

Case Study 1.1: Archiving Ancient Papyrus in Modern Times

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Ancient Egyptian papyri are among the oldest written artefacts of organic material that have survived over the centuries. When large amounts of papyrus were discovered and unearthed in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, their state of preservation differed greatly, ranging from carbonised fragments to extremely large and well-preserved rolls, such as the 20 m-long Ebers Papyrus. However, all of these finds have in common that due to the fragile and delicate nature of the material, they needed special care and treatment. One of the most common material supports that enables the archiving of ancient papyrus in modern times is the use of glass plates. After the flattening, cleaning, joining of loose fragments and other conservation works, papyri are frequently mounted under a frame between glass plates. Binding tape is used to attach the plates to one another. It is desirable for a little air to flow between the plates, therefore, airtight material is avoided or, alternatively, airholes for ventilation are included.

The result of this method is a glass-mounted archival unit that fulfils a number of archival functions. First of all, thanks to the sturdiness of the glass, the fragile papyrus fragments become tangible objects that can be handled, studied and exhibited with more ease and without further damaging the object; papyri that are often used by researchers, included in exhibitions or otherwise accessed especially require the support of a glass frame. Glass plates have the advantage that text on both sides of the papyrus can be accessed easily without the fear of breaking the papyrus into further pieces. At the same time, the plates help to preserve the papyrus by keeping it safe from environmental influences, such as dust; the ventilation between the plates prevents the growth of microorganisms. Beyond preservation, glass plates also help to restore the artefact by allowing for several fragments of the same papyrus to be placed next to one another. In addition, inventory and plate numbers, and other relevant information can be placed permanently under the glass along with the papyrus without leaving any traces on the object itself. Hence glass plates enable the restoration, preservation, handling and ordering of ancient papyrus.



Fig. 1: The papyrus collection of the Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig prior to 2010. The photo features the cabinet containing the glass plates, loose fragments in a cardboard box, and a tin box, that was used for the transportation of the papyri from Egypt to Germany. Since the photo was taken, all papyri in the Leipzig collection have been successfully mounted under glass plates and digitised thanks to numerous projects; © Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig.