which donkey was meant, and to whom it belonged. On the other hand, a text like this could hardly be used as legal evidence. If there were subsequently a dispute between the giver and Hori about the rent and its payment, the giver would have great difficulty in building a case on the basis of this brief note. Instead, he would probably collect the persons who had witnessed the transfer of the donkey. Other texts on donkey hire, for instance O. Deir el-Medina 62 translated earlier in this article, show that this was the usual practice. Ostraca such as these probably functioned simply as *aides-mémoire*, as written supplements to oral practice. As such, they must have been felt to be useful or they would not have been produced in such great numbers.

CONCLUSION

This diachronic survey of non-literary Deir el-Medina documents has presented some essential stages in the development of local private and judicial record-keeping. The documents reveal an oral village culture, in which the skill of writing was present in the persons of necropolis administrators (who were in a sense government representatives), but in which private and judicial matters remained largely oral. There was a rapid increase in the amount of writing in the private and judicial domains, followed by some standardization at the end of the 19th dynasty and in the first half of the 20th. The growing number and formalization of texts show that people had discovered that they offered advantages as *aides-mémoire*, and increasingly used them to supplement their oral modes of conducting business. The private use of texts as evidence probably remained limited until sealed papyri became widespread; such a practice cannot be proved for Ramesside Deir el-Medina. What made people write down their private business ever more frequently? Given the exceptional degree of literacy in the village, and the types of legal and business records that were current elsewhere in Egypt at the time, it would be better to ask what had held them back

previously. Very probably the impediment consisted of familiar oral practices, which had to yield to writing to some extent. This they did reluctantly, but definitely, in the course of two centuries.

APPENDIX: TRANSLATIONS OF TEXTS FROM DEIR EL-MEDINA REFERRED TO IN THIS ARTICLE[32]

Giornale 17-B	Allam 1973: 331-334
O. Berlin P. 1268	Allam 1982: 53
O. Berlin P. 10633	Allam 1973: 29
O. Brunner	Helck 1984: 7-10
O. Cairo CG 25612	Haring forthcoming
O. DeM 31	Allam 1973: 80-81
O. DeM 62	Allam 1973: 86
O. DeM 108	Allam 1973: 89-90
O. DeM 233	Allam 1973: 108
O. DeM 239	Allam 1973: 109-110
O. DeM 319	Helck 1965: 914
O. DeM 352	Černý 1973: 114
O. DeM 400	Menu 1973: 95
O. DeM 564	Allam 1973: 133; McDowell 1999: 170-171
O. DeM 828 + Vienna H. 1	McDowell 1999: 69-71
O. Gardiner 36	Allam 1973: 155-156
O. Gardiner 104	Allam 1973: 171-172
O. Gardiner 137	Allam 1973: 179-180; Menu 1973: 82-83
O. Gardiner 166	Allam 1973: 184-185
O. Michaelides 3	Allam 1973: 206
O. Petrie 4	Allam 1973: 227-228; Menu 1973: 102
O. Petrie 67	Allam 1973: 244
O. Prague 12	Allam 1973: 245
O. Turin suppl. 9754	Allam 1973: 252
P. Abbott	Peden 1994b: 225-244
P. Ashmolean Museum 1945.97	Allam 1973: 268-272; McDowell 1999: 38-40
P. Berlin P 10487 (= LRL 21)	Wente 1990: 183
P. Berlin P 10488 (= LRL 34)	Wente 1990: 183
P. Berlin P 10489 (= LRL 35)	Wente 1990: 183-184
P. Berlin P 10496	Allam 1973: 277-297
P. BM EA 10375 (= LRL 28)	Wente 1990: 194-195
P. DeM 26	Allam 1973: 297-301
P. DeM 28	Eyre 1987: 18-19
P. Geneva D 191 (= LRL 37)	Allam 1973: 303-307; McDowell 1999: 44-45; Wente 1990: 174-175
P. Turin Cat. 1978/208	Wente 1990: 135
P. Turin Cat. 2003	Helck 1965: 846-847

[32] With a preference for recent translations. If a text is not included in the list, no translation of it is available.

