

## The Oxyrhynchus Papyri Project

The long-term enterprise to decipher, reconstruct and publish the papyri found at Oxyrhynchus represents a collaboration between the British Academy, which adopted it as a Major Research Project in 1966, the Egypt Exploration Society, which funds the publication, the AHRB, which has given the project a five-year grant, the host institutions (Oxford University and University College London), and the numerous individual scholars and students who contribute to the research. Here **Professor Peter Parsons FBA**, Regius Professor of Greek at the University of Oxford, and Chairman of the Project, describes the unique finds arising from the rubbish dumps of Oxyrhynchus.

When the excavators, B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt, began to dig systematically, in 1898, they found the city's salvage piled up in dumps twenty feet deep. They found also fragments of its material structure; and when Flinders Petrie spent a season there, in 1922, he found more – the remains of colonnaded streets, substantial parts of a theatre which could have seated 11,000 people. The stonework has now vanished, except for a single pillar. But the salvage remains, and it is from the books and papers which it preserves that we rebuild Oxyrhynchus, 'City of the Sharp-nosed Fish'.

Oxyrhynchus was a county town, two hundred miles south of Cairo; its 30,000 inhabitants spoke, wrote and read Greek. After the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great, the most canny of his generals, Ptolemy, established himself there, and Greek immigrants – soldiers and traders, carpet-baggers and poets – flowed into the land of opportunity. Egypt became a Greek kingdom, then a province of the Roman and Byzantine Empires; the descendants of the immigrants remained the ruling class; only the Arab conquest ended a millennium of Hellenic domination. In many ways we know more about these Graeco-Egyptians than about their classical ancestors, and that from a simple accident of climate. Papyrus, the ancient form of paper, rots easily. The famous sites of Greece and Rome yield buildings and pottery and inscriptions on stone or bronze, but by and large no contemporary written matter. By contrast, southern Egypt has virtually no rainfall, and papyrus will survive for thousands of years under the sand. So with the rubbish of Oxyrhynchus: ten years' digging yielded 100,000 fragments and scraps of papyrus, which preserve a dustbin view of the life, mind and society of these Egyptian Greeks over a period of at least 700 years.

The finds were packed in boxes, and brought back to Oxford, where the Egypt Exploration Society (which financed the dig) deposited them. Publication began at once: a first volume of *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* appeared in 1898; the work

has gone on, despite deaths, wars and financial difficulties; volume 67 has just been published, and we continue at a rate of one volume each year.

The material, jumbled and fragmentary, has all the difficulties and excitements of unpredictability. Open a box, and take out the first piece: it may be Homer, it may be a shopping list. We have a summary catalogue, but it is in continuous process of refinement: scattered fragments get reunited, damaged texts identified. Our business is to decipher the papyri, to reconstruct them when they are broken or illegible, to assess their date and content, and to publish them with the explanatory comment which may be most useful to those who will use them – classical scholars, theologians, Roman historians. We seek to produce a steady flow of new material which, in context, will add new information and modulate old theories. The work is necessarily slow: three damaged letters, a substantial worm-hole, a torn-off corner may stand in the way of full understanding until an extra fragment or a good intuition solves the problem. Yet, given luck, a fragment may yield more than its bulk. The scrap illustrated in Figure 1 is just a scrap; but metre and a few legible words and an overlap with a quotation combine to recapture a scene from a lost play of Euripides – the observer, from his point of vantage, sees Theseus, club in hand and stripped for action, confront the monstrous bull whose 'tongue cleans out its nostrils'. This gives us 13 lines. The hope is always that other fragments will provide more. We now possess about half of Menander's lost comedy *The man she hates*: Oxyrhynchus has produced (so far) fragments of ten different copies of the play, which overlap and supplement one another to build up the jigsaw text.

Of the total salvage, about 10% is 'literary', that is, fragments of books. Ancient Greek



Figure 1. A lost play from Oxyrhynchus: P. Oxy. 3530, Euripides, *Theseus* (or *Aigeus*). Second/third century AD



literature, as we knew it a century ago, consisted of the small selection which, copied and recopied by hand, survived through the Middle Ages; this canonical material depended partly on chance survival, partly on the deliberate choice of texts for study in school. Oxyrhynchus and similar sites allow us to go back beyond the selections and destructions to the bursting libraries of the High Empire. The books show the conservatism of readers: most of what Oxyrhynchites read (or threw away) c. 200 AD had been written before 200 BC – already a canon of classical texts. Through the papyri we get a pre-emptive view of how such works were transmitted: the ebb and flow of textual variants and scribal corruptions, the bibliographic revolution which transferred texts from the old (pagan) roll to the new (Christian) codex, the increasing popularity of certain works or authors which would itself influence their chances of survival. We have fine editions in stately scripts with wide margins, cheap editions crammed on the back of recycled rolls; even illustrated books from a time when illustration attached only to technical or vulgar texts.

