

Papyrus

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

PAPYRUS pə-pī'rəs [Lat *cyperus papyrus*—‘the Egyptian papyrus’; Heb *gōme*] (Job 8:11); AV RUSH; [Gk *býblos*, *bímblos*—‘papyrus plant or roll made of papyrus’], whence “book” (Mk. 12:26).

A plant and the writing material that was made from it.

The papyrus was a marsh or water plant, abundant in Egypt in ancient times, that served many purposes in antiquity. The papyrus tuft was the emblem of the northern kingdom in Egypt and, like the lotus, was a favorite design on the capitals of columns. Ropes, sandals, and mats were made from its fibers (cf. Homer *Od* xxi.391; Herodotus ii.37, 69), and bundles of the long stalks were bound together into light boats (Isa. 18:2; cf. Job 9:26)

I. Papyrus Paper

From the papyrus plant early Egyptians made the tough and inexpensive paper that became the common writing material of the ancient world. The white cellular pitch of the long, triangular papyrus stalk was stripped of its bark or rind and sliced into thin strips. Two layers of these strips were laid at right angles to each other on a hard surface, forced together by pounding, dried, and smoothed with pumice. The sheets thus formed were pasted together to form a roll of any length desired. Pliny the Elder described the process and the product (*Nat.hist.* xiii. 11–13).

II. Egyptian Papyri

Extant Egyptian papyrus rolls date from the 27th cent B.C. and no doubt papyrus had been manufactured for centuries before. The Egyptian rolls were sometimes very long and were often beautifully decorated with colored vignettes (*The Book of the Dead*). Egyptian documents of great historical value have been preserved on these fragile rolls. The Ebers Papyrus of the 16th cent B.C. sums up Egyptians medical lore from the time of Amenhotep I. The Harris Papyrus, 41 m (133 ft) long in 117

columns, dates from the mid-12th cent B.C. and records the benefactions and achievements of Ramses III. Papyri of the 19th, 20th, and 21st Dynasties are relatively numerous, and their contribution is important for Egyptian history, life, and religion. By 1000 B.C. papyrus was used for writing far beyond the limits of Egypt. The Wen-Amon Papyrus (11th cent B.C.) relates that five hundred rolls of papyrus were among the goods sent from the Delta to the prince of Byblos, but except in rare instances papyri have escaped destruction only in Upper Egypt, where the dry climate favored their preservation.

III. Greek Papyri

With Alexander’s conquest of Egypt (332 B.C.) and the subsequent Ptolemaic dynasty, Greeks came more than ever before into Egypt, and from Greek centers like Alexandria and Arsinoë in the Faiyûm the Greek language began to spread. Greek papyri are abundant from the Ptolemaic (323–30 B.C.), Roman (30 B.C.-A.D. 292/3), and Byzantine (A.D. 292/3–642) periods, i.e., from the death of Alexander to the Arab conquest. The three hundred Aphrodito Greek and Coptic papyri, published by Bell and Crum, date from A.D. 698–722 and show how Greek persisted in the Arab period.

A. Discovery The first important discovery of Greek papyri in modern times was made in 1752 among the ruins of Herculaneum, near Naples. There in a house that had been destroyed and buried by volcanic ash from Vesuvius (A.D. 79) was found a whole library of papyrus rolls, charred by the heat. With the utmost pains many of these carbonized rolls were unrolled and deciphered, and the first part of them was published in 1793. They consist almost wholly of works of Epicurean philosophy.

The first Greek papyri discovered in Egypt were forty or fifty papyrus rolls that local residents claimed to have unearthed in a box of sycamore wood in Giza. One roll, purchased by a dealer, was presented to Cardinal Stefano Borgia in 1778; the others were destroyed as worthless. N. I. Schow published the Borgia Papyrus ten

years later; his edition included the first documentary text on papyrus, a list of certain peasants forced to work on the Nile embankment at Tebtunis in A.D. 192.

In 1820 natives found papyri, mainly from the 2nd cent B.C., in an earthen pot at the site of the Serapeum in Memphis. The papyri fell into various hands and are now in the museums of London, Paris, Leiden, and Rome. With them papyri began to flow steadily into the British and Continental museums. The present period of papyrus recovery dates from 1877, when an immense mass of Greek and other papyri, most documentary rather than literary, was found at the mound (*kom*) el-Faris in the Faiyûm, on the site of the ancient Arsinoë. The bulk of this collection passed into the hands of Archduke Rainer at Vienna; the museums of Paris, London, Oxford, and Berlin secured minor portions. These texts belong mainly to the Byzantine period.

