Seeing the Whole Picture:
Why Reading Greek Texts from Soknopaiou Nesos is not Enough
Sandra L. Lippert

The village Soknopaiou Nesos, situated at the northern shore of Lake Moeris, is well known to all scholars of documentary papyrology. Due to the large number of Greek documents from this site it is used as the prime example for many aspects of village life in Graeco-Roman Egypt. Otto’s groundbreaking monograph on priests and temples¹ largely relies on the Greek documents from Soknopaiou Nesos. Until the middle of the 20th century, only a very small number of demotic papyri from Soknopaiou Nesos was published, and some of them even without a continuous translation. The reason was, of course, the small number of demotists available at the time. Compared to the vast Greek documentation, these few demotic bits and pieces may well have seemed irrelevant for papyrologists. Although various demotists, notably Bresciani and Zauzich, strove to increase the number of published demotic papyri of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods respectively from Soknopaiou Nesos in the second half of the 20th century,² this earlier attitude towards the site remained strong among papyrologists. While bilingual documents in the Rylands Library had been edited jointly by Greek papyrologists and demotists in the 1909 and 1915 catalogues,³ the most recent example for a publication of the Greek part of a bilingual text without the demotic occurred as late as 2001⁴ – although at this period it would not have been difficult at all to find a demotist. But the unspoken idea that you do not need the demotic texts when there is so much Greek material around persists. Moreover, this concentration on the Greek texts gave rise to the subconscious notion that the population of Soknopaiou Nesos was highly hellenized and carried out their correspondence entirely in Greek.

In 1980, however, Deborah Hobson Samuel, by analyzing lists of taxpayers and landowners, showed that the population of Soknopaiou Nesos was mainly native Egyptian and that there were actually very few Greeks and later even fewer Romans there.⁵ Ostraca with totals for the present members of each phyle at a given day show that there were more than 130 priests at Soknopaiou Nesos during the early

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Hobson did not, however, take her own conclusions one step further: The population structure of Soknopaiou Nesos implies that the assumption of highly hellenized Soknopaiou Nesians writing almost entirely in Greek is very unlikely and that much more attention should be paid to the demotic sources.

In order to get a clearer view of the roles of Greek and demotic at Soknopaiou Nesos, let us first have a look at the Greek texts. The Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis\(^7\) (henceforth HGV) lists 1139 texts from Soknopaiou Nesos. Of course, there are a number of double entries for different dating proposals, and some of the documents are rather bilingual than just Greek. But even though the key-wording in the HGV is not one hundred percent uniform and therefore some documents have certainly slipped through, searching by content gives some interesting results. First, over half of the Greek documents (here given as grey wedges, no. 1–8 in Fig. 1) have been written either by or for the administration (641 out of 1139 or 56.28%). More than two thirds (436 out of 641 or 68.02%) of these administration documents are actually various receipts for taxes and customs dues (dark grey wedges, no. 4–6). Another large part (184 out of 641 or 28.71%) consists of petitions, declarations and announcements from the population to the state authorities (light grey wedges, no. 1–3).

Private matters, e.g. contracts, accounts and letters, contribute only slightly over one fifth (244 out of 1139 or 21.42%, white wedges no. 9–12) of the Greek material. The comparatively large black wedge (no. 13) of non-specified "other texts" consists mainly of unidentifiable fragmentary texts and also a few rarely or only once attested types like horoscopes, school exercises and so on. But it also, unfortunately, includes texts belonging to the other categories but key-worded in a different way, as mentioned earlier.

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If, on the other hand, we search for texts connected with the temple or priesthood, only the astonishingly small number of 99 out of 1139 or less than 9% turn up. Most of these texts are at the same time documents for the administration, such as lists of priests for tax purposes, temple inventories to be sent to the authorities, petitions for circumcision etc.

From this overview – which, admittedly, gives just a tendency and cannot be used for statistic evaluation – it becomes clear that the Greek documentation from Soknopaiou Nesos does not, as has often been assumed, reflect life at the village and in and around the temple in an adequate way. There is simply too much administrative material there. Even if it is a universal experience that most paperwork is created by dealing with the state administration it is suspicious that the temple – which, after all, was a large economic unit and certainly had a vast administration of its own – appears only marginally in the Greek documents.

The number of (hitherto largely ignored) demotic sources from Dime is quite large, but only a small part has been published to date. Luckily, this is changing now – the Roman period documents (with the exception of accounts) are in the course of being published by Maren Schentuleit and me as a result of a research project under the supervision of Karl-Theodor Zauzich. The first two volumes, covering ostraca and receipts, have already appeared, the third, on legal documents, will follow soon. A fourth, on priestly agreements, is also in progress. As will be shown below, the bulk of the material are accounts, which are so numerous that there is no hope for quick publication. An entire new research project will be needed for translating, evaluating and analyzing those hundreds of meters of papyri.

Of the 1879 known demotic documentary texts from Soknopaiou Nesos – this number is obtained by adding the Ptolemaic texts edited by Bresciani to the Roman ones we located in various collections during our research for the above-mentioned project – 1774 (or 94.41%) concern the temple and priesthood (cf. the grey wedges, no. 1–9 in Fig. 2). Most of them were written by the priests themselves and relate to the temple economy, such as receipts and accounts (no. 2 and 3), others to the administration of the temple, for example agreements between priests or between the priesthood and dependent craftsmen (no. 5). A few were written for the temple, e.g. lease offers or petitions (no. 7 and 8). A small number (12 out of 1879) are oracle questions (dark grey wedge, no. 9). The remaining 6% are legal documents (mainly bilingual) and a few private letters (white grey wedges, no. 10 and 11). From this overview it becomes clear that the demotic material – contrary to the Greek – is heavily biased towards the temple and its economy and administration.

