

# New Greek Texts from Oxyrhynchus

In June 2009, the British Academy hosted a workshop to discuss some of the exciting new texts pieced together by the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* project – followed in the evening by a public presentation. Professor Peter Parsons FBA describes how these fragmentary documents give a unique insight into Greco-Roman civilisation.

Between 1897 and 1907 excavators from the Egypt Exploration Society dug around the village of el-Behnesa, some 100 miles south of Cairo (Figure 1). They found the accumulated waste paper of an entire city, anciently called Oxyrhynchus: 50,000 fragments of papyrus, books and papers alike, written and read by the Greek-speaking colonials who ruled Egypt for the millennium between Alexander the Great and the Arab Conquest. The sorting, decipherment and publication of these papyri (now housed in the Sackler Library in Oxford) began in 1898; the work was adopted as a Major Research Project by the British Academy in 1966, and reached volume LXXIV in 2009.

Figure 1. Excavating at Oxyrhynchus, c. 1900.  
Photo: Egypt Exploration Society.



## Patterns of scholarship

The Oxyrhynchus papyri span about 700 years; they track the literary tastes and the bureaucratic regimes of a Roman and Byzantine province. The work on the papyri similarly tracks, over more than a century, the changing tastes and focuses of scholarship. At the beginning, Christian texts took a leading role: the late Victorians relied on archaeology to reinforce the superstructure of faith while geology was mining its foundations. Later, Greek literary texts took pride of place: as the co-ordinating scholarship of *Altertums-wissenschaft* revealed the empty shelves, the classics of the Classical world that had perished in the Middle Ages, papyrology began to recover, in fragments, parts of the lost inheritance – songs of Sappho, comedies of Menander, elegies by Callimachus. Alongside these, a growing archive of documentary texts (90% of the total) offered Roman historians, or at least the less blinkered of them, the opportunity to study in detail the economics and social structure of a Roman province.

The Oxyrhynchus Project still serves these audiences; and as scholarly focuses shift, it

seeks to adapt. An extensive codex of Acts (forthcoming) will raise questions about textual flexibility in the early transmission of scripture. At the same time, we publish more amulets, hymns and prayers, which materialise the grass-roots faith of early Christians. Archilochus and Simonides were great names among Greek poets, whose greatness had not saved them from extinction: papyri from Oxyrhynchus, recently published, restore elegies by them which rewrite the history of the genre. At the same time, we have material to meet the current interest in the Greek literary culture of the Roman period: novels, declamations, experiments in hexameter poetry. Published documents illustrate the beginnings of the census, the shifts in the gold/silver ratio, the administration of the imperial post, in the high days of Empire. At the same time we can respond to the modern preoccupation with Late Antiquity, where the Egyptian experience presents a vivid picture of the Byzantine province and its development under the Caliphate.

Scholarship progresses, and so do its technical resources. The last thirty years have provided us with now indispensable tools: in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* we can search the whole of Greek literature up to 800 AD; in the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri we can search all but the most recently published documents. More and more collections of papyri have posted digital images of their published holdings. Two local enterprises, designed and directed by Dirk Obbink, compound these advances. One refines the technique of multispectral imaging, by which papyri can be scanned at different wave-lengths and the most legible image produced by superimposing the best results.<sup>1</sup> Another develops the computerisation of the card catalogue: this makes a database, which can be searched (by script, date, genre) in such a way as to bring together scattered fragments of the same text.

The British Academy workshop discussed a selection of texts from different genres, prepared by different contributors (Professor Bowman, Dr Colomo, Dr Gonis, Professor

Handley, Dr Obbink, Professor Rathbone).<sup>2</sup> Politics and governance and bureaucracy, literary composition and philosophical study all had their place.

### Regulations and edicts

Egypt had been a Greek kingdom, before it fell to Rome in 30 BC. One document contains regulations issued (probably) by king Ptolemy XII, father of Cleopatra, about inheritance tax: if you die intestate, two-thirds of your estate will go to the Privy Purse. The script suggests the early Roman period. So the rulings of the old kings remained in force under the new emperors; and in fact contributed by accumulation to the comprehensive Tax Code, of which a copy survives in Berlin. We cannot be sure whether Ptolemy's code represents a concession or a supertax. But the date (63 BC) places it in political context. This is a time when the king needs all the support he can get; but also all the revenue he can raise, since (as we know from Cicero) he needs to pay gigantic bribes to the noble Romans whose support alone keeps him in power.

Under Roman rule, the emperor appoints a viceroy, the Prefect, whose major pronouncements take the form of edicts. Another document presented contains an edict of the prefect Vestinus (AD 59–62), with its formal prescript, 'Lucius Julius Vestinus speaks'. A certain Sarapion, it seems, had been head of the weavers' collective at Oxyrhynchus; and he has been publicly denounced for collecting unauthorised contributions. The prefect condemns him and his rebellious colleagues and accomplices, perhaps to a fine. 'And if they disobey in any way, I shall employ the appropriate punishment against them.' We may wonder why it takes an edict to deal with an episode of local malpractice. But weaving was a major industry, and linen one of Egypt's major exports; and extorting money is the prerogative of government. The prefect cannot afford to let a corrupt and contumacious union-boss get away with it.

### Legal bureaucracy

The prefect speaks, and the citizens obey. Lower down the heap, private letters give a view of the resourceful struggling with the bureaucratic. In one such letter Thonios

writes to Alexander, a priest of Demeter: neat professional script, impeccable spelling, style literate and in places pompous (Figure 2). By contrast the content comes down to earth. Under Roman rule, priestly offices were sold by auction, and the price paid to the state: Alexander, it seems, had bought a priesthood, but his payment is in arrears. That is important, since a priesthood may entitle you to exemption from certain 'liturgies', that is, unpaid bureaucratic jobs imposed by the state. But even if the priesthood is secure, the holder will still need to argue the case for exemption, and here too Thonios has been active in tracking down relevant case-law. Precedent plays a large part in Greco-Egyptian courts, and this letter even tells us the technical name for the procedure, the argument 'by similitude'.

Another letter refers to the perennial problem of the defaulting debtor. The legal procedure was simple if burdensome. The creditor applied, with a summary of the contract, to the Chief Justice; the Chief Justice added an instruction to the local governor; the creditor sent the document thus endorsed to that governor; and the governor instructed one of his assistants to serve the whole notice on the debtor. However, the debtor may create a diversion by claiming that the contract is forged: this initiates a criminal charge against the creditor, and the creditor may then be scared or impatient enough to give up or to reduce the sum owing. Prefects, and even Emperors, legislated against this manoeuvre, frequently enough to show how it persisted. In our



Figure 2. Avoiding government service: letter from Thonios, 3rd century AD. Image: Egypt Exploration Society/University of Oxford Imaging Papyri Project.

letter, the creditors believe that they have a contract in Cephalon the debtor's own hand. They can therefore call his bluff. Once notice has been served, the debtor must pay up or commit to the charge of forgery: so the

