

Materializing Ancient Documents

Roger S. Bagnall

Abstract: Two materially oriented revolutions have transformed the study of ancient documents in recent decades: first, a new interest in the ancient production of written artifacts; and second, the concern with the archaeological contexts, and more particularly the taphonomy – that is, the processes at work in the burial – of those same objects. The first, largely driven by the availability of digital images, has given life to the study of ancient writing as a cultural and social phenomenon and to the social life of written objects. In the process, connections between literary and documentary texts have come to the fore and distinctions between these categories have eroded. The second revolution began with an interest in what archaeological contexts of excavated papyri could tell us about the history of the texts, but it has evolved to see the texts themselves as artifacts engaged in an iterative dialogue with both the contexts and other objects found in them.

ROGER S. BAGNALL, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2000, is the Leon Levy Director and Professor of Ancient History at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University. He is also Director of the Amheida Project. His many publications include *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (2009), *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* (2011), and *A Sixth Century Tax Register from the Hermopolite Nome* (with James G. Keenan and Leslie MacCoull, 2011).

Two materially oriented revolutions have transformed the study of ancient documents in recent decades: first, a new interest in the ancient production of written artifacts; and second, the concern with the archaeological contexts, and more particularly the taphonomy – that is, the processes at work in the burial – of those same objects. The first of these has to do with both the raw materials of writing and the act of writing itself, and has been brought to life in the last twenty years by the increasing availability of high-resolution digital images. These revolutions have had major effects on the practice of epigraphy (the study of texts on stone and metal), papyrology (the study of texts on papyrus, potsherds, and wooden tablets), and are now beginning to affect numismatics (the study of coins and medals) as well, though the effects have reached these disciplines in unequal measure: Papyrology, from which I shall draw my examples, is far ahead of epigraphy on the digital imaging front. Epigraphy, on the other hand, has long been more closely tied to archaeology and is only slowly getting traction on digital

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images. Numismatics is now starting to catch up to the others.¹

Before turning to these materializing revolutions, let us acknowledge that they are not the only major changes that the documentary disciplines in classical studies have undergone in recent decades.² The other two are probably more familiar, but they are of enormous importance nonetheless. The first, and older, is the digitization of the papyrological textual corpus and the consequent ease of searching through its seventy thousand texts. The greatest result of this development, as Michael McCormick has stated about the study of the early medieval economy, is the luxury of being able to “fail cheaply, to risk our precious time on uncertain but potentially rewarding questions.”³ We can invest tiny amounts of time and minimal cost in many probes into the data; only a small fraction need to turn up useful patterns for the exercise to be intellectually profitable. Four decades ago, we would not have bothered to ask these questions; the transaction costs were too high to be wagered on the slim chance of a useful outcome.

The other major development is the internationalization of the discipline. Papyrology was always a relatively global field, in large part because it was so small. But today it is largely integrated across national lines, such that local “schools” of papyrology are no longer conceivable. Nationals of one country receive their graduate training in another, and their job in a third, almost as a matter of routine. When I was starting out, this was hardly thinkable. It is still more a European than an American phenomenon, but even that is changing.

There are now tens of thousands of images of papyri, ostraca, and tablets available on the Web, although probably more than half of the published artifacts are still not digitized. This work has been carried out in part by the multi-institutional APIS

(Advanced Papyrological Information System) consortium and in part by many independent projects around the world.⁴ These online collections have made it possible to replace volumes of selected paleographic examples, the limited but expensive guides of a few decades ago, with tools like the remarkable PapPal site created by Rodney Ast in Heidelberg, where visitors can look at images of hundreds of papyri, arranged by date or other criterion, in a gallery format.⁵ Through this medium the user has a broad, near-objective view of the range of handwritings found in any given period that its highly selective print predecessors could have never hoped to achieve. The initial impact, for me, was to destroy any remaining confidence in the precision of paleographic dating.

The first work to use large numbers of images to powerful effect was a dissertation based on analog images written in the years just before APIS began its work: Raffaella Cribiore’s *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (1996).⁶ By gathering and analyzing hundreds of photographs of so-called school texts, Cribiore was able to reconstruct the handwritings of both teachers and students in Greco-Roman Egypt, and the processes by which students advanced in learning. In effect, she showed what such a quantity of images could do, making the utility and urgency of digitization that much more obvious.

By contrast, when she and I later began to work on *Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt* (2006), most of the photographs were digital, and the online version of the book is illustrated with hundreds of them.⁷ We sought, on their basis, to move beyond the debates about literacy launched by William Harris’s book *Ancient Literacy* one-quarter century ago.⁸ Harris’s low general estimate of literacy rates had led to a host of studies seeking to identify the extent to which different groups in ancient societies were able to read and write. As we examined

how women used writing, both their own and that of those around them, it became clear that identifying women's hands was far from the straightforward matter we had imagined. We concluded that there were no visible differences between men's and women's handwriting. This kind of study depends on the large-scale provision of images, and it gives a type of information about every aspect of not only handwriting, but organization, layout, and key elements – in short, *diplomatics* – that could not have been had until now; or at least not without superhuman energy and endurance, not to speak of a lot of money. Once again, the investment required for scholarly inquiry has been reduced to more manageable levels.

Such possibilities and successes also introduce a need for changes in the style of editing documents. Jean-Luc Fournet has called attention to the presence in late antique documents of a series of characteristics, including handwriting, layout, and the use of diacritical marks, drawn from the usage of literary papyri and from teaching practices in schools. These are what he calls part of a literarization of documentary practice, visible mostly in the documents produced by those at the top of the socioeconomic and cultural ladder, to be sure, but which also trickled down to much humbler documents. We can also see a comparable migration of habits from the less literary and more business/administration-oriented parts of the educational system into less exalted levels of document-writing, notably in private letters of people of more modest station, even monks and estate managers. These observations led Fournet to point out that the editing and digital presentation of papyrus texts do not support such inquiries into the physicality of the papyri. Not only do editors not always record features like layout in their editions, but these characteristics are not well provid-

ed for in the toolkit we use for digitizing documentary texts. Roger S.
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But the new focus on materiality goes well beyond ink and how it is laid on the page. It goes also to the recognition of the importance of materials other than papyrus itself, most importantly ostraca, the potsherds used for a wide variety of ephemeral texts not only in Egypt but in much of the rest of the ancient world.⁹ In winter 2015, Clementina Caputo, one of the ceramicists working at our excavations at Amheida – a buried Egyptian city in the Dakhla Oasis – completed a study of the sherds used for the nearly nine hundred ostraca discovered at our site so far, with remarkable and unexpected results. Contrary to the prevailing belief that a person needing a sherd to write on simply picked one up at random, Caputo has shown that the ceramic fabric was chosen because it could easily be broken into suitable pieces by a blow or two from a flint or a hammer; other fabrics shatter. Second, what ceramicists call diagnostic sherds, like necks and bases, are almost never used for writing. Rather, someone who needed ostraca picked the large pieces of vessel walls, which are relatively flat, and then broke and shaped them as needed. Third, the shapes are not random either; people hacked vessel walls up into pieces of standardized shapes for particular purposes, like the labels stuck into mud jar stoppers on top of wine jars (see Figure 1).

Made possible largely by digital images and databases, this work – and much more I have not mentioned – has tended to reconstruct the ecosystem of writing as a whole: who wrote; how they were educated in different types of writing competence; what materials they used when, where, and for what purposes; how they displayed their education, importance, and concern for their correspondents by the way they laid out, wrote, and marked up what they wrote. In this way, the material characteristics of writing materials and



Source: Photo Excavations at Amheida. Trimithis (Amheida), third-to-fourth century AD.

writing itself have come to support inquiry into the entire social dimension of the technology of writing in ancient society.

This seems to me the more easily digested of our two revolutions, even though it has obviously brought significant change to scholarly investigation. More complicated is the developing relationship between papyrology and archaeology: in particular, the growing interest in the archaeological contexts of documents. From a documentary point of view, this has started out mainly from asking: what can we learn about our documents from their context? But we may also ask what we can learn about our archaeological contexts from the texts found in them, just as we might from any other artifact. This is, in fact, the direction things are going.

We may trace the roots to Peter van Minnen's 1994 article "House-to-House Enquiries: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Roman Karanis."¹⁰ Van Minnen's recognition that papyri were artifacts, that they could be, at least where the records were adequate, traced to the depositional units in which they were found, and that these units belonged to actual houses in which other artifacts had been found, represented a genuine breakthrough in the field. He was at pains to argue that the papyri he identified as belonging to the tax collector Sokrates of Karanis were found in a primary context: namely, Sokrates's house.

