
ORIENTAL MANUSCRIPTS AND NEW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

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PAPYRI, DIGITISATION, AND THE WEB: ACCESSIBILITY AND MANAGEMENT OF COLLECTIONS

The aim of this paper is to examine the current state of affairs among collections of textual material from ancient Egypt preserved upon papyrus: the climate of management, and attitudes towards making papyri available upon the web. Do

titudes towards making papyri available upon the web. Do papyri present any issues or problems different from those we face in the case of other types of manuscript material?

Papyrus as a writing ground and Egyptian books

The “papyri” which I wish to discuss are documents and texts — any kind of written material — inscribed upon the traditional pharaonic Egyptian writing-ground, papyrus, manufactured from the central pith of the stalks of the papyrus sedge [1]. Sheets of papyrus were made by laying down side by side thin strips cut from the pith of the plant, and then adding on top of this a second layer of strips, this time running at right angles to the strips of the first layer. Pressure or hammering caused the two layers of strips to cling firmly together, as the individual cells of the papyrus pith possess minute hooks that mechanically interlock. This structure has implications for the way in which papyri survive from the ancient world. Papyrus was the standard writing material in Egypt from the early third millennium BCE, until it was gradually replaced by parchment and paper from the fifth century CE onwards. It was also widely exported, being for example the normal writing — ground for literature in classical Athens [2].

The traditional form of book in Egypt [3], until the rise of the codex book in the Christian period, was the papyrus roll, manufactured by fastening together a series of individual sheets, each sheet overlapping its neighbour by about 1 cm in a pasted join. This was done at the workshop, and papyrus was available only in roll form. A suitable quantity of papyrus for a document, or a letter, or a small slip (for example, in order to write a dinner invitation, or to submit a query to the oracle of a god) were cut from the roll by the user. Occasionally, papyrus rolls are preserved complete and in excellent condition. Copies of the funerary “Book of the Dead” [4] were prepared for the one purpose of being included in the burial of an individual, either within the coffin itself, or in a special container or hollow statuette nearby. Sometimes they were ruined by fluids or resins from the embalmed corpse, but they can survive intact.

When a collection or archive of texts or documents was hidden or carefully stored (sometimes a tomb provided a convenient store — sometimes a buried pot), and then forgotten or abandoned, papyri can be found undisturbed and complete. Papyri stored in antiquity could nevertheless suffer damage from insects or from damp. Papyri as we now recover them may merely show a few insignificant wormholes, or they may have been reduced to a lacework of fragile fragments (*fig. 1*).

The great majority of ancient papyri, however, have been found in deposits of rubbish. Thus they had mostly been discarded as damaged, or as no longer of interest. Before being finally thrown away, they had often been reused as “scrap paper”, or as “wrapping paper”. In dumps of rubbish, they have often suffered further physical or insect damage. Much less numerous — but very significant for their content — are fragments folded and cut up as a reinforcement to combine with plaster and glue in the manufacture of decorated mummy-casings (so-called “cartonage”) (*fig. 2*). Such pieces overwhelmingly survive from the Ptolemaic Period (332—30 BCE). They are a major source for the economic and social history of Ptolemaic Egypt, as town rubbish-dump material becomes common only from the Roman Period. Carbonised rolls are an even rarer phenomenon. The most famous are those from Herculaneum in Italy, one of the towns overwhelmed by Vesuvius in 79 CE: in the eighteenth century a private library was uncovered there, most notably preserving philosophical works in Greek. Both old and recent excavations have found carbonised papyri at Tanis in the Egyptian Delta, although, otherwise, the damp conditions in the Delta have allowed very little papyrus to survive. Similarly, for climatic reasons, there have been very few finds of papyri outside Egypt [5].