Table 1: chronological distribution of document headings, (A) necropolis administration

formula	19/1	19/2	20/1	20/2	?	total
1.a. necropolis supplies						
what was given to the Tomb	2	2				4
through the hand of NN	4	4	5			13
by the 3 fishermen		1			1	2
received as what was brought from (. . .)		7				7
what was brought on this day		1			1	2
arrived through the hand of NN		2	5			7
by NN		1	1			2
the right/left side		1	2			3
received through the hand of NN			10			10
1.b. divisions						
what was assigned	2					2
dividing (. . .) among the gang			3			3
specification of dividing (. . .)			2			2
the specification of (. . .)				2		2
1.c. distribution of grain rations						
what was given as grain rations of month x		1			1	2
giving the grain rations of month x (. . .)		2	4		1	7
the giving of grain rations of month x (. . .)		1	3			4
subsequent grain rations of month x (. . .)		1		1	1	3
1.d. distribution of a specified amount						
amount of (. . .)			2	2	2	6
amount: x					2	2
1.e. deficits						
deficit of NN from (. . .)	2					2
deficit of water/wood of NN		2				2
1.f. work in the royal tombs						
what was done in regnal year x (. . .)			2			2

Table 1 (*cont.*)

formula	19/1	19/2	20/1	20/2	?	total
1.g. people absent/working						
right side			2			2
who is inactive/working			3			3

Table 2: Chronological distribution of document headings, (B) private business

formula	19/1	19/2	20/1	20/2	?	total
2.a. debt						
to inform one of the goods of NN that are with NN			4		2	6
goods of NN that are with NN			5	1	1	7
2.b. transfer/division						
copy of the goods NN has given to NN (. . .)	2					2
what NN gave to NN		2	6			8
what was given to NN		1	3		1	5
received through the hand of NN			2			2
to inform one of all goods NN has given to NN			4		1	5
to inform one of the money NN has given to NN			3			3
2.c. payment						
what NN has given to NN in exchange for (. . .)	1	1	1			3
what NN gave to NN in exchange for (. . .)		1	5			6
to inform one of the money NN has given me in exchange for (. . .)			1		1	2
to inform one of the money NN has given to NN in exchange for (. . .)			4			4
to inform one of all goods NN has given to NN for (. . .)			2			2
what was given to him in exchange for (. . .)			1		1	2
what was given to NN by NN in exchange for (. . .)			2			2
what was given to NN in exchange for (. . .)			4		1	5
to inform one of all the work (. . .)			3	1		4
2.d. donkey hire						
giving the donkey to NN			4			4
giving the donkey to NN for its rent			4		1	5
giving the donkey to NN for ploughing			3			3

Table 3: chronological distribution of document headings, (C) jurisdiction

formula	19/1	19/2	20/1	20/2	?	total
3.a. court proceedings						
arriving which NN has done at the court		2	2			4
coming which NN has done		1	1			2
(the) court of this day		1	2			3
complaining by NN (. . .)			3			3
complaining which NN has done (. . .)			2			2
NN complained to me (. . .)			2			2
(the) court of judges			2			2
speaking which NN has done (. . .)			3			3
3.b. oracle proceedings						
calling by NN/which NN has done to (. . .)			2			2
complaint of NN to King Amenhotep (. . .)			3			3
3.c. depositions						
deposition of NN (. . .)		5			1	6
(what) NN has said (. . .)		2	3			5
hearing the deposition of NN (. . .)			5			5
3.d. oaths						
oath of the Lord l.p.h. which NN has taken/pronounced		1	2			3
NN took an oath of the Lord l.p.h. (. . .)			2			2
(what) NN has said			8			8
taking an oath of the Lord l.p.h. by NN			1	1		2

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