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Greek Literary Papyri in Context: Methodological Issues and Research Perspectives

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Abstract: Literary papyri are not just bearers of the texts they preserve, but also material witnesses to the circulation and readership of literature in Graeco-Roman Egypt. As such, they may shed some light on the production practices and functions of these copies: on their scribes, their readers, their uses and reuses in different contexts. Only recently has a full awareness of the importance of these aspects been achieved and, even though attempts at contextualising literary fragments often prove problematic in many ways, the potential rewards of a holistic approach to literary papyri can still be analysed and exploited.

Keywords: literary papyri, Graeco-Roman Egypt, ancient readership, archaeological contexts, materiality of written artefacts

For many decades, literary papyri were considered solely as the bearers of texts. The stream of fragments re-emerging from the sands of Egypt brought extraordinary discoveries of lost pieces of classical literature and early copies of already known classical texts, and so scholars focused their attention on the new and exciting textual data. Little attention was paid to the contexts from which these papyri emerged, and the lack of interest in these aspects has often resulted in a substantial – and sometimes irreparable – loss of information.

For (too) many of the fragments now held in papyrological collections, information about provenance is unsatisfactory. Those acquired on the antiquities market are typically devoid of archaeological context, but data are often missing or scanty even for those from authorised excavations.¹ This is due both to objective problems (e. g., secondary deposits such as rubbish dumps or sites altered by *sebakhin*

¹ See the survey by Cuvigny 2009. On the loss of the context of origin see also Fournet 2018.

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or illegal digging) and to the excavators' failure to grasp fully the importance of a detailed record of the exact findspot, stratigraphy and the related finds. Indeed, the programmatic goal of many excavations was the recovery of as many papyri as possible, rather than a proper archaeological investigation.² Admittedly, this was partly dictated by the needs of a 'rescue archaeology', as the excavators were often in a race to rescue evidence from being plundered by clandestine diggers³ or destroyed in the digging by *sebakhin*. Moreover, different nations and institutions were also competing to build and enlarge their papyrological collections rapidly. So much so, that early papyrological excavations often became a sort of 'papyrus hunt',⁴ in which a detailed record of the archaeological data was not a priority. Nonetheless, the pioneers of papyrology occasionally display an embryonic awareness of the potential benefits of a different approach. Grenfell and Hunt, who had experienced methodical excavations in the Fayum with Hogarth, did realise, for example, the importance of considering together fragments from the same findspot in the rubbish dumps of Oxyrhynchus, announcing in 1906 the sensational retrieval of the so-called 'Hypsipyle library' from one basket,⁵ although they never published a detailed list of the basket's contents. In the 1920s, the University of Michigan mission at Kom Aushim was far ahead of its time in pursuing a comprehensive investigation of the daily life of ancient Karanis (including books, along with agricultural tools or furnishings), but its archaeological records are problematic and remain largely unpublished.

Some information has occasionally been recovered from the archives of museums and collections or from the papers of the 'pioneers', and hopefully further archival research will fill more gaps in our understanding.⁶

² This is largely the case in the English expeditions directed by Grenfell and Hunt and financed by the Egypt Exploration Fund, which led to the formation of one of the most important papyrus collections. A description of the context of early discoveries has occasionally been provided for individual papyri of particular importance (see e. g. Petrie 1889 for the 'Hawara Homer' and other texts found in the same area, and Wilamowitz-Moellendorf 1903, 1–3 for the Timotheus papyrus).

³ An instructive example is that of the Italian excavations at Tebtunis directed by Carlo Anti between 1928 and 1936: Anti habitually recorded the findspots of papyri and collected in separate containers the material found in the same place. But on the day of the discovery of the 'deposit' of the Temple of Soknebtunis in two cellars filled with thousands of fragments he was forced to empty the rooms within a day's work, in order not to leave the material exposed to clandestine diggers. This meant that it was impossible to record any data on the location of the papyri within the cellars (see Cariddi/Ryholt forthcoming).

⁴ The term is positively used e. g. in Baikie 1925, sp. chapt. X (225–251) "Modern Papyrus-Hunting".

⁵ "A Large Find of Literary Papyri", *Times* 14 May 1906, p. 4. Cf. Grenfell/Hunt, 1905–1906, 10.

⁶ 'Museum archaeology' has proved useful also for tracing purchases back to specific sites. See e. g. Vantorpe 1994 for the tracing of papyri from Pathyris; Falivene 2001 for papyri from El Hibeh;

In the editions of papyri published in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, there is hardly any information about not only archaeological contexts, but also about material features (regardless of the content of the papyrus, for documentary and literary fragments alike) and bibliological features. It is therefore not surprising that papyrological databases lack much information about the fragments' material aspects, since, quite often, it was never published in the first place. Although the palaeography of papyri has been from the start an indispensable tool in the decipherment and dating of the texts,⁷ attention to the physical artefacts as objects in their own right and not simply bearers of text has developed more slowly. One potential reason may be the boundaries between papyrology and other disciplines.⁸ The traditional idea that literary papyri belong mainly to the cognate field of Classical philology, although based on the practical need for collaboration, has resulted in a dichotomy between literary and documentary papyrology that is hard to overcome, if not in theory then at least in practice. And a philological approach has been for a long time more inclined to an abstract notion of text, focusing on the transmitted text rather than on the physical medium on which it is transmitted. It is significant, incidentally, that the development of a true 'material philology' is somewhat recent and owed to the study of medieval manuscripts rather than papyri.⁹ Bibliological concerns have led to an increasing awareness of the relevance of literary papyri's material aspects. Indeed, papyri preserve a wealth of information about ancient books, and recent decades have seen the publication of many studies of their bibliological aspects.¹⁰ It needs to be stressed, however, that analysis of material aspects would have limited value if it is detached from

Martin 2007 for the provenance of lots acquired by German collections through the Deutsches Papyruskartell, with specific reference to Oxyrhynchus.

7 Kenyon 1899, Schubart 1925, Norsa 1929–1946. Radiciotti 2007 traces the evolution from a first period when palaeography was perceived as just auxiliary for papyrology, towards a deeper integration between the two disciplines. See also Fournet 2022, who introduces the concept of 'paléographie signifiante'.

8 Wilcken attributed distinct tasks to the two disciplines within the study of literary fragments (see Mitteis/Wilcken 1912, xi: "Hiernach sind ausgeschlossen [scil. from Papyrology] erstens die literarischen Papyri in griechischer und lateinischer Sprache. Sie sind nach ihrem Inhalt der griechischen oder römischen Literaturgeschichte zuzuweisen. Nur die Fragen der äußern Herstellung dieser Handschriften (wie Format, Schrift u. ä.) fallen unter den Begriff der Papyruskunde und sind nach Maßgabe der Ergebnisse dieser Disziplin zu behandeln". The aim was a productive collaboration between the papyrologist (who is capable both of deciphering the written text and of recognising and treating the papyrus' material features) and the philologist, but in practice the two aspects of this supposedly joint work remained separate and did not lead to an exploitation of material aspects fruitful for philological research.

9 See Nichols 1990 and, for the term "material philology", Nichols 1997.

10 E.g. Turner 1977, Turner/Parsons 1987, Bastianini 1995.

analysis of the text. At best, it can produce synchronic and diachronic statistics on the incidence of certain features, but it cannot achieve a full understanding of the written artefact in its cultural dimension. Only a holistic approach that exploits the complex interplay between ‘container’ and content can give full value and substance to the very concept of manuscript tradition, understood as the binomial “history of tradition and textual criticism”.¹¹

A ‘rebalancing’ of attention on the various features of a papyrus has been established and has now every opportunity to advance, appreciating materiality and context along with the text. A good example of the possibilities of such an approach is the productive use of palaeographical and archaeological data for the reconstruction of ancient book collections.¹² Recently, several studies have shed significant light on individual aspects of these multifaceted issues¹³ and nowadays an editor of a literary papyrus cannot limit their work to an investigation of text alone.

One more way to contextualising literary texts consists in exploring their relations to documentary texts. Once again, a distinction based on content has limited our possibilities of understanding: a transdisciplinary approach is clearly needed, since those who owned a copy of the *Odyssey*, read a novel, or consulted a glossary were the same people who kept a tax receipt, wrote a private letter, or submitted a petition to the authorities. Fragments of documents and fragments pertaining to literature alike bear witness to daily life within socio-economic, linguistic and cultural contexts, and can contribute to a more complete view of them by offering different perspectives. Along with a general attention to the hermeneutic value of context, the last decades of the past century saw many seminal studies exploring the intersections between literary and documentary papyri,¹⁴ such as fragments of books kept in administrative archives,¹⁵ books copied on the back of documentary papyri,¹⁶ or the full papyrological record from specific sites and periods of the settlements in Graeco-Roman Egypt.¹⁷ Even the traditional boundary between literary and documentary papyri, reflected as it has been in the many separate tools for papyrology, is recently bridged, e. g. through the incorporation of the previously separate Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB) within the comprehensive Trismegistos database or the inclusion of the new Digital Corpus of Literary Papyri (DCLP) in papyri.info, alongside texts in the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri (DDBDP).

¹¹ See Pasquali 1952.

¹² E.g. Funghi/Messeri 1992, McNamee 2007a, Houston 2011.

¹³ E.g., very selectively, Johnson 2004, Capasso 2005, McNamee 2007b, Del Corso 2010, Fournet 2012.

¹⁴ See Messeri 2005.

¹⁵ E.g. Clarysse 1983, Bagnall 1992, Fournet 2018.

¹⁶ E.g. Lama 1991, updated in Lama 2007. On some reuse cases from the Heroninos archive see Turner 1978.

¹⁷ E.g. van Minnen 1998, Maehler 1997.

The present monographic issue of *Trends in Classics* is the result of a conference held at the University of Genoa, 15–16 December 2022, within the project “Greek and Latin Literary Papyri from Graeco-Roman and Late Antique Fayum: Texts, Contexts, Readers” (funded by the Italian Ministry of the University and Research programme “Research Projects of National Relevance” PRIN 2017), which focused on the issues outlined above and on the methodological challenges they pose.

We decided to organize both the conference and the present volume in three parts, each devoted to one of the main aspects that we wanted to investigate and discuss. The first part (“Written, reused, recycled”) focuses on the materiality of the witnesses in relation to particular genres, authors or works. The second (“Read, revised, studied”) analyses the evidence for how certain categories of texts were used and perceived. The third part (“Found together”) presents two cases where the find context is known, and evaluates whether there is any correspondence with original use contexts. Such an organization is of course too rigid in many respects, and many papers offer insight into more than one of these aspects. But overall, the contributions collected in this volume show how, starting from the thorough analysis of different data – such as the archaeological contexts, the use and reuse of rolls, the characteristics of the handwriting, the presence of signs –, it is possible to achieve the same goal: to shed light both on how the texts were treated and used, and on where they were produced and circulated. This kind of approach is useful for every fragment, but applying it to papyri with the same kind of content (a literary or paraliterary genre, a single author, even a single work) is particularly fruitful, since it reveals something about how these texts were perceived and yields a wide range of results, from the reconstruction of a single book collection to an outline of educational practices and cultural interests in certain periods or milieux. Just as a documentary text provides information in itself but says much more when placed in a broader context such as an archive or a dossier, where it ‘interacts’ with other texts, a cross-sectional study of the features mentioned above in literary or paraliterary texts can say something about their role in a larger cultural history.

Papyrological witnesses are complex, and investigating their complexity not only provides access to an immensely rich resource, but also confers a great responsibility on those who are privileged to work with them. Our hope is that the papers collected in this volume offer an effective demonstration of how papyrological research can proceed along the path of contextualisation with confidence and energy, yielding new and stimulating “facts”¹⁸ for the understanding of the ancient world.

18 Cf. Youtie 1963.

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