The article received little criticism at the time, in part perhaps because readers not in proximity to the Kelsey Museum at the University of Michigan did not have access to the full data on which the case rested. In

more recent years, as a new generation of scholars has pushed deeper into the Karanis archives and assessed the excavation and recording practices of the 1920s and 1930s – which were state of the art at that time – doubts have grown about the reliability of the data on which van Minnen based his arguments. These doubts have sometimes been expressed in the context of a broader skepticism about our ability to relate texts and their places of discovery, as in Lisa Nevett’s demonstration of the uncertainty that can beset such inquiries even with more recent and better-documented excavations, like at ancient Kellis, modern-day Ismant el-Kharab, Egypt.¹¹

In the same period, an interest in secondary contexts began to grow, driven in large part by the excavations conducted by an international team first at Mons Claudianus, an important quarry site in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, and then in the series of explorations carried out under the direction of Hélène Cuvigny, with Jean-Pierre Brun leading the archaeological work, at the forts along the desert roads, as well as by a team working at the port of Berenike on the Red Sea. In these sites, almost all of the material found – well more than ten thousand ostraca in all – came from dumps; hardly a sherd was found where it was originally received and read. House-to-house inquiries, or room-by-room, were out. The only important question was whether the dumps were themselves primary or secondary dumps: a nearby rubbish bin or a dump where rubbish was carted away from place of first tossing. The close collaboration of the papyrologists with the archaeologists in the fort excavations produced an acute investigation into the formation of dumps, and the consequent pursuit of stratigraphy within the dumps, in which dating information in the ostraca was used in a kind of virtuous feedback loop to help refine the stratigraphy and its chronology.

To return to the more pressing questions of papyri in the proximate context of discovery: Traianos Gagos, Jennifer Gates, and Drew Wilburn have provided a good summary of the history of thinking, or lack of thinking, about this problem.¹² They have shown how the ambitious goals with which the Karanis excavations began were lost in the postwar period, and that most papyri in collections came onto the market without any kind of context; we will never be able to reconstruct most of what has been lost. Even if papyri come from excavations, as is the case of much of what was found at the ancient Egyptian sites Tebtunis and Oxyrhynchos, the archaeological record is inadequate to support a detailed reconstruction. Yet work on bringing together the different finds and approaches can still help recreate the larger context, even if the microcontexts are mostly lost.

If the 1990s were the era of optimism about what was possible with Karanis, then the past decade has been an era of caution. Robert Stephan and Arthur Verhoogt’s article “Text and Context in the Archive of Tiberianus” is exemplary of this.¹³ In it, they show, through meticulous analysis of the records, that with respect to a papyrus dossier, the excavators did not actually distinguish finds in two successive levels in their reporting, but attributed them all to the earlier level, even in the case of a physical space said not to have been in use in that period. But Stephan and Verhoogt do not despair; rather, they argue cogently that one may reattribute the particular group found in a particular space to the later level. But there is a catch: these papyri apparently were cleared away and put in the space where they were found not as part of their primary use, but when the house was being renovated. If not exactly a dump, the space can be seen as a place of secondary storage or disposal. The conclusions drawn about the actual use of the house by the persons involved in the documents are restrained

but not defeatist: patient reconstruction – reengineering the Karanis database, one might call it – is not a completely hopeless errand.

But it is far from simple. The pessimist's case was made convincingly in Tom Landvatter's paper presented at the 2013 papyrology congress in Warsaw on the so-called House of the Nilometer at Karanis.¹⁴ The excavators again seem to have attributed papyri to the highest level that had undergone alteration; again the papyri in the house were not found in their lifetime location of use, but in a place that represented storage or discarding. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that some of the supposed archive was found in the street outside, with even individual papyri divided between house and street contexts. Their place of finding is thus not necessarily even their point of discarding, let alone their place of lifetime use.

With Karanis and the Nilometer archives, this argument seems impossible to refute; the gulf in dating is too wide, even if the ceramic chronology might be open to challenge. But I would not go beyond this to adopt a nihilistic approach to attributing documents to occupation levels, or to abandon all hope that we may speak of a house as belonging to an individual or family.

