

The native traditions of funerary literature have a long history in Ancient Egypt. Prior to their disappearance and absorption into other movements such as Coptic Christianity, the last native funerary texts were written in the Demotic script in the first four centuries of the Common Era. A handful of Demotic funerary papyri consisted of elaborate passages in combinations often unique to each papyrus (e.g. Papyri Rhind, Papyrus Harkness, Louvre E 3452, Bib. Nat. 149). However, a large corpus of Demotic funerary texts written on a variety of media (papyri, stelae, coffins, sarcophagi, ostraca, mummy boards, mummy bandages, graffiti, mummy labels, etc.) consisted of specific religious formulae which were repeatedly copied and employed for more than two centuries while Egypt was ruled by Roman Emperors. As of yet, the significance of these texts has not been fully investigated. Even though scholars have designated these texts as “abbreviated,” their short length in no way implies their abridgement from other more substantial texts. They share important relationships with more elaborate funerary documents, but they also serve as independent wholes in their own right. This is proven by the fact that their complete formulae are copied word for word in numerous examples and portions thereof reproduced in many more. Rather than expressing all the complexities of Egyptian religious philosophy, these texts provide a “cliff notes” version of only the essential concepts of afterlife theology as the latest known examples deriving from the native Egyptian traditions dating back to the era of our first large corpus of religious texts – the Pyramid Texts.

This paper presents preliminary finds derived from a chapter of my University of Chicago dissertation on formulaic Demotic funerary texts. The formulaic Demotic funerary texts, rather than unsophisticated “abbreviated” documents, actually bear witness to the importance, maintenance and revival of native funerary traditions in an increasingly hostile milieu. In spite of the increasing Christianization of Egypt, the millennium old Osirian theology persisted and even experienced a flourishing as documented in the archaeological record and confirmed in the formulaic Demotic funerary texts. Further traditional deities maintained and increased their roles in the funerary sphere, appearing in vignettes accompanying the deceased in connection with the religious formulae. As the very last texts in the native Egyptian funerary tradition, the formulaic Demotic funerary texts serve as an important source for the development of Egyptian religion into the Christian Era.