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8 Lippert and Schentuleit, op.cit. (above, n. 6).
9 S. Lippert and M. Schentuleit, Demotische Dokumente aus Dime II: Quittungen (Wiesbaden 2006) = P.Dime II.
10 S. Lippert and M. Schentuleit, Demotische Dokumente aus Dime III: Urkunden (Wiesbaden 2010) = P.Dime III.
If we combine the information about the writers and addressees of Greek and demotic documents respectively from Soknopaiou Nesos, we can create a complementary picture of how demotic and Greek documentation interacted at Soknopaiou Nesos.

In Fig. 3, correspondence in Greek is rendered by black arrows, correspondence in demotic by grey ones, while the striped arrows signify the use of bilingual documents.
Since this diagram is quite complicated, it is useful to have a closer look at different areas. Let us start with the temple, its use of texts in the interior administration and its connections to individuals (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4:
Correspondence with and documentation within the temple

At the temple, there was of course another large group of demotic texts that have not been mentioned before: religious and scientific works for the use of the priests. However, for the purpose of this paper, we will concentrate only on the documentary material. In fact, the only Greek documents written by individuals for the temple are a few oracle questions, and for some of them it is not even clear whether they really come from Soknopaiou Nesos. The entire inner administration, including for example ostraca with bookkeeping notes and phyle counts, papyri with lists of phyle members, day-to-day-accounts, payment orders, receipts of wheat from the temple stores, inventories and so on, are demotic until at least the late second half of the second century AD; Greek documentation about the temple after that period is also scant. Moreover, the receipts issued by the temple scribe to Egyptian lessees and dependent workers for fees and dues paid to the temple are entirely demotic, as well as the letters, lease proposals and oracle questions sent in by Egyptian individuals. This area, therefore, simply cannot be understood without consulting the extensive demotic material.

The relations between the temple and the village or state administration are, as would be expected, kept mainly through Greek documents. But compared to the vast number of demotic accounts, inventories, lists of priests, etc. created on a daily basis by the interior administration of the temple, the Greek documents sent to the state administration are just the tip of the iceberg. The day-by-day data was collected, clarified, adjusted, summarized and then transformed into yearly reports and lists that were translated into Greek (see Fig. 5). Therefore, to judge the temple economy of Soknopaiou Nesos by looking simply at the Greek documents would be tantamount to forming a picture about an individual's life by looking only at his/her annual tax declaration.
As for the interaction between individuals and the administration, as well as correspondence between different levels of the administration, it was carried out almost entirely in Greek. It is only during the Ptolemaic period that we find some demotic petitions from Egyptians to minor village officials such as the *komogrammateus* who, obviously, were Egyptians themselves (Fig. 6).
The last area to focus on is that of the relations between different individuals, be they Egyptian or Greek, more specifically legal documents and letters, and, for their own business purposes, accounts. Here the languages are again well mixed. Depending on the nature of the documents, those exchanged between Egyptians could be composed either in Egyptian, Greek, or a combination of both languages, while those passed between Egyptians and Greeks would in most cases be written in Greek, although there is some evidence for the occasional use of bilingual documents as well. Greeks naturally only exchanged Greek documents among themselves (Fig. 7).

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 7:**
Legal and private documents and correspondence between individuals

The legal documents deserve a more detailed consideration. They turn up both in the Greek and the demotic material, and actually many of them are bilingual, consisting of an upper part written in demotic and a lower part (or hypographe) written in Greek. These bilingual documents are in fact the result of a legislative decision of the Roman government. At some point in the early Roman period, demotic legal documents were required to have a lengthy Greek subscription consisting of the subjectively styled declaration of the first party, then the same for the second party, a characterization or summary of the document and the note of registration. The demotic and the Greek texts of a bilingual document are therefore not just translations of each other but follow different patterns. Nevertheless, they obviously share a number of important points, for example the date, the names and filiation of the parties and the characterization of the object of the transaction. This can be very helpful: if a bilingual document is only partly preserved, some of the data lost in one part may be recovered from the other. But as mentioned earlier, it still happens that just the Greek part of a bilingual document is published, probably because the editors thought that the demotic just duplicated the Greek.

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There is, however, some information which is not identical: the titles or professions of the parties appear regularly in the demotic text, but not in the Greek which, in turn, gives the signalement that is lacking in the demotic.\(^\text{13}\) In the case of sales of houses – the most common type of bilingual document at Soknopaiou Nesos – only the demotic part gives the quarter of the village in which the house is situated. Assenting parties, usually spouses or children of the first party who waive their own claims, are more frequently mentioned in the demotic part, but occasionally occur also in the Greek hypographe, kyrioi of female parties do not occur in the Greek hypographai to demotic documents, but if the bilingual document in question is a security for a loan, they are mentioned in the Greek loan document which in Roman Soknopaiou Nesos is usually written in a narrow column on the right hand side of the same sheet of papyrus.\(^\text{14}\) Quite naturally, each part of the text only gives the names of the scribe or scribes responsible for it and not for the other part. So, even with this type of document for which it seems safe to ignore the demotic one will miss important data by just reading the Greek.

To summarize: the Greek documents from Soknopaiou Nesos provide a wealth of information about the state administration and its dealings with the population and the temple, especially tax payments, while the demotic documents supply data about the interior administration of the temple and its economy.

Soknopaiou Nesos is only one example of a village in Graeco-Roman Egypt. But it is especially well suited for study because of the large number of papyri available – and offers the great chance to see the whole picture by including demotic material that provides insight into areas hardly or not at all covered by the Greek documentation. I would like to encourage all researchers, be they demotists or papyrologists, to accept this offer by joining forces and knowledge.
