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Editing Dead Reptiles: The Tebtunis Papyri at the University of California, Berkeley

ANTHONY BLISS

I am a curator, but some of my best friends are editors. I mostly edit myself. My collecting responsibilities cover roughly four thousand years of written history, so sometimes my focus is a little blurry. My own training harks back to the McKerrow-Greg-Bowers school of textual editing, but none of these three great editors prepared me for the challenge of handling thousands of papyri.

The Collection

As the winter of 1899 approached, Oxford papyrologists Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt found themselves facing a crisis. They were in Egypt hunting for papyrus, but their funding had run out and they were faced with shutting down their operation. Word of this situation reached George Reisner, the head of the University of California's Egyptian expedition. He immediately wrote to Phoebe Hearst (mother of William Randolph Hearst), who had sponsored many U.C. archaeological projects. For \$2,500, U.C. could put Grenfell and Hunt on the payroll for six months and receive most of the artifacts recovered. Mrs. Hearst sent a check.

The site that Grenfell and Hunt had chosen for this winter season was modern Umm el-Breigat, in the southwest of the Fayum oasis (about 120 miles south of Cairo and 10 miles west of the Nile). The site appeared promising. It had not yet been disturbed by local farmers, and it was dry enough to have preserved papyrus and other antiquities.

From December 1899 through April 1900, Grenfell and Hunt quite successfully rummaged through what proved to be the remains of the village of Tebtunis. The first month they spent digging out parts of the village itself. They unearthed a number of houses, and parts of the main temple of the village. This later was shown to be the temple of the crocodile god Soknebtunis ("Sobek,

Lord of Tebtunis"). In the second and subsequent months they moved to the cemeteries in the desert immediately bordering the ancient village on the south. Here they found many mummies of both humans and crocodiles. It soon turned out that in a small percentage of these mummies, papyrus had been recycled to make mummy heads and pectorals and to stuff or wrap the crocodiles. At the same time, a great number of artifacts were recovered: everything from writing implements, jewelry, and decorative items to mummy portraits. A significant percentage of these artifacts came to Berkeley.

The papyri found during the excavations were indeed, as Reisner had promised Mrs. Hearst, an "abundant mass." There are about thirty thousand fragments now at Bancroft. We do not know exactly how many because some of the original tin boxes still remain to be unpacked. Between 1902 and 1938, some 1,094 texts (less than 5 percent of the total number of fragments) were either published in full, with translation and commentary, or briefly described. Grenfell and Hunt themselves played a major part in the publication of the papyri, which were retained in Oxford before being transferred to Berkeley just before World War II.

The Tebtunis Papyri provide intimate details about daily life in a village in Greco-Roman Egypt over a six-hundred-year time span (ca. 300 B.C.—A.D. 300). They offer vivid images of all phases of human life, from birth to death, at home and in public. In some cases, the documents are so detailed that personalities emerge: one example is Menches, the official scribe of Tebtunis from 119 to 112 B.C. One challenge in the years to come is to connect the picture that the written documents give us with the artifacts that were found at the same spot and are now in the Hearst Museum at Berkeley. Taken together, the papyri and the artifacts will provide a complete picture of life in Egypt under Greek and Roman rule. It is indeed a boon to research that all this material is available on one campus. [An aside: Bancroft staff celebrate Menches day on August 20 (with that great Egyptian invention, beer). August 20, 119 B.C., is the date of his reappointment as town clerk, and the document testifying to this is P. Tebt. 10.]

Anthony Bliss has been curator of rare books and literary manuscripts at the Bancroft Library since 1980. He previously worked in the rare book and manuscript libraries at the Huntington Library in San Marino and at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb.

Most of the Tebtunis papyri were written in Greek, the administrative language of Egypt from Alexander's conquest until the arrival of the Arabs (332 B.C.–A.D. 640). Greek was also used by the native Egyptians, especially when communicating with the government or when entering the ranks of the bureaucracy themselves. Egyptians also continued to use their own language and script, Demotic, a cursive form of hieroglyphic and extremely difficult to read. At Tebtunis, a dozen papyri written in Latin were found. Despite Roman rule, Latin never replaced Greek as the common written language in the eastern part of the Roman Empire.

So what do we do with this marvelous mass of documents? Ever since I joined the Bancroft staff twenty years ago, I have been worrying about how to preserve this material and make it accessible. In 1995, I got wind of a new initiative, the Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS) being formed by Columbia, Michigan, Duke, Yale, and Princeton. I managed to get the partners to include Berkeley in the project.

The Project

The funding we received from the National Endowment for the Humanities allowed us to proceed on three fronts simultaneously: conservation, cataloguing, and digitization. The documents are extremely fragile and need to be properly mounted in glass. Most had originally been mounted in plastic. These mountings had to be redone because they were damaging the papyri. Once they were remounted, we could proceed to on-line cataloguing and then to digitizing of the fragments.

When we had completed a few hundred papyri, we designed a website and database to make them available online. This is easier to demonstrate than it is to describe, so I invite interested readers to visit our website at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/APIS/>

A full cataloguing record for a papyrus fragment contains all the following elements:

PAPYRUS INFORMATION: Call Number; Type of Text/Title of Work; Location; Section/Side; Publication/Side; Material; Items; Size; Lines; Physical Properties; Paleographic Description; Publication Status; Textual Date; Modern Date; Origin; UC Inventory Number; Provenance; Language; Genre; Author; Type of Text/Title of Work; Content; Context; Persons; Geographica; Publications; Translation; Transcription; Link to the Duke Data Base of Documentary Papyri (full Greek transcription); Thumbnail View; Images (100%, 150%, 200%).

This is not “mere” cataloguing; a record of this complexity is a major editorial achievement.

The Future of the Project

APIS is now up and running with access to at least some of all of the six original partners' holdings of papyri. Links are in place to the Duke Data Base. The APIS membership base is expanding. Among institutions who have indicated that they will participate are the University of Chicago (both the Regenstein Library and the Oriental Institute), the University of Texas at Austin, Washington University (St. Louis), the University of Pennsylvania, and, in Europe, the universities of Oxford, Vienna, and Bologna.

At Berkeley, we have obtained campus funding to recruit a papyrologist. This person's task will be to carry forward the work that we have accomplished in the last four years and to continue the Library's collaboration with APIS. Ahead of us lie about thirty thousand unstudied fragments. These will have to be identified, and pieces must be reassembled and mounted, catalogued, digitized, and properly housed. This will take many years, probably several careers. Given the amount of material to be dealt with, it is clear that the editorial work cannot be very extensive at this point. Graduate students will help, but the skills required are so specialized that I contemplate calling on the worldwide papyrological community to assist with the task.

What if we posted images of the unstudied papyri on a special website and invited scholars to examine them and contribute their findings on-line directly to the project? My working title for this is “distributed editing.” There are concerns with this approach, of course: quality control would be the main one. Could a review board be established (and maintained)? Would scholars contribute freely to such an enterprise when it might or might not be considered a publication? Should contributors be screened by senior scholars before being allowed to participate? Would certain documents be reserved to the exclusive use of particular scholars? If so, for how long?

I would be interested to receive comments from ADE members about this distributed editing scheme. The advantages are tantalizing—making ancient documents available in a way that realizes the full capabilities of the Web. (For example, we will have the opportunity, eventually, to bring together electronically Tebtunis documents housed at Berkeley, Copenhagen, and Florence.) And we will make them available not only to specialists: we would be providing access to original documents to scholars and students who do not possess the papyrological expertise to deal with them directly. Now, isn't that the point of documentary editing?