

Putting papyri into archaeological context: new insights from Tebtunis, Egypt

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For more than a century, scholars have studied the ancient Egyptian texts written on rolls of papyrus that have been found in tombs, temples and cemeteries. But it is only recently that systematic attempts have been made, as at the site of Tebtunis in the Fayum oasis, to relate such texts to the archaeological contexts from which they came.

Papyrus was the standard writing material of ancient Egypt. It was manufactured from slices of the pith of the papyrus plant (*Cyperus papyrus*), a tall perennial sedge that grew profusely in marshy areas throughout the Nile valley. By modern times it had retreated south from Egypt in the face of over-harvesting and the replacement of swamp by agricultural land. In antiquity, however, papyrus was produced in ever-increasing quantities, chiefly for use by the Egyptian bureaucracy, and, by the first millennium BC, for export to Greece and the Levant.

Despite the vast amount of papyrus produced in dynastic times, most of it was subsequently destroyed by the damp conditions caused by irrigation and high levels of groundwater. It survived only when deliberately or accidentally deposited in dry environments, principally in the tombs of kings and other members of the elite, and in cemetery or temple areas, typically at the desert edge of the Nile valley. Therefore, our evidence from papyri of the dynastic period tends to come from very few contexts and to be very limited in its quantity and content. Among the best known papyri that have survived in tombs are many copies of the funerary Book of

the Dead,² now preserved in museums worldwide. Most of them were acquired by purchase in the nineteenth century, and where they were discovered is usually quite unknown. Some are excellently preserved, and some are illustrated by still vividly coloured vignettes.

The hunt for papyri in the 1890s

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, as part of a programme to modernize Egypt, the then ruler Mohammed Ali promoted the expansion of agriculture, and this led to a widespread search for fertile soil from the rubbish dumps of ancient ruined sites. Some two millennia earlier, in the third century BC, the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt had encouraged an expansion of agricultural land in the Fayum oasis (Fig. 1). Subsequent economic and political decline, and the shrinkage of the oasis caused by failure to maintain the complex system of canals and dykes, left a ring of towns and villages stranded in the desert, and in the nineteenth century these proved a valuable source of soil.

By the 1890s, scholars had realized that the Egyptian rubbish dumps were also rich in discarded papyri from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods (c. 300 BC to AD 300). Biblical, literary and historical scholarship had also reached a point where this evidence, even if torn and fragmentary, and unattractive to collectors and museums, was thought worthy of attention. As a result, local enterprise soon ensured that material lacking any provenance flooded onto the market, while foreign excavators attacked promising archaeological sites, generally with the sole aim of harvesting papyri.

In late 1899 the English classical scholars Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt arrived at the site of Tebtunis (Figs 1, 2) in the southern Fayum to conduct excavations in search of papyrus texts, one of several such missions working in Egypt at the time. Tebtunis had grown from a village into a substantial town during the Ptolemaic period. It was centred upon the temple of the crocodile god Sobk, in his manifestation peculiar to the town, Soknebtunis. Many buildings surrounded the temple and its processional way, which stretched over 200m to the north (Figs 3, 4). The modern inhabitants of the southern Fayum were probably already aware before 1899 that the site was a source of saleable manuscripts. Certainly, for the next 40 years, surreptitious and officially sanctioned excavations had much the same success in extracting tens of thousands of fragmentary papyri from Tebtunis (Fig. 5), and they are now dispersed among many museums and libraries in Cairo, across Europe and in North America.



Figure 1 The location of ancient Tebtunis and Memphis in relation to the Fayum depression and the northern valley and delta of the Nile.



Figure 2 Bernard Grenfell (left) and Arthur Hunt (right) outside their tent during the 1899–1900 excavations at Tebtunis.



Figure 3 Ancient Tebtunis, showing the area of the temple of Soknebtunis, its processional way or dromos, and the location of the sanctuary of Isis, within the Quartier de la Chapelle (based on fig. 1 in Galazzi & Hadji-Mina, 2000, see n. 6 below).

Late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century attitudes to texts
 Grenfell and Hunt, basing themselves on traditions of classical scholarship, established a concise method of publishing papyrus texts, each of which was regarded as unique. This approach is still widely admired and followed, but it leaves little scope for taking an interest in, and investigating many aspects of, the papyri: above all, their physical appearance and make-up, and their archaeological context. Skills were developed, on the basis of the content and handwriting of the papyri, for guessing where they had been found (their “find-spots”), their dates and archaeological contexts, rather than trying to interpret their content on the basis of the context –

which was, of course, often unknown. The wealth of textual evidence provided by the papyri is invaluable, but it should not reduce the importance of archaeology for the study of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. The picture that emerges from the texts alone tends to be a worm’s-eye view that reflects the experiences of individuals or single institutions, and it may not be valid for the society as a whole or for other parts of Egypt. Instead of relying solely on the textual evidence, papyrologists have recently begun to consider papyri as just one kind of artefact to be studied in relation to others. This has been achieved both by systematic excavation and by using texts in the interpretation of archaeological data.

New approaches to a problematic legacy

Relating texts from Egypt to their material context presents a new challenge to papyrologists and archaeologists, but it has already yielded significant rewards. Various new approaches have been developed in the past 20 years. For example, what may be called museum archaeology has tried to make sense of the confused routes by which papyri have found their way into modern collections. This can involve meticulous investigation of excavation records, excavators’ journals, and travellers’ and collectors’ diaries and correspondence. During their excavations at Tebtunis, Grenfell and Hunt appear to have inked tiny numbers, prefixed by a “T”, in a single sequence onto the back of each fragment as it came into their hands. These, long ignored, now allow their material in various collections to be identified, and Ann Hanson of the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) has been able to make great progress in assigning groups of fragments to parts of the site.³ Recent editions of various papyrus texts from Tebtunis have been able to re-unite (at least photographically) fragments scattered across the world.

Another new approach that is proving successful involves the comparison of information in the papyri with new archaeological data from surveys and excavations. This has been made possible by advances in the past 25 years in the study of the archaeology of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt.⁴ For example, surveys and excavations in the Fayum, in desert oases and in the Nile valley, as well as in its bordering cemeteries, have yielded not only new texts but also precise archaeological data about settlements, religious centres and trade routes, which can now be confronted with the textual evidence.

Although the vast majority of Egyptian and Greek papyri were not found in systematic excavations, it is possible to relate texts to their archaeological contexts by other methods. Thus, models based on textual evidence can be created for comparison with archaeological data. One of the aims of the Fayum survey project, directed by Dominic Rathbone of King’s College (University of London) has been to create a schematic map of the location of villages using references in the papyri, and then to compare it with data obtained from the survey. Survey can also provide plans of the outlying structures and agricultural works, such as irrigation canals in Fayum villages. Comparing such plans to agricultural and irrigation terminology in the papyri not only enables papyrologists to understand the texts better, but also enables archaeologists to interpret these material remains according to their role in social and economic transactions.



Figure 4 A pair of limestone lions guarding the northern end of the processional way leading to the temple of Soknebtunis at Tebtunis.



New investigations at Tebtunis

One of the most striking rewards of Ptolemaic and Roman Egyptian archaeology has been the prospect of finding texts in the course of systematic excavation. Since 1988 a Franco-Italian excavation at Tebtunis, directed by Claudio Gallazzi of the University of Milan, has made some outstanding discoveries. These have included, every field season, hundreds of texts in demotic Egyptian⁵ and in Greek found in a rubbish dump on the desert edge and in other areas of the town (Fig. 6).⁶ The dump consists of layers of fertile matter formed by compression of the rubbish, with sand dividing the layers and indicating periods when the dump was not in use. Texts can be grouped together according to their stratigraphy and may be studied in relation to other finds. Because many texts have exact dates, other artefacts, including undated texts, can be dated with greater confidence.

The recent research at Tebtunis has clarified details about earlier unscientific excavations and put papyri from such excavations into an archaeological context. Material cleared in previous excavations has left a covering layer over some areas of the site. Excavating a large enclosure immediately east of the temple, the

Franco-Italian mission has discovered several small rolls of papyrus. These have now been recognized as messages to the desert guards or police, and the police post and its watchtower have been identified. An Italian mission to Tebtunis in the 1930s also found a large quantity of demotic literary texts. It is often said that these were found inside the "cellar" of a house in the area of the temple. Recently, the area has been cleared anew. By comparing records and photographs from the excavations of the 1930s, it has been possible to identify the probable subterranean find-spot of the papyri, and to relate this to the overlying structures.



Figure 6 Claudio Gallazzi recovering a documentary roll of papyrus from the temple area at Tebtunis, November 2001.

Figure 5 Papyrus fragments from Tebtunis (now in the Egypt Exploration Society papyrus collections in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) of the "Myth of the Sun's eye" written in demotic Egyptian; the text includes animal fables (some of which are also found in Aesop's fables); this passage tells of how smaller creatures are eaten by larger ones, until the griffin is the ultimate avenger of all murder (second century AD; from plate 3 in Tait 1977, see n. 1 below).

Furthermore, by studying the contents of some demotic sale contracts discovered by Grenfell and Hunt at Tebtunis in 1899–1900, the Franco-Italian mission has identified and excavated a sanctuary of the goddess Isis. The demotic documents record, for example, the sale of a neighbouring house and precisely pinpoint its location beside the sanctuary of Isis and along the processional way leading from the main temple (Fig. 2). The correlation of these economic transactions with the buildings themselves is another example – although an exceptional one – of how archaeology and texts can complement each other. There is a real prospect that, if work is extended to other parts of the town, up-to-date archaeological investigation and new finds, combined with the study of old excavations and long-known texts, may provide us with a far clearer view of Tebtunis and of its activities during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods.

Notes

1. Andrew Monson undertook fieldwork at the site of Tebtunis in 2001 as part of his postgraduate research at the Institute of Archaeology, and John Tait, Edwards Professor of Egyptology at the Institute, began his work on texts from Tebtunis in 1969; see, for example, W. J. Tait, *Papyri from Tebtunis in Egyptian and in Greek* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1977).
2. The Book of the Dead is the modern name for a constantly evolving corpus of Egyptian mortuary texts, with the ancient title The Book of Coming Forth by Day. These texts, some of which derive from the royal Pyramid Texts of the earlier part of the third millennium BC, comprise hymns, spells and prayers to assist the deceased in overcoming the perils of the transition to the afterlife, and in enjoying its rewards. They were inscribed upon a papyrus roll in hieratic or hieroglyphic script (or both) for the benefit of an individual, and placed (from the mid-second millennium until the early Roman period) upon or near the body. For a general account of Egyptian mortuary texts, including the Book of the Dead, see W. Forman & S. Quirke, *Hieroglyphs and the afterlife in ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), and for a translation of the mainstream of the texts see T. G. Allen, *The book of the dead, or going forth by day* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
3. A. E. Hanson, "Text and context for the illustrated herbal from Tebtunis", in *Atti del XXII Congresso di Papirologia*, volume 1, I. Andorlini, G. Bastianini, M. Manfredi, G. Menci (eds), 585–604 (Firenze: Istituto Papirologico "G. Vitelli", 2001).
4. See R. S. Bagnall, "Archaeological work on Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, 1995–2000", *American Journal of Archaeology* **105**, 227–43, 2001.
5. "Demotic" is the name of both a language and a script. Demotic language was the Egyptian formal legal language of the eighth century BC, and it was the closest the Egyptians ever came to recording their up-to-date spoken language in written form, until the Coptic period (third century AD onwards). In the period relevant to the Tebtunis site, demotic was the script used for writing both literary and documentary texts in the priestly communities throughout Egypt, but would have been quite unintelligible to the mass of the population.
6. The site of Tebtunis has yielded one of the largest collections of papyri ever found in Egypt. For more information, see two popular articles on Tebtunis by Claudio Gallazzi in *Egyptian Archaeology*, numbers 5 (1994) and 14 (1999), and also C. Gallazzi & G. Hadji-Minaglou, *Tebtynis I: la reprise des fouilles et le quartier de la chapelle d'Isis-Thermouthis* (Cairo: IFAO (Institut français d'archéologie orientale), 2000).