One of the many pleasures of doing this blog is that there are some highly trained scholars who are members who interact with the posts on occasion. One of them is Brent Nongbri, whom I first knew when he was a graduate student at Yale (PhD 2008) and who for several years was an Honorary Research Fellow at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. One of his fields of expertise is papyrology, the study of ancient papyrus manuscripts.

Brent was interested in my posts on the alleged first-century copy of the Gospel of Mark, and contacted me to let me know about an article he wrote on a related matter — yet another manuscript fragment allegedly connected with Mark and also allegedly from the first century, one that almost none of the rest of us scholars have heard about. He had himself posted about it, and he has given me permission to repost his posts.

The post is a bit technical in places (this kind of thing needs to be), but it’s fascinating and I think you can get the point if you read through it. (And you can get a sense of what a piece of serious scholarship on this kind of thing looks like.) Most of the German and Greek is translated. At the end it turns out Brent has done a really interesting piece of sleuth work to figure out what it’s all about. Here it is, in full.

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A First-Century Papyrus of Mark (Probably Not the One You Think)

Posted on July 21, 2017 by Brent Nongbri

[[With thanks to Sonja Anderson, Malcolm Choat, Ann Hanson, and Hugo Lundhaug for help in gathering sources and checking facts.]]

One of the great things about researching ancient Christian manuscripts at Macquarie University in Sydney was the collection of bibliographic resources there. The Department of Ancient History at Macquarie had gathered, all in one room, articles relating to just about every papyrus of the first few centuries AD that has been plausibly (or implausibly) identified as Christian. While going through these files a couple years ago, I stumbled upon a folder with the label “P.Fackelmann.” I was curious because I had recently had a series of discussions with Roberta Mazza about Michael Fackelmann, who was the former conservator of papyri at the renowned collection in Vienna as well as an occasional seller of antiquities.

Inside the folder I found a single article not by Michael Fackelmann, but Anton Fackelmann. Michael Fackelmann had been preceded in the conservation job at Vienna by his uncle, one Anton Fackelmann (1916-1985). The article had appeared in a short-lived Greek journal called Anagennesis in 1986, a year after Anton Fackelmann had died. The title hooked me instantly: “Präsentation Christlicher Urtexte aus dem ersten Jahrhundert geschrieben auf Papyrus, vermutlich Notizschriften des Evangelisten Markus?” (“Presentation of Early Christian Texts from the First Century Written on Papyrus, Probably Notes of Mark the Evangelist?”).

First of all, I was shocked that I had never heard of this article before. Even outlandish and
universally rejected claims about early Christian papyri tend to make the news (such as the almost universally rejected claim that a tiny fragment from Qumran, 7Q5, contained Mark’s gospel). But this Fackelmann article on Mark was totally new to me. Given all the recent talk about a first-century papyrus of Mark’s gospel associated with the Green Collection and allegedly found in mummy cartonnage, this seemed all the more bizarre. Imagine my further surprise when I started reading the Fackelmann article and discovered that it too concerns a papyrus recovered from mummy cartonnage! I give my translation of the relevant paragraph:

In 1972, a fragment of mummy cartonnage (a breast plate) was acquired in Cairo and made available for sale. The cartonnage was about a finger’s width in thickness and contained in addition to linen several papyrus leaves…among others a papyrus of 22 x 43 cm and a strip of 4 x 43 cm. It can be assumed with certainty that it is part of a papyrus scroll. Other texts coming from the cartonnage suggest Alexandria as the origin of the mummy.

Then we learn that this particular papyrus is a palimpsest, one that had been washed four (!) times (“an manchen Stellen vor neuerlicher Beschreibung sogar viermal abgewaschen”). The under-texts, however, are said to have remained partially visible because the “washing was not done thoroughly, so that one can make out Greek and Hebrew letters of the under-text, and sometimes it yields a jumble of letters” (“Abwaschen erfolgte nicht sehr gründlich, sodaß sich griechische und hebräische Buchstaben der unteren Texte durchschlagen und manchmal ein Gewirr [sic] von Buchstaben ergeben”).