I say that on the basis of comparing two houses excavated by our team at Amheida. One of these belonged to a rich man; it was a large house, with spacious rooms, several of them painted in high Roman style. The central room, with a dome, had mythological scenes in bands above a dado imitating polychrome stonework. The other house is more middling, being half the size and, as far as we can see, rather plain. The large house was well preserved, up to and above the height of doorways; the small house, in a location more vulnerable to the wind, was highly eroded and had less secure contexts. In the rich house, we found numerous ostraca with the same individ-

ual's name, in locations breathing abandonment and discarding, in good contexts, sometimes with associated datable coins, above floors and below collapse. In the small house, the far fewer ostraca offered no such hooks and were rarely found even in good contexts of abandonment. I do not have any doubts that the rich house is that of a man named Serenos, who, we deduced from one of the letters found in the house, was a member of the city council. I would not hazard identifying the owner of the small house except in the most generic fashion. And it does matter. To know that a city councilor had Homeric scenes on his wall, and a graffito with a line from a now-lost play of Euripides, is not trivial knowledge.

Let us now turn back to the question of dumping. This does not, as my colleagues Rodney Ast and Paola Davoli have shown, reflect a single, straightforward phenomenon, but rather several possible stages in the use and reuse of materials.¹⁵ Not all of these apply to any one object – here we are talking mainly about ostraca – but they make up a coherent sequence.

Consider an ostrakon that is inserted into a mud jar stopper, which is slapped on top of a jar of wine, with a vine leaf protecting the wine from the mud (see Figure 2). The jar travels from farm to city, its contents are consumed, and the mud stopper, still with ostrakon in place, is thrown away, probably at no great distance. The unfired stopper normally disintegrates relatively quickly, leaving the ostrakon separated from its original frame: instant decontextualization.

At some point, soon or late, the debris is carted away and dumped elsewhere; this is now a secondary dumping action. At Amheida, unlike the desert forts, this is the abandoned parts of a Roman bath, which were used in the late third and early fourth century as a place to dump all sorts of material, from construction debris and

Figure 2
Vine Leaf on Underside of Mud Jar Stopper

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Source : Photo Excavations at Amheida. Trimithis (Amheida), third-to-fourth century AD.

ashes to jar stoppers with their ostraca (or the two now separated). Some decades go by, and the debris-filled area of the former baths is sold off as building lots. The purchasers take some of the accumulated garbage and spread it around the whole area to level it for building. The dumped material is now in a third-stage use. A street is laid out over it, and next to it a mansion is built. A little to the north of the house a school is added on.

In the course of construction, thousands of sherds are needed for chinking; they are placed in walls and in vaults between bricks, partly as spacers, partly to help turn rectangular bricks into curving vaults. Some of these sherds are ostraca; all come from previously dumped material, whether in the baths (as seems most likely) or perhaps partly from elsewhere. In this use, which is

also tertiary in character, the sherds begin a new life. Someday, the vaults collapse, and perhaps the walls fall over as well, as the weight of external sand pushes against them. The brickwork breaks apart, the sherds are released from captivity, and they enter a layer of collapse debris, often difficult to tell apart from occupation debris that was on the last floor of the house or walking surface of the street.

Use and reuse thus take many forms. When we excavate these contexts, we find ostraca and transcribe and edit them. Since most of them have no independent means of dating – and even the regnal years on some could belong to multiple reigns, with no imperial names being given – the stratigraphy is of the utmost importance. At the same time, as ostraca are dated, they help, in company with coins, to anchor their

strata. This is an iterative process: the ostraca as texts and the ostraca as artifacts are mutually reinforcing. Understanding the ostraca in a stratigraphic unit can help the archaeologist reconstruct the formation of that unit, not simply its place in time.

This history was intelligible to us only because the contents of the ostraca possessed an internal coherence that allowed the archaeologist to refine the initial description of the process of formation of the physical record. From the papyrologist's point of view, understanding this process of formation makes it possible to connect ostraca found in similar contexts with the same kind of formative processes, even if they have not a trace of the verbal links, like shared names or official titles, that usually allow papyri and ostraca to be connected into an archival mass. The stratigraphic information in effect functions as a kind of meta-verbal text for the ostrakon. The two revolutions thus connect at an interesting juncture: where they complicate the notions of texts and archaeology as separate domains with different types of information that can scarcely be brought together. The focus on the artifactual character of writing emphasizes what we might call the nontextual side of textual witnesses; and the careful exploration of stratigraphy can lead to archaeological contexts providing a kind of meta-textual characterization that ties directly into the textual analysis of the documents.

