

EGYPTIAN PAPYRI

The University Museum's collection
of papyri and related materials

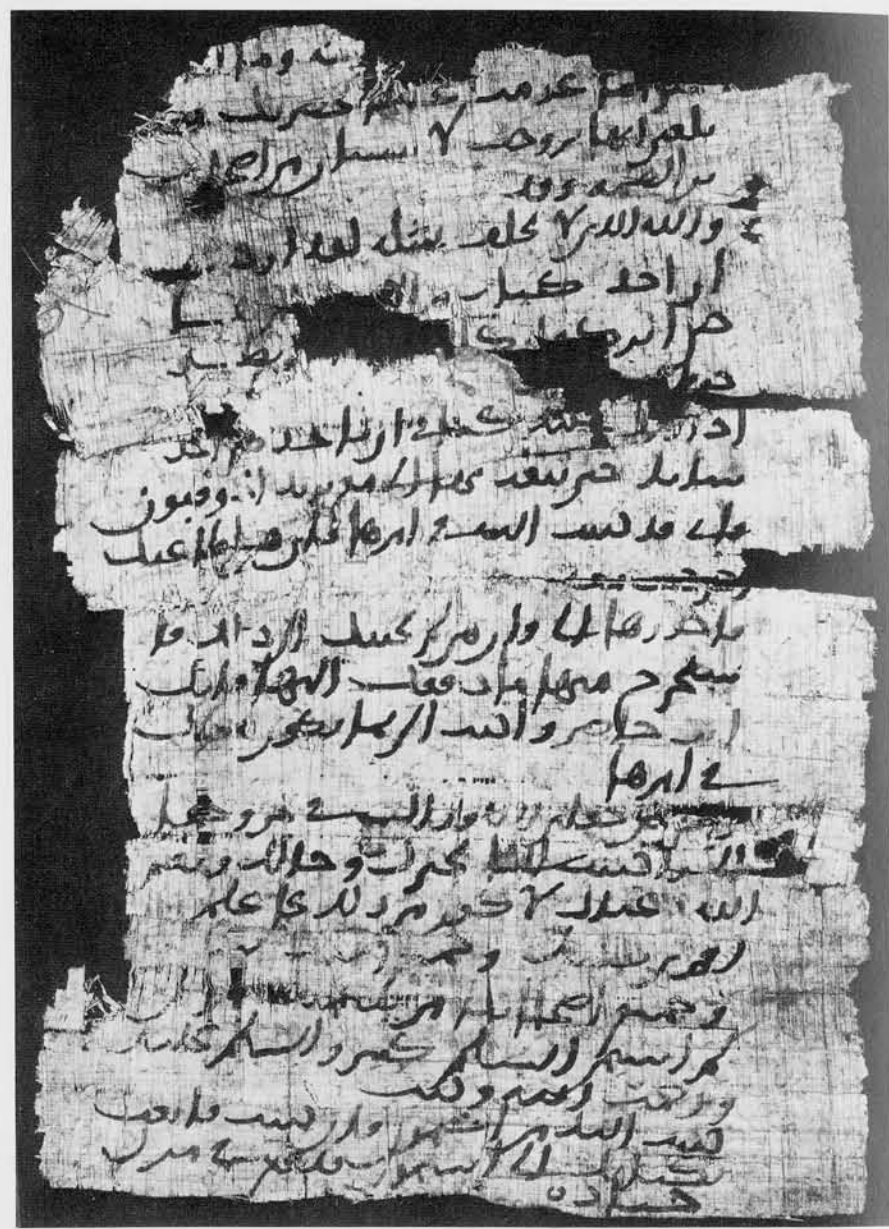
JOHN R. ABERCROMBIE

In a second century A.D. Greek epistle a well-intentioned father offers some free advice to his son, who was probably wishing for a more tangible sort of response. He tells his "sweetest" lad to offend no one and to give his studies his undivided attention, for in this way a man will profit. The father then adds that he is sending his son money, monthly supplies and clothes (University Museum E 2805 = Oxyrhynchus 531).

An Arabic letter dating to the 8th century A.D. describes what must have been a curious situation. A slave-owner demands his slave girl be returned at once with "the mail." He is upset, because she fled his house at night and entered another where she married (E 16423).

In a Hebrew letter written during the Crusades, a displaced refugee and unemployed scholar bemoans his fate. The author laments how circumstances forced him to pawn his wife's jewelry, his own clothes, his Bible and unbound volumes. He then traveled to Damascus in hopes of finding employment, and later requested that his son be allowed to visit him there. But when his wife discovered that the boy had slipped away to visit his father, she sent a messenger who brought him back home. The scholar, when he heard what had happened, threatened divorce (E 16516).

These three personal letters discovered in Egypt are samples of the informative and



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often entertaining papyri and related written materials in the University Museum's Egyptian collection. Many other personal, legal, administrative, literary and religious texts are also to be found among the collection's 2000 or so pieces.

Since 1898 the Museum has acquired this written material through purchases, excavations and gifts; however, most of it derives from two sources early in this century. Late in the 1890's and early in the 1900's, B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, two British archaeologists, conducted extensive excavations for Egyptian papyri at town sites and cemeteries in Oxyrhynchus, the Fayûm region and Hibeh. Their work, which was undertaken in part to counter illicit plundering of sites for papyri, produced a great volume of written materials. Eventually, the University Museum and other interested organizations were awarded some

1
Hebrew letter dated to the 11th century A.D. After the part described here the letter continues: The scholar eventually discovers that his father-in-law had driven his son out of the house. The father entreats his wife to let his son travel with him to Egypt via Ascalon. Paper, irregularly folded. 21 x 18 cm. E 16516.

2

Greek list of Roman emperors from Augustus to Decius dating to the 3rd century A.D. Despite several errors in spelling and the omission of Gaius, the list is accurate. On the recto side are preserved a few lines from a proclamation made in the reign of Severus Alexander. Papyrus. 13.8 x 13.4 cm. Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 35. E 2749.

of these discoveries by the British Exploration Fund in repayment for their financial support of Grenfell's and Hunt's research.

The second source, from which more than half of the collection derives, was the untiring effort of William Maxwell Müller, noted Egyptologist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Max Müller became associated with the Museum shortly after its founding and early on encouraged the Museum's Egyptian Section to take an active interest in the current papyri discoveries by beginning its own collection. In 1900 Müller traveled to Egypt where he purchased papyri and other artifacts for the Museum's collection. His entertaining letters from 1900 to 1902 relate how Müller was able to barter with the native dealers in order to gain a favorable price. Even by comparison to prices of that time, Müller proved to be a shrewd buyer and acquired papyri for a pittance. Two cigar boxes of fragments cost him 15 shillings (\$3.75). From a Luxor merchant he purchased a Hieratic magical papyrus, several Demotic contracts and other fragments for a mere two pounds (\$10.00). With the assistance of a Dr. Kern, Müller bought significant Demotic temple records, a Greek papyrus and other fragments for 25 pounds

(\$125.00) or about half of what the dealer originally quoted.

Müller's major acquisition came some ten years later. In the summer of 1910 Müller bought the main portion of a large private collection owned by Bernard Moritz, an Arabic paleographer in Cairo. Müller originally negotiated to purchase the whole collection for \$750, but when only \$500 was made available to him, he acquired only part. This purchase from Bernard Moritz today comprises over half of the present collection and includes materials in several different languages.

A smaller percentage of the Museum's present collection was not purchased but was exhumed in the 1920's by Clarence Fisher, Curator of the Egyptian Section (1914-1925). Fisher uncovered Hieratic and Hieroglyphic fragments at Drah Abu Neggah, a rich Ramesside cemetery near ancient Thebes. Surprisingly, his most important papyri find was made in the poorest tomb (No. 156, the tomb of Pennesittai) on the site. Here Fisher discovered Demotic legal documents dated to the early Ptolemies (late 4th-3rd century B.C.) inside of two large beet shaped jars. The documents, probably part of a family's personal records, include a lease, marriage contract, divorce paper, promissory note, sales of part of a house, provision for the dead and other contractual arrangements.

Over the years, several donors also have presented papyri to the Museum. One of these gifts, the missing conclusion to one of the Hieratic Tomb Robbery papyri (dated to the 20th Dynasty or 11th century B.C.) in the British Museum, is especially noteworthy (49-11-1).

These gifts, discoveries and purchases today provide the Museum with a fine collection of ancient, medieval and early modern written material from Egypt. The entire collection spans some three thousand years from about 1300 B.C. to modern times. The bulk of the collection, however, postdates the Persian conquest of Egypt in the 6th-5th centuries B.C. The Greek and Demotic materials date mostly to the Hellenistic and early Roman periods (circa 300 B.C. to A.D. 300). The Coptic, Hebrew, Arabic and Pahlavi materials as well as some Greek pieces were written in Byzantine times. Several Hebrew and Arabic documents are as late as the 17th century. A few Hieratic and Hieroglyphic pieces can be ascribed to the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate periods (circa 1550 B.C. to 600 B.C.).

Individual items in the collection are written on three different types of material: papyrus, leather and paper. Papyrus is the vehicle for the largest number of written pieces prior to the 4th century A.D. It continued to be used until the 9th and 10th centuries, but was gradually replaced at first by



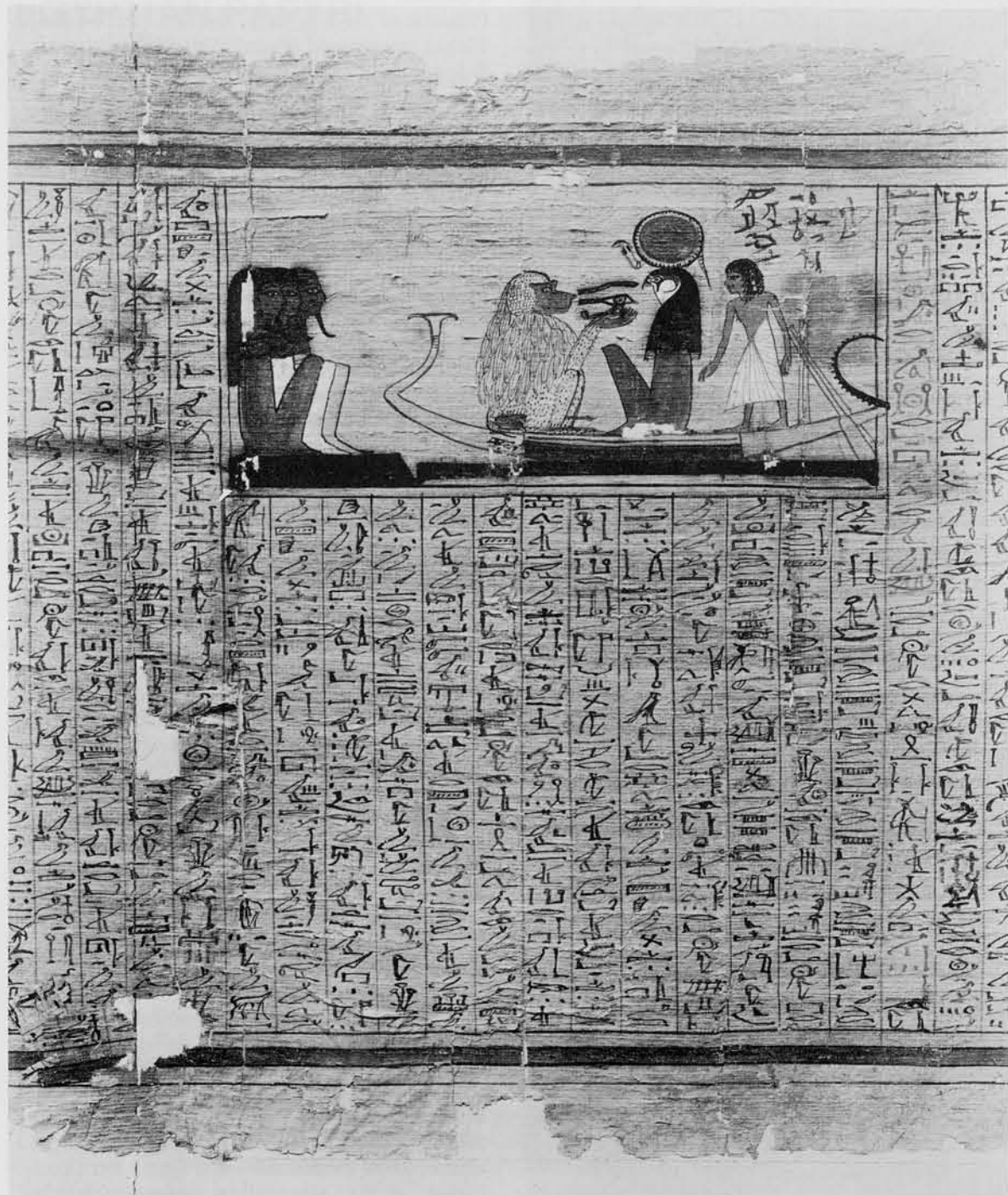
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leather (parchment and vellum) and later by paper. Other materials such as broken pottery (ostraca), cloth, bark or wood, stone and metal were inscribed in various periods and under various circumstances. No systematic analysis of the Museum's collection of these materials has as yet been attempted.

The importance of all these writings inscribed in many languages and on different materials lies in what they reveal about the languages, history and cultures of Egypt and

the surrounding areas. Although much of the collection remains unedited, the Demotic, Greek and Hebrew documents so far published provide a panorama of life in ancient and medieval times. Indeed, one is somewhat surprised to discover how little certain aspects of life have changed through the centuries.

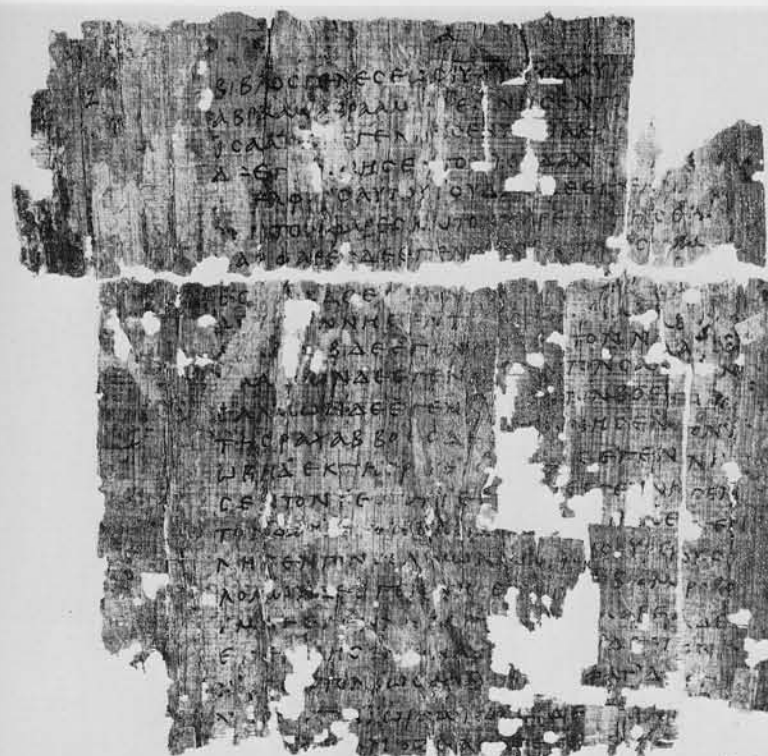
For example, then as now the state levied various taxes. According to tax receipts and a tax list from the Hellenistic and Roman



3
Book of the Dead. Dated to the 13th century B.C. Cursive hieroglyphic inscription in black and red with colored vignettes. Papyrus. 561 x 36 cm. E 2775. Another section of this papyrus is shown on the cover.

4
Fragment of the St. Matthew Gospel, chapter 1, verses 19, 12, 14, 20. 3rd century A.D. Greek. Papyrus. 14.7 x 15 cm. Papyrus Oxyrhynchus. E 2746.

5
Odyssey of Homer, Book X, lines 26-50. Dated late 3rd century A.D. Papyrus. 20.6 x 17.2 cm. Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 778. E 2818.



2746. III Cent. A.D.
Fragment of Gospel of St Matthew.
Vv. 19, 12, 14 20 of 1st Chapter.

periods, an individual was responsible for paying the state tax collectors ten percent sales tax, poll tax, weaving tax, dike maintenance tax, profit tax, land tax, poor tax, temple tax, police and defense tax, festival tax, pig tax and many other taxes. One quickly recalls the aphorism about life's only certainties, death and taxes.

Marriage and divorce contracts are not modern legal inventions. The Museum possesses several marriage contracts, some of which are from pre-Christian, Ptolemaic Egypt. These Demotic contracts stipulate that a husband was responsible for providing his future wife with shelter, food (four measures of wheat daily), one hin (or about 7/8 of a pint) of oil monthly, cloth and a bride's gift (one piece of silver). If a husband were to commit adultery and wanted a divorce, according to the marriage contract he could divorce her as long as he paid six pieces of silver and gave her half of what he owned.

A complex agricultural system with cash crops, governmental incentives and controls, crop irrigation and regional distribution and storage operated in ancient times. Before the end of the Nile's annual inundation, the state granaries lent certain seeds to farmers for planting. The state, furthermore, controlled and restricted what farmers could plant in any year. The major crops—cash crops—were

wheat (emmer) and barley, although lentils and cabbage were also grown, probably for private consumption. At harvest, farmers then sold their produce to the granaries and on occasion to private individuals.

Religious beliefs were strongly held. Many different religious documents are preserved in the collection and most appear to have been written with great care. Some are beautifully decorated, especially copies of the Egyptian Book of the Dead with its vignettes (on display in the Upper Egyptian gallery), Christian Biblical fragments and Muslim Quranic manuscripts. Also on display in the Biblical Archaeology gallery is one of the earliest fragments from the New Testament, Matthew 1, (3rd century A.D.), found in the first season of excavation at Oxyrhynchus.

Other traditional classics of literature were also read in earlier times. The Museum's Egyptian collection includes fragments of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (E 2818 currently on display in the Classical World [Greek] gallery), Euripides' *Hecuba*, Isocrates' *Contra Sophist*, Demosthenes' *Contra Timocrat*, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, a fragment of a Greek grammar by Theodosius of Alexandria, Arabic short stories and Rabbinic Hebrew treatises.



Cataloguing, mounting, identification and study of the collection have taken place sporadically since the first acquisition. Today about half of the pieces are catalogued individually, most of these have been mounted and some identified; however, few have been thoroughly studied. Only an estimated ten percent of the collection has been edited and published in any form. The Greek papyri obtained through the British Egyptian Exploration Fund were published by the British excavators in *Oxyrhynchus I-III*, *Fayûm Towns and Their Papyri* and *Hibeh Papyri I*. The Demotic rolls from Drah Abu Neggah have been dealt with in *Mizraim* and the *Museum Journal*. Many of the Hebrew documents purchased by Müller were published in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*. Some Pahlavi fragments are reproduced in *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*. But on the whole, numerous written pieces, mostly from Müller's purchases, remain unpublished and in many instances unstudied.

In 1966 Robert Kraft of the Religious Studies Department of Penn requested and received permission from David O'Connor, Associate Curator of the Egyptian Section, to examine the collection. Kraft and Antonia Tripolitis, an interested graduate student, found that numerous fragments were still stored in boxes and had not been mounted or flattened. They began by flattening and mounting the contents of one of the storage boxes. When it became apparent that fragments of what was originally the same papyrus might be found in several different boxes or might already be mounted under glass, the idea of mounting the materials immediately after flattening was abandoned. Instead, the flattened pieces were placed in lined folders for storage and classification until all the fragments of a document could be located. The fragments of each document at that future date will be mounted between glass or plexiglass.

As it became apparent to Kraft that the bulk of the collection remained inaccessible—indeed unknown—to scholars and that some of the known material needed curatorial attention, he organized a "papyri project" in 1971 under the sponsorship of the Egyptian Section and the Religious Studies Department, with support from both the Museum and the University "work study" program. An immediate goal of the project was to organize the collection by language groups, inventory each of these subcollections, and thus make the materials more readily available for research.

Soon this initial aim will be realized, at least in part. A catalogue of the Hebrew documents in the Museum's collection will be deposited in the Van Pelt and Museum libraries. This catalogue contains detailed



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descriptions and scholarly notes, and xero-graphic copies of each document. Such information will aid researchers in determining the state of preservation and the feasibility of further study of each document at the Museum. Similar catalogues of the relatively smaller collections of Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, Demotic and Pahlavi pieces should follow fairly quickly. The relatively large number of Greek, Coptic and Arabic documents will require a much longer time to catalogue although work has already begun. Yet much remains to be done simply in the more mechanical aspects of the project: classifying by languages and type of writing, rejoining broken pieces, mounting and labeling. The actual task of gathering philological and historical information from the materials remains for future investigators.

Acknowledgments

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