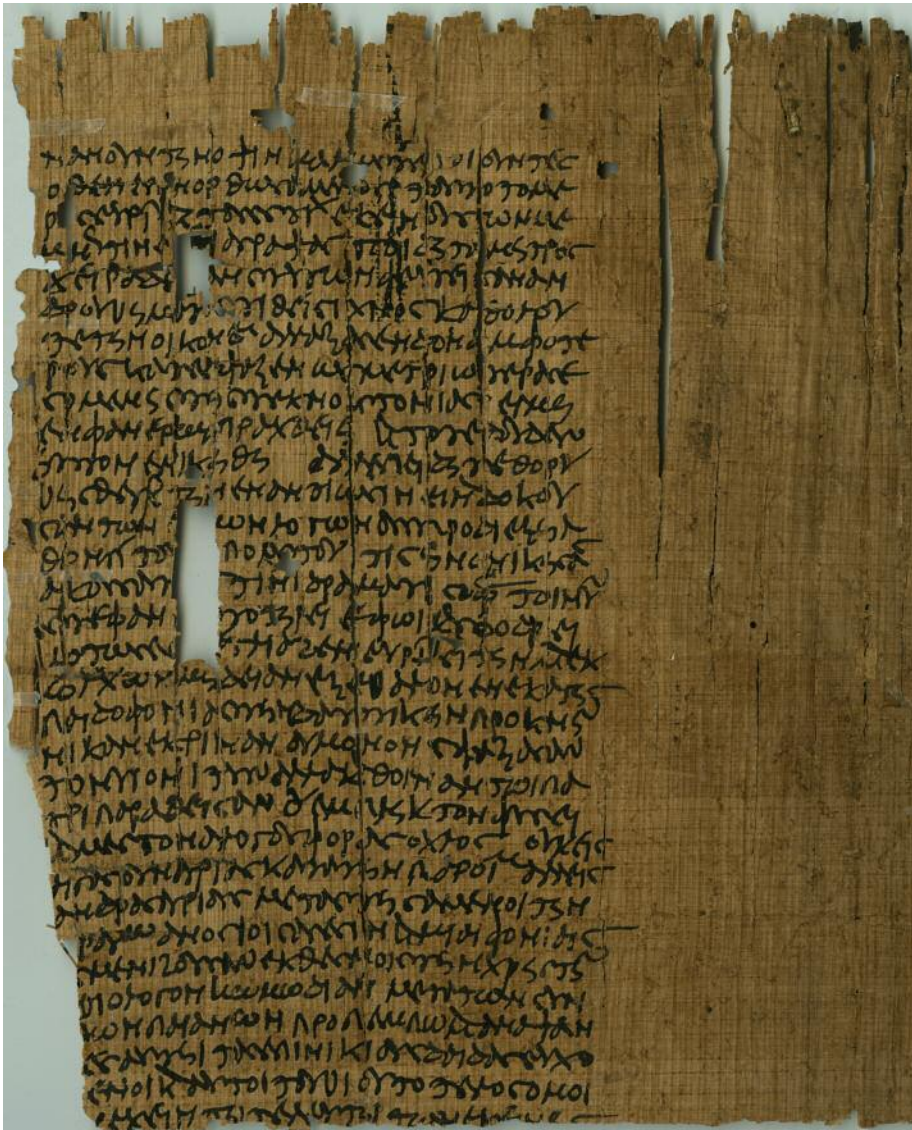


Figure 3. *Killing children on stage: rhetorical declamation, 3rd century AD. Image: Egypt Exploration Society/University of Oxford Imaging Papyri Project.*

sooner it is served, the better. Service rests with the governor's assistant; but they make fall-back arrangements, in case he proves negligent. There is a book to be written about 'negligence' (*ameleia*) and her sister 'administrative error' (*planē*) in ancient bureaucracies.

### Literature and philosophy

Amid such distractions, Oxyrhynchites of means participated in a literate culture typical of the panhellenic world. In the heyday of the Roman empire, within what is loosely called the Second Sophistic, the study of classical literature, and the practice of public declamation, combine to delight an audience which thus finds its heritage revived. A long papyrus contains probably an author's

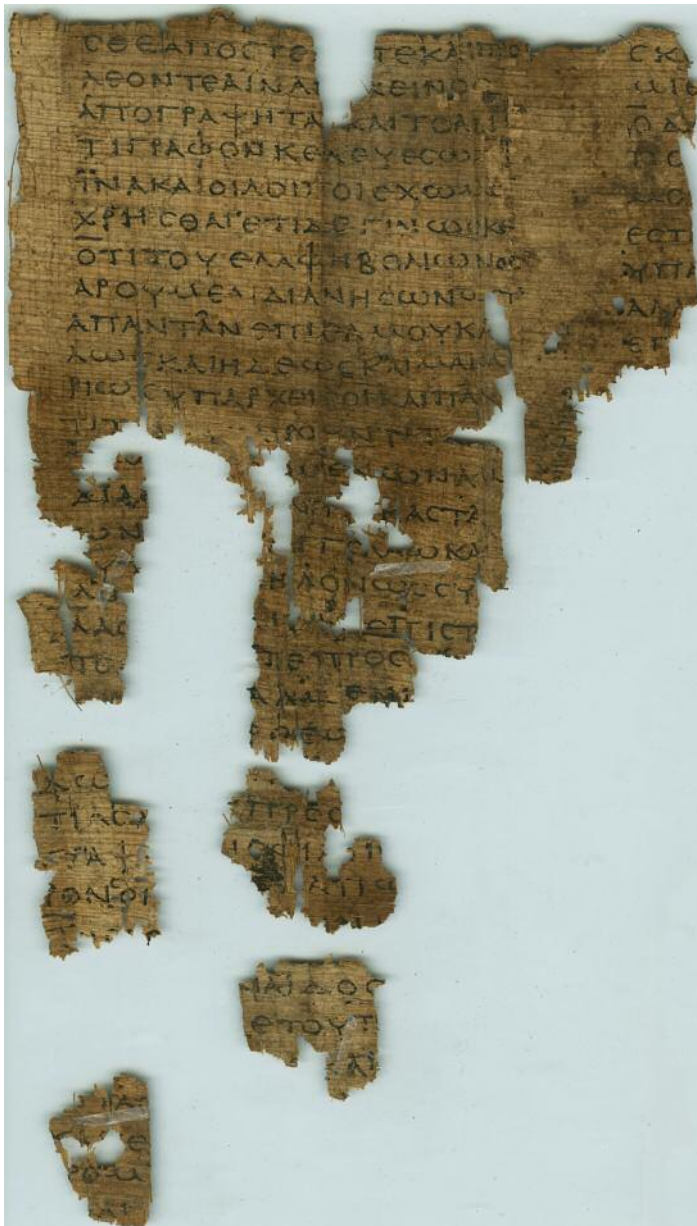
draft, written in a rapid, cursive and abbreviated script, whose decipherment represents a triumph of mind over scribble (Figure 3). In one short speech the author asserts the paradox that Comedy is more moral than Tragedy, and invites his audience to join in a torch-lit procession to honour Comedy, in the hope that their own lives may have so happy an ending – an ingenious borrowing from the several comedies by Menander which equally end with torches and revelry on stage. As part of the argument, he dwells on the immorality of tragedy. Euripides, he says, was forced by public outrage to rewrite his *Hippolytus*; similarly he had to rewrite his *Medea*, because in the original version he made her kill her children on stage. The first 'fact' we find in other

sources, which allege that the first audience resented the portrayal of Phaedra as a shameless seductress. The second is entirely new, and the author seeks to validate it by quoting two unknown verses which (he says) the poet deleted from his second version – verses which (he thinks) imply a murder on stage. *Ne pueros coram populo Medea trucidet* is one of those tragic rules that descend through Horace to Boileau: so the claim is sensational – and no doubt incredible. The author is a stylist, not a scholar, and his insouciance may serve as a warning. How many of the literary 'facts' we inherit from antiquity derive from such swampy couplings of malignant gossip, bibliographic muddle and rhetorical manipulation? Shakespearian scholars may recognise the genre.

In the literate culture, intellectuals need a philosophical allegiance. Oxyrhynchites, to judge from their salvage, read Plato in bulk, Stoics and Epicureans more rarely, Aristotle hardly at all. One of our new texts comes from a work well-known but long-lost, the collected Letters of Epicurus. In a first fragment (Figure 4), Epicurus writes about his plan to travel from Athens to his native Samos, 'from island to island' (that is, avoiding the dangers of the open sea; Epicurus had already experienced one near-fatal shipwreck), there to meet any friends who have leisure for the journey. In a second, he attacks the number-mysticism of the Pythagoreans, in which a square represents justice (equal sides = equity) – 'the wisdom of fools'. If both fragments belong to the same letter, the union of travel and polemic may remind the reader of St Paul. More perhaps emerges from the first piece about the propagation of doctrine. Epicurus, say, writes a letter to one disciple, who copies it and passes it on to a second, and so along the chain. There follows a damaged passage, where the words 'collection' and 'letter' can be seen: should we infer that our new letter is organising precisely that collection of Epicurus' letters in which it will itself appear – and in which scholars can now read it for the first time since the Fall of Rome?

At Oxyrhynchus, life and literature have enjoyed a chance longevity under the protecting sand. Sarapion the extortionist, Alexander the simoniac, Cephalon the recalcitrant debtor now resurface, along with the amateur rhetorician who celebrated Comedy and the amateur philosopher who studied Epicurus. They add their own fragments to the incremental mosaic that constitutes our knowledge of the Greek and Roman world.

Figure 4. *Sailing to Samos: a new letter of Epicurus, in a copy of the 1st century AD. Image: Egypt Exploration Society/University of Oxford Imaging Papyri Project.*



#### Note

- 1 For more on the process, and a demonstration of the results, go to the Oxyrhynchus Online website ([www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy/](http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy/)), and see under 'Recent imaging developments'.
- 2 The British Academy workshop on 24 June 2009 was convened by Professor Eric Handley FBA and Dr Dirk Obbink. The main contributions were (in the order that this article reports them): 'Ruling of Ptolemy XII (?)' by Professor D.W. Rathbone (King's College London); 'Edict of Vestinus', by Professor A.K. Bowman FBA (University of Oxford); 'Letter of Thonius' and 'Letter of Ammonius', by Dr N. Gonis (University College London); 'Rhetorical Declamation', by Dr D. Colomo (University of Oxford); 'New Letter of Epicurus', by Dr D. Obbink (University of Oxford).

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The Oxyrhynchus Papyri project is one of approximately 40 major research projects that are designated 'British Academy Research Projects'. Each organised and run by its own committee, these projects aim to make available fundamental research tools of benefit to a wide range of scholars. The full list of Academy Research Projects can be found at [www.britac.ac.uk/arp/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/arp/)

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