Much of what I have said is, in a sense, inward-looking. It argues for the advantages that documentary studies and archaeology can both draw from the artifactual turn in papyrology, despite the many hazards and pitfalls along the way. But there is also a case to be made that this approach is more likely than traditional philology to help us connect with other fields. One example is the study of the Cairo Geniza – a mass of three hundred thousand Jewish manu-

script fragments found in Old Cairo – with which papyrology shares a massive range of shared concerns, including diplomatic and paleographic challenges and the twin problems of the taphonomy and the non-stratigraphic excavation of these written artifacts. I am certain that similar common ground exists with all sorts of other ancient and medieval documentary contexts, and I am equally certain that there will be many rewards in exploring these commonalities.

There are, of course, plenty of limits and cautions. For example, even if we can be confident that we have identified the house of Serenos at Trimithis, the ostraca from that house are not the kinds of discursive documents that tell us much about the family that lived with him in it, except to mention the mistress of the household. Otherwise, the ostraca speak more to the household and its economy than to the family, behaving – oddly – much more like the archaeological side of the ledger than like the textual. It will undoubtedly be exceptional, especially in an era of expanding settlements and rising water tables, to have it all. But that does not mean we should lose sight of the desirability of that goal.

We should recognize that these directions are not neutral or accidental. They represent the results of a secular shift in the makeup of the field of papyrology and in the kind of training that papyrologists have received, away from the mostly literary and philological approaches and education prevalent a generation or two ago and toward history in a very broad sense, including particularly religion and archaeology. One might say that we have moved from being interested only in the text of a new fragment of Sappho to wanting to know who was copying and reading Sappho.¹⁶ I am overschematizing and exaggerating, of course; a more traditional kind of literary papyrology still goes on as before, sometimes seemingly untroubled by statements like “provenance unknown.”

And papyrologists still have to know the languages well to do what they do. But interest has undeniably shifted in the direction of the broader cultural horizons of the ancient world in their embodied form, and

away from disembodied canonical texts. This neither is, nor should be, the end of philology. But if it were the end of an isolated philology, that would be no bad thing.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See, for example, Online Coins of the Roman Empire (OCRE), <http://numismatics.org/ocre/>.
- ² Space constraints prevent me from discussing the comparable developments in other parts of the ancient world, but whether dealing with cuneiform tablets or inscriptions from medieval Vietnam, similar changes are visible throughout the study of antiquity.
- ³ Jennifer R. Davis and Michael McCormick, eds., *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 83.
- ⁴ See the Papyrological Navigator and the Papyrological Editor – produced by several partnering institutions, including APIS, the Duke Collaboratory for Classics Computing, and Columbia University Libraries – at <http://papyri.info>.
- ⁵ See <http://pappal.info>.
- ⁶ Raffaella Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).
- ⁷ Roger Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC – AD 800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).
- ⁸ William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- ⁹ I discuss this in chapter six of Roger S. Bagnall, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
- ¹⁰ Peter van Minnen, "House-to-House Enquiries: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Roman Karanis," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 100 (1994): 227–251.
- ¹¹ In Beryl Rawson, ed., *A Companion to Families in the Greek and Roman World* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
- ¹² Traianos Gagos, Jennifer Gates, and Drew Wilburn, "Material Culture and Texts of Graeco-Roman Egypt: Creating Context, Debating Meaning," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 42 (1–4) (2005): 171–188.
- ¹³ Robert P. Stephan and Arthur Verhoogt, "Text and Context in the Archive of Tiberianus (Karanis, Egypt; 2nd Century AD)," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 42 (1–4) (2005): 189–202.
- ¹⁴ See Thomas Landvatter, "Archaeological and Papyrological Inquiry at Karanis: Problems and Potentialities," paper presented at the 27th International Congress of Papyrologists, held in Warsaw, Poland, July 29 – August 3, 2013.
- ¹⁵ My reflections here grow out of conversations with Amheida Project field director Paola Davoli, and with Rodney Ast, my papyrological colleague in the excavation; their thinking may be found in Rodney Ast and Paola Davoli, "Ostraka and Stratigraphy at Amheida (Dakhla Oasis, Egypt): A Methodological Issue," paper presented at the 27th International Congress of Papyrologists, held in Warsaw, Poland, July 29 – August 3, 2013.
- ¹⁶ For the former, see Simon Burris, Jeffrey Fish, and Dirk Obbink, "New Fragments of Book 1 of Sappho," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 189 (2014).