Fackelmann claimed that the date of the early use of the papyrus was established by multiple strong indicators (“mehrere gute Anhaltspunkte”): The style of the handwriting (he seemed to be referring to the under-texts, but he was not explicit) was said to be “Ptolemaic,” a type of writing that, according to Fackelmann, “comes to an end in the first century and is not found later.” Furthermore, the method of preparing cartonnage with animal-based glue (Knochenleim) all over rather than just in some spots was said to “indicate that this papyrus was inscribed at the latest in the second half of the first century” (“daß dieser Papyrus spätestens in der zweiten Hälfte des ersten Jahrhunderts beschrieben wurde”).

Fackelmann then claimed that there were several different writings with Christian content to be found in the under-text with the aid of special photographic techniques. In the photographic plate that accompanies the text, however, none of this alleged under-text is visible. What is visible (presumably the uppermost text of this “palimpsest”) is a document that itself seems to be Ptolemaic, a point to which I will return. Below is a scan of the published photographic plate of the papyrus.
Fackelmann's drawings of the under-text he claimed to detect seem almost deliberately confusing in the article. They are drawn to different scales with completely different orientations. Thus, I made a composite of all his drawings to show how they seem to me to
match up to the photograph.

As an example of one of Fackelmann’s transcriptions and translations, here is part of the alleged text of “Proto-Mark” (again, I re-orient the drawings so they make more sense):
As an example of one of Fackelmann's transcriptions and translations, here is part of the alleged text of "Proto-Mark" (again, I re-orient the drawings so they make more sense):
And, to finish out the surreal picture, Fackelmann’s translation:

...im Alter von 36 Jahren... April 26 ? .....Angehörige.....Golgotha.....
...gekreuzigt zusammen mit Mördern.....mein Gott mein Gott....

There are so many problems. It’s difficult to know where to start. The handwriting depicted in the drawings is extremely crude and the Greek is mostly nonsense. Some of the letters are upside down relative to the others. Some of the letters visible in the drawing are not transcribed, and some letters in the transcription are not (to me, at least) visible in the drawings. Just take the first few words. There is no trace of an iota in ετει. The drawing’s AC (lambda-sigma) has been incorrectly transcribed as AC (alpha-sigma). The lunate omega in (mαχω(υ)) stands in contrast to the “capital” omega (Ω) used later in this same fragment. The whole thing looks nothing like a standard papyrological edition. And none of the material in the drawing is at all visible in the photograph. The question inevitably arises: How did this ever get published? The editorial board of the journal Anagennesis included such prominent papyrological names as Cavallo, Coles, and Sijpesteijn (but also O’Callaghan, who was known for some questionable identifications of early Christian papyri). It is a mystery to me how this ever made it into print.

And what has become of this papyrus? As far as I can tell, the scholarly record of this article is pretty quiet for fifteen years after its publication, aside from its inclusion in some bibliographies and its harsh dismissal in a footnote in Georg Strecker’s Hermeneia commentary on the Johannine epistles (xli-xliv, note 78). A letter from Fackelmann’s son appended to the copy of the article in the Macquarie folder indicates that the papyrus itself
was sent to Kurt Aland at Münster for permanent loan in 1986, after Anton Fackelmann’s death. It seems likely that Aland or a member of his staff accepted the piece, recognized that the claims made about it were unverifiable, and quietly filed it away, never to be heard from again.