Among these, there are fragments of whole authors or particular works once famous but lost in the Middle Ages. Sophocles wrote 120 plays, of which only 7 survived; Oxyrhynchus has yielded the greater part of his comedy *Tracheters*. The song-writers Sappho and Alcaeus, the lyric epic of Stesichorus, Callimachus' erudite elegies, the situation comedy of Menander, remained disembodied reputations until the present century; much of the substantial text found in modern editions comes from the libraries of Oxyrhynchus. Those texts in turn have a wider bearing: we now understand much more fully why and how Latin poets appeal to Callimachus as their exemplar of

Figure 2. The Gospel reaches Oxyrhynchus: P. Oxy. 4404, Matthew xxi 34–7. Late second century AD?

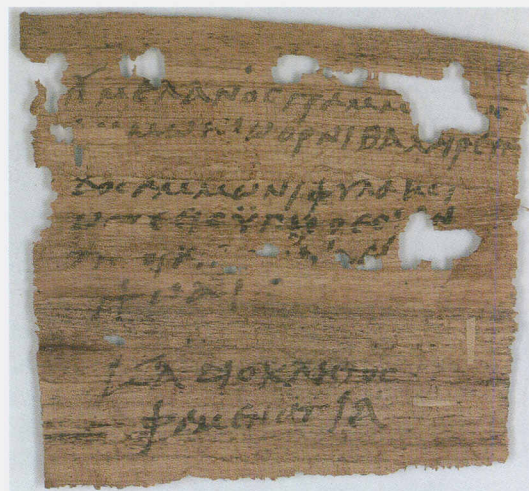
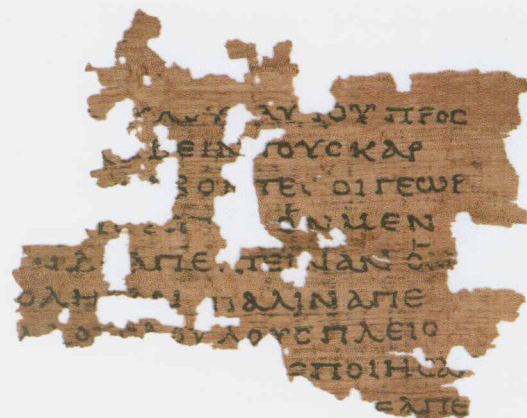


Figure 3. The Emperor's real name: P. Oxy. 3055. AD 285

sophistication, how Plautus transformed Menander (the beginning of the mutations which lead on to *Figaro*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and *Neighbours*). Alongside these revived classics, whole genres that we were scarcely conscious of: the comic novel, magic and divination, the samizdat literature of Greek resistance to Rome.

Around and between the literary cast-offs lie the documents: loans, sales, leases, wills, tax-returns, edicts, registers, bureaucratic correspondence and private letters and all the other written ephemera of normal life. The texts combine in a picture of society, economy and mentality. They have the statistical uses of the random: to assess (as is rarely possible elsewhere in the ancient world) patterns of family and mortality, prices, wages and inflation. They exhibit the structures of government: the mechanics of the 14-yearly census, the operation of a flat-rate tax-system, the logistics of maintaining way-stations for the imperial post. They illustrate the realities of resisting a despotic state: farmers retreat into the desert, officials protract the bureaucratic process, usurers levy illegal rates of interest by incorporating it into the capital. They show the practical and mechanical processes of agriculture and manufacturing: the hazards of bee-keeping, how to build a cistern and repair a water-wheel, what it takes to 'fire, re-fire and pitch' 15,000 wine-jars. They show the sinews of commerce: a banking system in kind, the tax charged on bringing cucumbers to market, the longueurs and dangers of transport by boat and by donkey. Some documents, above all private letters, speak with an individual voice: 'if you won't take me to Alexandria, I won't eat I won't drink so there', writes a schoolboy to his father. Some



look outwards to the great events of history through their reflexes on the individual: the future Emperor Titus arrives in Alexandria, oxen are commandeered for the baggage-train of an imperial campaign in Syria, the Public Schoolmaster of Oxyrhynchus writes to his Emperors, ‘the Masters of the Earth and the Sea’, to complain about his unpaid salary. Some illustrate the gathering revolution of Christianity. Fragments of the Gospels turn up already in the second century AD (Figure 2), together with works then circulating but later rejected (the Gospels of Mary, Peter and Thomas among them). The documents complement these from the third century onwards: a sacrificial test to be passed, the arrest of a designated ‘Chresian’ (so spelled), the dismantling of a former church, Copres who signs his letter with a cryptographic Amen, the arrival of Sunday in the official calendar – such pieces sketch a grass-roots history of the early Church.

Some of our texts are anthology pieces in themselves, whether Pindar or the private voice. Most will contribute to larger syntheses, or raise general questions about the world they represent. I offer two examples.

Oxyrhynchus Papyri XLII 3055 (Figure 3) is the most commonplace of private documents. ‘From Melas the secretary to Ammonios the chicken-man, greetings. Give Ammon the watchman, for household use, ten eggs, that makes 10 eggs. Year 1 of Diokles, Phamenoth 11.’ The date, by the year of the emperor’s reign and the day of the Egyptian month, equates to 7 March, 285 AD. And so the matter might end. Yet the emperor’s name looks odd. This is (C. Aurelius Valerius) Diocletianus (Caesar Augustus), who was to make history as a famous persecutor of the Christian church. Lactantius *On the death of the Persecutors* duly notes that he was called Diokles before he came to power; at that stage, says another source, he converted his Greek name into a Roman form. Diokles had proclaimed himself emperor on 20 November 284, near Nicomedia in northern Asia Minor; it took him until May 285 to crush the rival claimant. Yet secretary Melas, three months later, far away in small town Oxyrhynchus, not only recognises the new emperor, but knows his original and less glamorous name. The Roman world had no mass communications; it did possess, as this chit shows, a detailed, vigorous and extended grapevine.

Oxyrhynchus Papyrus LIX 3965 (Figure 4) contains an poem on Plataea, the decisive land-battle in the Greeks’ Great Patriotic War against the invading

Persians. The author, Simonides, famous for wit and avarice, in a productive life of 90 years and with patrons far and wide in the aristocratic and princely clans of Greece, must have been the leading Greek poet of the early fifth century BC (overlapping the careers of Pindar and Aeschylus). His collected works existed still in Roman libraries; in the

Figure 4. Simonides on the Battle of Plataea: P. Oxy. 3965. Second century AD





Middle Ages they vanished. Papyri have given him fragments of a second life. This poem was, it seems, a celebration. It begins by invoking Achilles, the great Greek champion of the war against Troy; that war against an Eastern enemy (celebrated by Homer) is put in parallel with the new war against the Eastern enemy (celebrated by Simonides); and



Figure 5. The goddess Ignorance, from an illustrated Menander: P. Oxy. 2652. Second/third century AD

so we hear how the Spartan general Pausanias, the Achilles of his time, led his army towards the decisive field of battle. A fragment only: but one full of questions. It illustrates the propaganda of victory, and the jostling of the victors. It plays up a theme which Herodotus will make his own, the cyclical hostilities of West and East. Above all, it offers a poetic structure which no one would have expected. The poem leads from a hymn to a narrative, just as the older Homeric hymns served to introduce the recital of the Homeric epic. But, whereas the earlier hymns and epics are long and in hexameter metre, everything here is in miniature, and in elegiacs (a metre more associated with the private and the convivial). The 'anxiety of influence' bears upon Greek poets as much as upon modern ones; in the third century BC it gives rise to a riot of formal experiment and intertextual sophistication. But, as often, we see that the clear categories of the text book, 'classical simplicity' against 'hellenistic contrivance', rest simply on lack of information. Simonides' pocket epic is as revolutionary in form and structure as anything his successors contrived two centuries later.

We have a lot more to do: work for at least another generation. In the narrower sense, this project seeks to decipher, edit and publish the papyri of Oxyrhynchus. In a wider sense, we hope to rebuild a culture from its waste paper, and with that to fill gaps of fact and hypothesis in the study of Greek and Roman antiquity, where there is so much that we do not know. Agnoia, the Goddess Ignorance (the drawing, Figure 5, shows her as a character in Menander's *The Girl who gets her hair cut off*), may serve as our patron.