Most of these discoveries were made by natives digging for fertile earth (*sebakh*) at ancient sites and occasionally finding antiquities to sell to tourists or dealers. By this time, however, the Egypt Exploration Fund (later Society) had begun its operations in Egypt, and Flinders Petrie was at work there. Digging among Ptolemaic tombs at Gurob in 1889–1890, Petrie found many mummies, with mummy-casings made of “cartonnage,” papyri pasted together. Scholars hailed the Petrie papyri as the most important found to that time, for they were mainly from the 3rd cent B.C. and included a copy of Plato’s *Phaedo*. The British Museum secured papyri of the lost work of Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, the lost *Mimes* of Herodas, a fragment of an oration of Hyperides, and extensive literary papyri of works already extant. The Louvre acquired the larger part of the *Oration Against Athenogenes*, the masterpiece of Hyperides. In 1894 B. P. Grenfell of Oxford began working with Petrie in the Egyptian excavations and secured papyri, with D. G. Hogarth, for England.

With A. S. Hunt of Oxford, Grenfell excavated in 1896–1897 at Behnesa, the Roman

Oxyrhynchus, and unearthed the greatest mass of Greek papyri of the Roman period thus far found. Their discovery in 1900 of a great mass of Ptolemaic papyri at Tebtunis in the Faiyûm was comparable in importance to their Oxyrhynchus find. One of the most productive sources of papyri at Tebtunis was the crocodile cemetery, where many mummies of the sacred crocodiles were wrapped in papyrus cartonnage. Grenfell and Hunt also excavated important Ptolemaic texts imbedded in mummy cartonnage in 1902 at Hibeh, and P. Jouguet made similar finds in 1901 at Ghoran and in 1902 at Medinet en-Nahas. Excavations by Grenfell and Hunt at Oxyrhynchus in 1903–1907 produced results almost as astonishing and quite as valuable as those of the first excavations there. The work of L. Borchardt and a German team at Abusir in 1902 has exceptional interest, for it uncovered the then-earliest Greek papyrus text, a fourth-century papyrus roll of the verses of Timotheus of Miletus. The Timotheus roll held this precedence until 1962, when a fourth-century papyrus roll containing an allegorical commentary on the Orphic hymns was discovered in the funeral pyre of a tomb at Derveni near Thessalonica in Greece. The acquisition of papyri by purchase and excavation continues to the present, chiefly in Egypt but also occasionally elsewhere, e.g., at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates and at numerous sites in the Judean desert.

B. Literary More than 1500 Greek literary papyri, great and small, of works other than biblical and theological have been published. That about one-half are Homeric attests the great popularity of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in Greco-Roman times. These are now so abundant and extensive that they make an important contribution to Homeric textual studies. Rather less than one-third preserve works of other ancient writers that were already known through medieval or modern copies. Among these are works of Plato, Demosthenes, Isocrates, Thucydides, Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschines, and Herodotus. Another

extensive group preserves works or fragments of works that were usually regarded as lost or were unknown. They include portions of Alcman, Sappho, and the lost *Antiope* and *Hypsipyle* of Euripides, fragments of the comedies of Menander and the Iambi of Callimachus, *Mimes* of Herodas, poems of Bacchylides, Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*, the *Persae* of Timotheus, and six orations, one of them complete, of Hyperides.

C. Documentary The overwhelming majority of published Greek papyri — more than 15,000 — have been documentary. This category embraces every kind of public and private text, including letters, accounts, wills, receipts, contracts, leases, deeds, complaints, petitions, notices, and invitations. The value of these contemporary and original documents for the illumination of ancient life can hardly be overestimated. The life of Upper Egypt in Ptolemaic and Roman times is now probably better known than that of any other period of history down to recent times. Among the most important of the Ptolemaic documentary papyri are the revenue laws of Ptolemy Philadelphus (259 B.C.) and the forty-seven decrees of Ptolemy Euergetes II (118 B.C., 140–139 B.C.). In 1910 a papyrus now in Hamburg supplied the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, by which Roman citizenship was conferred upon the *peregrini* (non-Italians) of the empire. The private documents are even more important illustrations of the life of common people in antiquity.

