

Today we have a guest post – another one from Brent Nongbri, who, if you remember, did his PhD in New Testament at Yale and is currently an Australian Research Council (ARC) Research Fellow in the Department of Ancient History at MacQuarie University in Sydney Australia. He is one of the leading researchers on ancient manuscripts in the world, and among his other many fine virtues, is a member of the blog.

You may recall that I raised the question a week or ten days ago about why archaeologists don't set out to find manuscripts any more, the way Grenfell and Hunt did in the late 1890s, leading to the spectacular discovery of the Oxyrhynchus papyri, in a trash heap outside of the city of Oxyrhynchus, a discovery that was so massive that scholars are still publishing the uncovered papyri today. Brent has the answer. Here's what he has to say.

Bart asked me to elaborate a little bit on a comment I made on the post on [How Manuscripts are Discovered](#). I commented specifically about the discovery of papyri in Oxyrhynchus. This is what I wrote:

A couple quick thoughts on why digs like the Oxyrhynchus project of Grenfell and Hunt don't take place anymore. I think you're right about cost being a big factor. A second consideration is advances in stratigraphic archaeology. Grenfell and Hunt used untrained locals to plow through those rubbish mounds without keeping the kind of detailed written records that archaeologists make now. Only in a relatively few cases did they note the context in which papyri were found. So, a great many papyri were found, but a huge amount of contextual information was lost in the process. A well-run modern project would move much more slowly than Grenfell and Hunt did and keep a lot more records. Finally, already in the early 1900s, Grenfell and Hunt were working against the clock, as their rubbish mounds were used by locals for fertilizer. Here is what the papyrologist Eric Turner wrote in 1952: "The inhabitants, who had begun their destructive work as early as 1904, dug out the site for the sake of its sebakh (fertile earth). In 1922 [Flinders] Petrie reported that a railway had been constructed and 100-150 tons of earth per day were being removed as fertilizer." So, if that was the case in 1922, it's unclear how many of these rubbish mounds would be left today.

Let me start by saying that I'm a huge admirer of Grenfell and Hunt. If you look through the 17 volumes of Oxyrhynchus papyri that they published, you realize that as they worked on these manuscripts (biblical manuscripts, classical literature, census returns, tax reports, land registers, court proceedings, wills, divorce certificates, personal letters, etc.), they became absolute experts on every aspect of the study of the Greco-Roman world, from the finer points of poetic meter, to the ins and outs of early Christian literature, to the most nitty-gritty aspects of the taxation system. It's really amazing. I've even written an article defending Grenfell and Hunt from some of their modern-day detractors (available [here](#)).

That said, their archaeological methodology was not completely ideal. They went digging for a specific kind of artifact: papyri. If they came across other sorts of artifacts, they didn't really care because they were just trash anyway, right? (As Grenfell put it in 1897, "the rubbish mounds were nothing but rubbish mounds; and the miscellaneous small *anticas*

which we found are of little interest...”). In fact a number of the non-papyrological finds from their digs at Oxyrhynchus seem to have been completely lost! In archaeological projects nowadays (the reputable ones, anyway), we don’t go looking for one specific type of object. We may have a specific question in mind, but modern archaeology is not a search for objects. More than anything, it’s about recording data. Archaeology is destructive. As you dig through the layers of sediment, you destroy them. They’re gone forever, so you better keep really good records! If you find spectacular artifacts, that’s great, but that’s not really the point. The point is to document everything thoroughly.

Now, Grenfell and Hunt were somewhat ahead of their time in that they did try to take note of which papyri were found near each other. As Grenfell said in 1897:

“Finding that the rubbish mounds were so fruitful, I proceeded to increase the number of workmen and boys up to 110, and the flow of papyri rapidly became a torrent which it was difficult to cope with. Each lot found by a pair (man and boy working together) had to be kept separate from the rest; for the knowledge which papyri are found together is frequently of great importance...and since it is inevitable that some papyri should get broken in the process of getting them out of the closely packed soil, it is imperative to keep together, as far as possible, fragments of the same document.”

So, they were, to some extent, keeping track of what they were doing, but they didn’t always report this information. The result is that scholars sometimes have to do a lot of work to figure out the connections. For example, in 1899, Grenfell and Hunt published a short snippet of Romans 1 (see a picture of it [here](#)). They mentioned that it was found together with a contract from the year 316 and with other documents from the same period, but they didn’t tell us what these documents were or who wrote them! So for over a hundred years, we didn’t really know the context of this papyrus. Then, in a brilliant piece of detective work published in 2010, AnneMarie Luijendijk, a professor at Princeton, figured out that this fragment of Romans was part of the personal archive of a flax merchant named Aurelius Leonides. What this means is that by looking at the other documents in this archive, we can actually get a rare glimpse of the life of an ancient owner of an early Christian papyrus (you can download her article on the papyrus [here](#)). So, because Grenfell and Hunt didn’t transmit meticulous records to us, there is still a lot of work to be done even on the Oxyrhynchus papyri that have already been published (never mind the thousands of unpublished pieces sitting in boxes in Oxford!).

But what about more recent work in Egypt? Is anyone digging in rubbish heaps these days? In fact, the answer is yes, but it’s not the trash of cities like Oxyrhynchus. Instead, excavation has taken place in the waste dumps outside monastic dwellings. In 2005, a Polish team working in southern Egypt discovered three complete early Christian books written in Coptic (the Egyptian language spelled out mainly using Greek letters) that had been thrown out. You can read about them and see some very interesting pictures of their discovery in a pdf file [here](#) (you have to scroll down a few pages in the file) and pictures of their conservation in a file [here](#). So, there are still some neat things coming out of ancient Egyptian trash heaps!



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