

IN THE CLASSROOM; Unlocking the Secrets of Ancient Papyrus; UC Berkeley scholars are studying the texts for clues to life in Egypt thousands of years ago.; [HOME EDITION]

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Full Text (1011 words)

Muttering softly, Todd Hickey peered into the screen of his laptop computer at a black-and-white digital image of a tattered 1,900-year-old Egyptian papyrus document. He was trying to puzzle out what words might lie in a gap between torn edges.

The last word Hickey could read was "Soknebtunis," the name of a crocodile god once worshipped by the Egyptians, and a clue that the house whose sale or loan is described had been next to the god's temple. Hickey and a computer database that provides word sequences in early Greek kept coming up with "megalou-megalou," or "great- great," to follow. But the words were too long to fit.

"Some people do the crossword puzzles," Hickey said, searching for a better fit. "I could sit and do this stuff all day and not get tired of it."

But these days the 35-year-old papyrologist, or papyrus specialist, has a lot more to do than just translation. As the curator of the Tebtunis Papyri, a collection of ancient papyrus documents recognized as one of the best in the United States, Hickey has a lot of other responsibilities for making sure it is preserved, well-funded and connected to UC classes.

The collection was unearthed about a century ago by British archeologists backed by philanthropist Phoebe Apperson Hearst, mother of media tycoon William Randolph Hearst. But only 5% of the documents have been studied or translated. An even smaller percentage has been properly restored. The rest remain at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, often sandwiched between pages of the Oxford University Gazette or loose, like chunks of ancient bark, in battered old boxes.

The collection is undergoing a rebirth. Badly needed restoration has begun and a center to study the papyri is being funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, UC funds and donations. The center is trying to establish a \$1.25-million permanent endowment.

Hickey says it will take lifetimes to learn all the documents have to offer.

Other universities, including the University of Michigan, Duke and Columbia, have papyrus collections. But because of its size and completeness, Berkeley's is one of the best, according to Traianos Gagos, president of the American Society of Papyrology and curator of Michigan's collection.

Unlike most other collections, which were compiled piece by piece from dealers with little knowledge of their origin, Berkeley's entire collection is from one site: the archeologically rich southwest corner of the Fayum Basin of Egypt. The area was called Tebtunis in ancient days.

The collection holds a nearly complete picture of life there 2,300 to 1,600 years ago. The Fayum Basin was a breadbasket and attracted Greek and Roman rulers. But around AD 300, the desert

started to encroach and the farmers went elsewhere.

Though the desert was a disaster for ancient people, it was a boon for Oxford University archeologists Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt and Egyptologist George Reisner, who had persuaded Hearst to fund the trip for UC's collections.

The desert heat had preserved the artifacts and documents under sand, including crocodile and cat mummies, human portraits on wood, writing tables, jewelry and many papyrus documents.

They were largely forgotten until a Dutch papyrologist named Arthur Verhoogt came to Berkeley in 1993 to study the works of an ancient scribe named Menches.

Verhoogt thought that everything useful had been translated. His first glimpse of virtually untouched documents was an awakening. "I was flabbergasted ... that there was so much material still to be worked on," said Verhoogt, now a University of Michigan assistant professor of papyrology and Greek.

Along with Bancroft's rare book curator, Anthony Bliss, Verhoogt applied for a federal grant to conserve the documents and to join five other universities in putting digital photos online. In 2000, UC kicked in \$45,000 annually for as much as 10 years.

Most documents are in Greek or Latin. Some are in Demotic, an ancient Egyptian language.

Fragments of a copy of a long-lost play by the Greek playwright Sophocles have been found. But for Hickey, the tax documents, marriage certificates and letters from slaves or former slaves are the real treasures.

In reading them, "You get a sense of shared humanity, a sense that certain things have changed but there are some things that haven't changed over 2,000 years about human nature," he said.

In one letter with frayed edges and a large, sloppy hand, a servant or slave named Aphrodite writes to her boss: "Do not think, mistress, that I am negligent of your commands." She lists her completed chores, including fetching a shirt and running errands.

In a misguided attempt at preservation, a papyrologist in the 1940s encased 1,700 of the documents in flexible plastic. Over the years, the plastic caused bits of papyrus and writing to flake off. The situation worsened when the plastic was removed. But better ways have been found to remount the documents in safer glass, albeit at a slow pace.

Since arriving in June 2001, Hickey has tried to bring some order to the collection. He offers community presentations. He is starting a new class on translating the documents in the spring. He has four undergraduate students, one volunteer, two graduate students and a high school student steadily pecking away at the mound of documents.

Brigit Flannery, 26, a doctoral student in ancient history and Mediterranean archeology, came to Berkeley specifically to study the papyri.

Flannery is focusing on one scribe. His name isn't known, so she calls him "Scribe X." But she knows his handwriting: a thin, spidery but elegant Demotic.

Flannery believes the documents could prove or disprove theories about ancient Egypt.

"The proof is available," she said as she picked through boxes filled with tiny bits of papyrus. "We just need to look at it."

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: GRADUATE STUDY: Flannery studies scribe's work.; PHOTO: ANCIENT SECRETS: Todd Hickey, right, papyrologist and curator of the Tebtunis Papyri, and graduate student Brigit Flannery look at long-neglected sheets of papyrus dating from 250 BC that are stored in the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Randi Lynn Beach For The Times

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