D. Septuagint More than 150 papyri of the LXX have been discovered. Perhaps the most important is the Berlin Genesis (3rd or 4th cent A.D.) in a cursive hand, purchased at Akhmîm in 1906. Other papyri preserving parts of Genesis among the Amherst, British Museum, and Oxyrhynchus papyri date from the 3rd or 4th century. British Museum 230 (3rd cent) preserves Ps. 12:7–15:4. A Berlin papyrus contains Ps. 40:26–41:4. An Amherst papyrus (7th cent) shows parts of Pss. 108, 118, 135, 138–140. Of the Prophets the chief papyrus is the Heidelberg Codex (7th cent), which

contains Zec. 4:6 to Mal. 4:5. The John Rylands Library of Manchester has papyrus fragments of Dt. 23–28 from mummy cartonnage dating from the 2nd cent B.C.; with a Fuad papyrus of Dt. 31:36–32:7 they comprise the earliest witnesses to the LXX. The important Chester Beatty collection in Dublin contains portions of several LXX codices, including two of Genesis (3rd cent and 4th cent), Numbers and Deuteronomy (2nd cent), Isaiah (3rd cent), and Ezekiel and Esther (3rd cent). Papyrus fragments of the LXX discovered in caves near Khirbet Qumrân date from the 1st cent B.C. (*see DEAD SEA SCROLLS*). The great antiquity of some of these documents gives special interest to their readings.

E. New Testament Eighty-three papyri containing parts of the Greek NT have been discovered in Egypt. They vary in age from the 2nd to the 7th cents and in extent from scraps of a few verses to almost complete codices of a Gospel, Acts, or the Pauline letters. The fragment of Jn. 18:31–34, 37f in the John Rylands Library, dated ca 125, is the oldest witness to the NT text. Another remarkable MS is Bodmer Papyrus XIV and XV, a third-century codex containing most of Luke and John. It preserves an early and important text-type found in the famed Codex Vaticanus. The Bodmer collection of Geneva includes another important papyrus codex of John from ca 200. The last leaves of this codex belong to the Chester Beatty collection, which also has a valuable codex of the Gospels and Acts from the 3rd cent and a codex from ca 200 originally containing Romans, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians, in that order.

Eighty of the known NT papyri are parts of codices. The three remaining papyri are parts of rolls that originally carried classical and OT texts and were inscribed later on their backs (verso) with NT passages.

F. Theological Of the numerous Greek theological papyri that have come to light,

thirty-one fragments of NT apocryphal writings have been published. The Oxyrhynchus sayings of Jesus, dating from 2nd and 3rd cents, are probably the best known (*see* LOGIA). Other Oxyrhynchus papyri preserve parts of the Apocalypse of Baruch (chs 12–14; 4th or 5th cent); the Acts of John (4th cent); and Irenaeus *Adv Haer* iii.9 (3rd cent). The Shepherd of Hermas is now attested by numerous papyrus fragments from the 2nd to 6th centuries. Among the valuable theological papyri discovered in 1941 at Tura were the lost commentaries on the Psalms, Job, and Zechariah by Didymus the Blind (6th or 7th cent) and several works of Origen, including commentaries on Exodus and Romans, a homily on 1 Kings, *Contra Celsum*, and the lost *Dialogue with Heracleides*, all from the 6th and 7th centuries. Several Greek papyri from the 3rd to 5th cents contain the *Homily on the Passion* by Melito of Sardis. The papyri continue to furnish important texts of patristic literature as well as early Christian homilies, hymns, prayers, letters, and amulets.

IV. Aramaic and Hebrew Papyri

From 1893 to 1908 numerous Aramaic papyri, dating from the 5th cent B.C., were found on Elephantine (Egyp *Yeb*), an island near Aswân (Egyp *Sewen*; cf. SYENE [Heb *šewēnēh*] of Ezk. 29:10, denoting the southern border of Egypt). The literary papyri contain portions of the Book of Ahiqar and an Aramaic version of Darius's Behistun inscription. The documentary texts reflect the affairs of a colony of heterodox Jews doing business and serving as a military outpost under Persian control and worshiping their god Yahu in a temple, in which they made meal, incense, and burnt offerings. When Egyptian priests destroyed the temple of Yahu in 410 B.C., the Jews appealed for redress to the Persian governor, under whose patronage the temple was rebuilt by 399 B.C.

In 1942 an Aramaic papyrus letter that has been dated ca 603/602 B.C. was discovered at Saqqârah (Memphis). In it the Palestinian king Adon (of Ashkelon?) sought military aid from

Pharaoh Neco II against the invading armies of the Babylonian Nebuchadrezzar. Other important Aramaic papyri were discovered in 1962 and 1963 in two caves of the Wādī Dâliyah N of Old Jericho. These texts, dating from 375 to 335 B.C., contain about forty fragments of contracts, loan agreements, and other business documents written in Samaria.

Beginning in 1947 and continuing for more than a decade, Aramaic and Hebrew manuscripts were found near Qumrân and other ancient sites in the wilderness of Judea W of the Dead Sea (*see* DEAD SEA SCROLLS).

Although most of these materials are leather, some are papyrus. The Aramaic papyri consist chiefly of documentary texts dating from the First and Second Jewish Revolts. The Hebrew papyri derive largely from the same periods and contain several remarkable letters of Simon bar Cochba, the legendary leader of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome. These finds near the Dead Sea include the oldest papyrus found outside Egypt, a Hebrew letter dated ca 750 B.C. found in a cave of *Wādī Murabba-ât* (P. Mur. 17). This letter, reused in antiquity to record a list of contributors, belongs to the period of King Uzziah's economic activity in the Judean desert and the Negeb (2 Ch. 26:2, 7, 10).

V. Other Papyri

A. Coptic Coptic papyri have made special contributions to early Christian literature. C. Schmidt published a considerable Coptic fragment of the Acts of Paul and a Coptic (Akhmîmic) codex of 1 Clement, almost complete. Texts of Psalms, Proverbs, and homilies were discovered at the White Convent near Panopolis (Akhmîm); indeed, biblical papyri in Coptic are fairly numerous and are being rapidly enriched by such discoveries as the Bodmer Papyri III (John and Genesis), XVI (Exodus), XVIII (Deuteronomy), and XIX (Matthew and Romans). The library of Coptic papyrus codices found near Nag Hammadi in 1945 is a remarkable collection of Jewish and Christian gnostic writings (*see* NAG HAMMADI).

B. Arabic Arabic papyri, from the period after the Arab conquest, A.D. 640, first began to appear from Egypt in 1825 when three pieces were brought to Paris and published by S. de Sacy. Not until the great papyrus finds of 1877–1878, however, did any considerable number of Arabic papyri find their way into Europe. The chief collections are at Vienna (Rainer Collection), Berlin, and Cairo. Large archives of Arabic papyri were discovered at the turn of the century in Aswân (Syene). A few fragments of documentary and magical Arabic papyri from the 10th cent were found among the manuscripts in *Wâdî Murabba-ât*.

C. Latin Latin papyri are comparatively rare. Of the one hundred literary papyri that have been published, Vergil's *Aeneid* is most frequent, with the works of Cicero next best attested. Latin papyri, chiefly after Diocletian, were discovered in Egypt, although some texts came to light at Herculaneum, Dura-Europos in Mesopotamia, and Palestine. The literary texts are accompanied by Latin-Greek glossaries, lexica, and grammars reflecting the schools of Roman Egypt. Nonliterary Latin papyri have become especially valuable in elucidating Roman military and legal traditions.

VI. Contribution to Biblical Study

The papyri have made a valuable contribution to textual criticism of both the OT and the NT. For early Christian literature their testimony has been of unusual interest (the Oxyrhynchus Logia and Gospel fragments). Both literary and documentary papyri have illuminated the religious and cultural environment of the Bible: parallel structures and expressions in the papyri have made biblical literary forms clearer.

A series of uncial MSS from the six centuries preceding the Codex Vaticanus bridges the gap between what were the earliest uncials and the hand of the inscriptions and allows more accurate dating of uncial MSS. Minuscule or cursive hands, too, so common in the NT MSS of the 10th and later cents, appeared in a new light when such writing was seen not as a late

invention arising out of the uncial but as the ordinary hand, as distinguished from the literary or book hand, that had existed side by side with the uncial from at least the 4th cent B.C. *See* WRITING.

The philological contribution of the documentary papyri has been considerable. Like the NT writings, they reflect the common as distinguished from the literary language of the times, and words that had appeared exceptional or unknown in Greek literature have been shown to have been in common use. The problems of NT syntax are similarly illuminated.

Specific historical notices sometimes light up dark points in the Bible. For example, a British Museum decree of Gaius Vibius Maximus, prefect of Egypt (A.D. 104), ordered all who were out of their districts to return to their homes in view of the approaching census (cf. Lk. 2:1–5). Most important of all is the contribution of the papyri to a sympathetic knowledge of ancient life. They present a veritable gallery of biblical characters. A strong light is sometimes thrown upon the social evils of the time, of which Paul and Juvenal wrote so sternly. The child, the prodigal, the thief, the host with his invitations, the steward with his accounts, the thrifty householder, the soldier or service receiving his *viaticum* or retired as a veteran upon his farm, the husbandman, and the publican, are met at first hand in the papyri, which often they themselves had written. The worth of this material for the historical interpretation of the Bible is very great.

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