But in 2004, Dieter Lührmann published a collection of essays, in which he made a reference to this papyrus in passing, even noting that he had seen it in Münster in 1993. His impression was that Fackelmann was playing a “tongue-in-cheek game with the rules of papyrus research” (“augenzwinkernde Spiel mit den Spielregeln der Papyrusforschung”). Then, in a study of the Secret Gospel of Mark published in 2010, Eckhard Rau dedicated a few pages to the Fackelmann papyrus. He summarized Fackelmann’s descriptions and arguments, pointing out a host of problems in Fackelmann’s presentation (Fackelmann’s confident transcriptions despite his repeated references to the difficulty of the readings, Fackelmann’s reference to Hebrew characters that are not present in his transcriptions, etc.). In the conclusion to his treatment, Rau remained non-committal about whether or not the publication was a hoax produced by Fackelmann (“…mir nicht wirklich gesichert zu sein scheint, dass Fackelmann einen Hoax produzieren wollte.”). Rau concluded, however, with the following informative footnote (my translation):

In a letter of October 2007 Holger Strutwolf, the director of the Bible Museum in Münster, informs me that the Fackelmann papyrus is actually there. He writes: “All attempts to read the under-text to even begin to check the readings of Prof. Fackelmann have failed. However, Fackelmann’s thesis that the under-text is a Christian text (even a precursor of Mark’s gospel) can now be falsified. The upper text is most likely from the 2nd or 3rd century BC.”

So, the papyrus was still in Münster in 2007, and scholars in Münster have identified the uppermost text of the papyrus as Ptolemaic in date, thus making impossible any Christian associations for any of the under-text (if there even is any under-text at all). Thus, Fackelmann’s article would seem to be either a case of extraordinarily wishful thinking or a deliberate hoax.

While the papyrus has remained on display in Münster, its ownership was transferred to the Norwegian bibliophile Martin Schøyen in the 1990s, and it became MS 2630 in his collection. Of course, knowing that some items in The Schøyen Collection were bought by the Green family around 2012 (such as this parchment scrap of Romans), I wondered if the Fackelmann papyrus might be one and the same with the “first century Mark” that first hit the rumor-mill in early 2012 with some kind of connection to the Green Collection. But that turns out not to be the case. Martin Schøyen was kind enough to confirm that the manuscript remains part of The Schøyen Collection and is in storage. The fact that the scholars in Münster have not been able to detect the under-text Fackelmann saw means that we now have two mysterious “first-century” papyri attributed to Mark that allegedly came from mummy cartonnage and that seem to be invisible to most scholars. Fascinating.

But that is not quite the end of the story. Last year, I asked an Austrian colleague in general terms what he knew about Anton Fackelmann. He replied with words to this effect: “I never
met him, but my closest brush with the old gentleman was a long time ago, when someone gave me that strange article written by his son.” His son? Yes, his son. The same one who I mentioned earlier who sent a letter to Macquarie. Whose name also happens to be Anton Fackelmann. Re-reading the article again, I see that there is nothing inconsistent with the son, who is not a specialist in ancient manuscripts, having written the article. While there are a few “authoritative” statements, there are no real claims of papyrological experience or special references to the author’s earlier work on manuscripts. In fact, there are no references or footnotes at all. And (as Rau also noted) the attributions of authorship are all wonderfully ambiguous.

The usual method for indicating a posthumous publication is simply to add a cross (†) next to the author’s name. That is not done in anywhere in our article. Instead, in the table of contents, the author is listed as “A. Fackelmann (in memoriam).” In the article itself, before the title we find: “IN MEMORIAM: Dr. h. c. A. Fackelmann.” A tribute, but not an attribution of authorship. And at the end of the article, the author’s name is given simply as “Anton Fackelmann.”

As I say, delightfully ambiguous. Anyone reading this article will likely see the name “Anton Fackelmann” listed as the author (along with the topic of mummy cartonnage) and assume that the author is Anton Fackelmann, the famous conservator of papyri. But it’s just an assumption. The author could just as easily be the son, who, to my knowledge, had no papyrological training. This would make sense of the somewhat dodgy content of the article. As to the question of how it got past the journal’s editors, your guess is as good as mine.

Update: 3 August 2017: Some of the Fackelmann mysteries solved.

References:


