As all of you should know by now, I am remarkably pedantic. Therefore when I don’t know much about a topic, I go back to books and sometimes the Internet. Being mostly interested in Byzantine papyri, I had to refresh my knowledge of papyri from mummy cartonnage and related matters, since they have become such a hot topic after the publication of the new Sappho fragments (P. Sapph. Obbink and P.GC.105), and the YouTube adventures of the two Palmolive Indiana Jones retrieving New Testament papyri through mummy masks washing-up. So I thought to share what I have learnt so far.

In lesson one of any course in papyrology or related subject, you would be taught that there are two main sources from where you can legally or illegally retrieve papyri: excavating the remains of ancient cities, cemeteries, deposits or rubbish heaps, and dismounting mummies or book bindings, coverings and similar agglomerations of papyrus and other materials. Papyri can be found in mummy contexts, so to speak, in two main forms. They could have been used for fabricating mummy masks and panels, mixed together with other materials such as linen, and then covered with stucco and painting (the so-called papier mache), or they could have been used for wrapping or filling the mummies themselves. This second case is what B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt found, for instance, in the sacred
crocodile cemetery of Tebtunis, and later in other villages in the Fayum when papyrology was in its early days at the beginning of the 20th century. Possibly the first to have done experiments for retrieving papyri from mummy cartonnage was the French archaeologist Jean Antoine Letronne around 1825; he was disappointed by their bad status of preservation and the administrative contents. Sometimes the papyri retrieved from panels covering the feet or the breast of the mummies preserve the shape of the elements they come from. You can see an example of feet-shaped papyri in the Berkeley Tebtunis collection clicking here; you can have an idea of the appearance of mummies covered by such masks and panels from an image of a Ptolemaic one nowadays in the Louvre, clicking here (I know, it is a free-from-copyright image, but mummies scare me to death and I don’t like having a whole one in this post…).

From a rough calculation, I would say that the vast majority of our legal and illegal findings have derived from discoveries in situ; fewer papyri have come from mummy cartonnage or other similar kinds of papyrus recycling. (You will not get percentages from me: I refuse numbers as a form of resistance to a present where everybody knows the price and measure of everything, but the value and meaning of nothing).

Mummy fillings, wrappings and mummy cartonnage are renown for being an excellent source of papyri of the Ptolemaic period, which are fewer in absolute numbers than those of the following Roman and Byzantine periods, and therefore particularly important to scholars of the Hellenistic period. According to standard papyrology manuals, the practice of fabricating cartonnage for mummy masks and panels went on throughout the entire Ptolemaic period, and ended towards the end of the Augustan era, so at the beginning of the first century AD.

The retrieval of papyri from mummy panels and masks presents a number of problems and issues due not only to the technical aspects of the process, but also to the damages it procures to the objects. As you may imagine, there are different views about what comes first, either the mummy masks and panels, or the texts inside them. Therefore papyrologists and conservators have been working hard for finding methods for obtaining papyri from mummy cartonnage that take all these issues into consideration. Nowadays imaging technologies can help not only through the recording of the entire process, but also and foremost through the developing of non-destructive ways for retrieving and reading papyri. However at the moment, as J. Frösén reminds us in a dedicated chapter of the Oxford Handbook of Papyrology ("Conservation of ancient papyrus materials", p. 88), "the recovery of papyrus from cartonnage is still the subject of controversy. Admittely it interferes with the integrity of the cartonnage as an artifact".

Among the conservators who have worked in the field of papyri from mummy cartonnage there is Michael Fackelmann, a conservator active in Vienna in the seventies-eighties of last century. Fackelmann is an elusive figure, I have discovered, although he wrote important contributions on papyrus restoration that you find in the standard papyrology bibliography. Interestingly, he became also a collector and dealer of papyri, which were sometimes sold to university collections worldwide besides to private collectors. In those years there was much less awareness of the importance of papyrus archaeological provenance and acquisition circumstances than nowadays; I have been constantly reminded recently of the long history of the issues of ‘provenance’, and how much they are embedded in our disciplines and even in the birth of papyrology. I think historical awareness does not excuse present practices, and above all invites future change for better ones.

In any case, what I have realized is that some of the papyri connected with Fackelmann’s activities are particularly important in the history of dismounting mummy cartonnage, because they challenge the above-mentioned standard chronology of papyri from this kind of source. In other words, there have been cases of papyri that are said to come from mummy cartonnage and to date after the Augustan period, other than the recent Sappho fragments, dated to the 3rd century AD by their editors on the basis of C14 analysis and palaeographical considerations, and the New Testament texts that the Palmolive Indian Jones declare they found dissolving mummy masks. On these and other papyri challenging the traditional chronology we’ll talk in future posts.

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Update on the new Sappho fragments and the Green Collection

Posted on May 10, 2014 by Roberta Mazza

The director of the Museum of the Bible/Green Collection, David Trobisch, has kindly informed me via email that the collection is going towards full digitisation and open access. As it happens in many other collections, “in some cases items are put on reserve and not accessible until the research has been done.” He writes that information on the acquisition circumstances of the Green Sappho fragments and their relation with the London Sappho will be provided in a forthcoming publication by Dirk Obbink.

As for the acquisition circumstances of Galatians 2 (GC 462), the Green collection has purchased it “through a trusted dealer that we have done business with over many years”.

I thank David Trobisch for the answers he is constantly providing; it is clear that his arrival is a dramatic step forward for the Green Collection. My only comment is that this dealer must not be so trustworthy since the papyrus was on sale from e-Bay Turkish seller MixAntik in 2012.

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Papyri retrieved from mummy cartonnage: a video

Posted on May 2, 2014 by Roberta Mazza

“I figured about 65 classical texts…”Dr. Scott Carroll in Mexico, September 2013
As the readers of my blog know, I am a big fan of Dr Scott Carroll, formerly on the payroll of the Green Collection (2009-2012) and recently collaborating with the evangelical apologist Josh McDowell, as you can read in a recent post of Brice C. Jones. I am fascinated by this Indiana Jones of Biblical Studies, as I have explained in an old post, and desperate to meet him in person.

At the moment, I am just following his adventures on the web. I know that a meeting with him would be an amazing experience, as I understand while watching the faces of people gathering en masse for his talks in the videos I am now religiously collecting for my amusement.

However, I found this particular video of an event organised by the University of the Nations for a workshop in Mexico last September 2013 a bit concerning. Here Scott, after having explained what his and his wife’s organisation (I guess the Scott Carroll Manuscripts & Rare Books and The Manuscript Research Group) do, starts moving around what do seem glazed papyrus fragments and other artefacts. Then he addresses the fascinating topic of papyri from mummy cartonnage. He jokes about the smell of mummy cartonnage over the house stove to the despair of his wife, and alludes to the scams you may find on eBay looking for cartonnage. Finally, he explains how to extract papyrus fragments from mummy cartonnage showing images from his computer. He says that the procedure he shows through what seems to be powerpoint slides – that you can see in the screen shots I took from min. 24:40 onwards in the video (see below), but I really recommend to watch the video itself – was performed at Baylor University (Texas) where, he asserts, he had an appointment. Unless he is lying, which I cannot believe because he is a good Christian, he must refer to the days when he was working for the Green Collection and the Green Scholars Initiative, since Baylor University has been collaborating with both at least from September 2011. In fact, an event lead by Scott Carroll consisting into the dismounting of a mummy mask for obtaining papyri took place at Baylor University and involved professors and students of the Department of Classics on September 9, 2011, as reported in the Bulletin of the Department (pp. 1-2).

Can you help me tracking down this Indiana Jones of Biblical Studies for an interview (and a picture with autograph, obviously)? Can you add details, corrections or integration to the information retrieved so far? Were you part of the public for any of these scholarly or wider audience events? I’d love to hear from you…
The girl with the Christian tattoo: Religious-magical practices in late antique Egypt

Posted on March 28, 2014 by Roberta Mazza

The British Museum will host soon an exhibition of Egyptian mummies, *Ancient lives, new discoveries*, that is destined to become a blockbuster. Press releases have revealed some details: the exhibition will be a new look at mummies covering a long time span, from the pharaonic to the late antique period, and will show to the public what scan imaging and other technologies can reveal about the mummified person’s terrestrial life. I am usually not so attracted by mummies, the study of diseases and human physical features because it is so depressing to see how boring we are in these matters: we lose teeth, get cancer, eat badly and inexorably die, and have been doing so for millennia now. Besides this, ancient human facial reconstructions remind me of Madame Tussauds’ wax horrors of the kind that I hope nobody will dare to try on my remains: good reason to go for a more elegant incineration. But in this case I was intrigued by the information that the mummies on show will include a woman who lived in ab. 700 AD Sudan and had an interesting, Christian tattoo on her upper inner thigh.

This reminded me how much a ritual, bodily practice Christianity was in antiquity, and how biased is the general, common view of it as all centred on spiritual and intellectual activities. In fact, religion in practice is well attested by some of my favourite pieces in our papyrus collection and others: written amulets from Egypt, dating from the pharaonic to the late antique period. (The magical manuscripts and objects from Egypt in the John Rylands Library go well beyond this period if we consider also items from the Cairo Genizah and the Gaster collections.) These amulets are sparse but fantastic evidence of a body-centred practice: that of writing religious-magical passages and formulas on a strip of papyrus, folding it into a small packet and hanging it around the neck, often as a part of a more complex ritual including praying, chanting and other activities.

These Egyptian sources show us a religious environment very close to that of the tattooed Sudanese woman. Like us, when facing crises of any kind, the ancients tried any possible means to solve or prevent troubles. Among the experts they could consult for help were priests, magicians, sorceresses, and later saints, monks, priests and other specialists in the field. Christianity changed only partially and very slowly beliefs and practices that people living on the Nile shared for millennia, which are hard to define according to modern categories of religion, magic and medicine. In fact the first generations of papyrologists struggled to place these amulet texts under the categories they used in publications. For instance, anything Christian was published by Grenfell and Hunt in the opening section of their papyrus volumes, under the title of ‘Theological fragments’, which ranged from Biblical fragments to liturgical texts, and also amulets with Christian references. In the Rylands catalogues you will see placed under this category, for instance, P.Ryl. III 471, recently studied by Theodore De Bruyn. Here’s his English translation (you can see an image of the papyrus clicking here):

Holy oil of gladness against every hostile power and for the grafting of your good olive tree of the catholic and apostolic church of God. Amen

These words were taken from a baptismal anointing formula, containing reminiscences of Paul’s Romans 11:24. This was a type of amulet of which Church Fathers would have certainly approved. John Chrysostom, for instance, was pleased to see women and children carrying gospels on their chests, and Augustine recommended the use of gospel books for curing headaches instead of enchantments. However, the Church was aware of the persistence of practices and beliefs of pagan origins including amulet-making, and repeatedly condemned them.

Troubling cases for both the Church at that time, and papyrologists more recently, include items such as *P.Oxy. VII 1060, which despite the ‘Oxyrhynchus/Oxford’ abbreviation is in Manchester*. It was not placed by Grenfell & Hunt among the ‘Theological fragments’, but inserted into a Byzantine general ‘Prayers’ section and tagged as ‘gnostic’ (everything Christian but bizarre to Victorian eyes was gnostic…). The papyrus is small and written in a tiny, cursive handwriting of the 6th century AD, sometimes hard to decipher. Here it is with a translation from M. Meyer, R. Smith (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, Princeton (1994), n. 25:
As you can see, it consisted of a mix of Christian formulas and holy names and elements derived from more ancient pagan ritual traditions. The diminishing name of Aphrodite and magic onomatopoeic names are followed by the name of Iaoh Sabaoth Adonai (the Jewish, then Christian God as invoked in magical papyri), formulas of protection of the house from insects, reptiles and evil, and finally the invocation of Saint Phokas. The amulet was perhaps fabricated close to the day of Saint Phokas (March 5, the indiction dating system followed a cycle of 15 years). In this case the tiny sheet of papyrus was more probably deposited in the house than worn, but we cannot be totally sure.

Coming back to the Sudanese woman, there is a late Coptic Rylands amulet (P.Ryl. Copt. 103) that may be connected with the practice of religious tattooing. Despite being defined as a papyrus, this magic text is in fact written on paper, and palaeographically dated to the 9th century. The text inscribed on it is not always easily readable, as you can see from an image available on the Rylands Library database (click here).

This is a recent translation of most part of the amulet from M. Meyer, R. Smith (eds.), Ancient Christian magic: Coptic Texts Of Ritual Power, Princeton (1994), n. 115:

... My mother is Mary. The breast... the breast from which our lord Jesus Christ drank. In the name of the seal that is traced upon the heart of Mary the virgin; in the name of the seven holy vowels which are tattooed on the chest of the father almighty, AEEIOUO; in the name of him who said, “I and my father, we are one,” that is, Jesus Christ; in the name of Abba Abba Abba Ablanatha Nafla Akrama Chamari Ely Temach Achoocha! I adjure you by the sacrifice of your only begotten son, Jesus Christ, Rabboni, in the way that you sealed the cup.

One aspect people tend to forget is that the vowels (AEEIOUO), which in this case are said to be inscribed on the chest of God, were in fact chanted in rituals, as explained in the studies of Sabina Crippa. The seal (σφραγίς) of God – possibly suggested here as traced upon the chest of Mary – has been related by some scholarship to real tattooing, according to a tradition rooted in Revelation and other Christian texts.

Tattoos in late antiquity have been most recently studied by Mark Gustafson. Interestingly, as in the case of the written amulets, Christian attitudes towards tattooing show ambivalence, reflecting how complicated it was for Christians to establish their own practices in relation to the surrounding religious and social system. On the one hand we see tattooing condemned as a barbarian and pagan practice, or used as an infamous mark, according to a longer Graeco-Roman punitive tradition. On the other hand, ancient Christians are recorded bearing symbols and words tattooed on their arms, and, like our Sudanese woman, on their legs, literally following Paul Galatians 6:17: ‘From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks (στίγματα) of Jesus’ – the word στίγμα (pl. στίγματα) was used for tattoos marking slaves, or people condemned to the mines and other penalties. While tattoos were against Jewish laws as established by Leviticus, religious tattooing was common in Egypt and other nearby areas and Christian later practices certainly relate to these longer traditions. Procopius of Gaza (ab. 465-528 AD), for instance, records the use of tattooing the cross or the name of Christ. In Africa, a Manichaean monk is reported to have tattooed on his leg: ‘Manichaean, disciple of Jesus Christ’. Probably this remained hidden since the episode is recalled in the context of Vandal persecution of Manicheans at the end of the 5th century AD.
The tattoo on the Sudanese woman’s thigh, also hidden from sight, is not only ideologically but also visually linked to the Christian magical papyri. The Telegraph reports the interpretation of the drawing as the name of the Archangel Michael, who was a powerful protector against evil and in fact is often invoked in magical papyri. Similar patterns with elaborate versions of the Christian cross and other symbols do occur in magical texts. The practice of tattooing Christian symbols, such as the cross, on the wrist and other body parts is still alive among Copts in Egypt and worldwide. A simple Google image search will reveal you how common and varied are tattoos with religious themes. Meanings attributed to the practice may vary, ranging from marking identity to remembering pilgrimages to protection against illness and evil. Contemporary Ethiopian magical scrolls are also deeply rooted in the ancient Egyptian practices here discussed. You can read more about them, and see them, at this excellent website: [Online Exhibit: Ethiopic Manuscript Production](#).

**References:**


A brief, interesting overview on tattoos meanings and uses is A. Mayor, ‘People Illustrated: Tattooing in Antiquity’, *Archaeology* March/April 1999, 55-57.

J. Carswell, *Coptic Tattoo Designs*, Beirut 1958. A beautiful account with images of the trade of an Egyptian Copt tattooer, Jacob Razzouk, who lived in Jerusalem in the fifties of last century. He owned a tattoo-shop for pilgrims, mostly but not only Copts. He used woodblocks to stamp designs on the skin before using needles, and the designs are reproduced and explained in the book.

Tattoos in modern Egypt are also recalled in Winifred Blackman, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*, (1927).


Dion, aged 45, farewell

Posted on May 21, 2013 by Roberta Mazza

The gilded cartonnage upper-body mummy case of Dion is on display in the Manchester Museum Ancient Worlds Gallery. We know the name of the dead and his age at death because of a Greek inscription on the back of the head: 'Dion, aged 45, farewell'.

As Artemidoros and his family, Dion was a member of the Hellenised elite that administered the Arsinoite nome under the Roman rule. His family wanted him to be buried in Hawara, following traditional Egyptian funerary practices.

The mummy case has been dated to the first century AD. The face mask resembles the traditionally Egyptian, gilded ones but at the same time, following a new Greek and Roman taste, individual features are introduced, such as the black hair and the inlaid eyes. The upper part of the body is protruding from the mummy case. Dion holds an intense pink flower wreath in his right hand and a papyrus roll in the left. Below his bust, on the case, a mummy, possibly that of Dion, is guarded by two mummified rams.

Garlands and wreaths: flowers and their possible meanings

Not differently than in other parts of the ancient world, flower garlands and wreaths were commonly used in Egypt for different celebrations and rituals, as these lines from a 2nd century AD papyrus letter from Oxyrhynchus (P.Oxy. 44 3313) informs:

'Apollonios and Sarapis to Dionysia, greetings. Your wonderful announcement about the wedding of the most excellent Sarapion has filled us with joy, and we would have come straight away to serve him on a day long-awaited by us and to take part to the celebration; but because of the prefect’s court sessions and because we are just recovering from being sick, we were unable to come. There are not many roses here yet; on the contrary they are few and from all the estates and the garland makers we were barely able to collect the thousand that we sent to you with Sarapas, even by picking those that should have been picked only tomorrow. We had as much narcissus as you wanted, so we have sent four thousand instead of the two thousand…'

Remains of flowers and garlands have been found in many tombs of the Roman period in Hawara and other Egyptian sites. Petrie mentions them often in his notebooks and excavation reports, a well-preserved example of a wreath can be seen at the British Museum and the Manchester Museum have some too (5371.c-d). As many others, the British Museum sample was made by immortelles (Helichrysum stoechas), a perennial flower imported to Egypt from Italy or Greece that now seems to grow especially on canal banks and in cemeteries (S. Walker et al., Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt, London 1997, p. 207).

The shape and colour of the garland’s flowers represented on Dion’s mummy case recall rose buds and may have a connection with Isis and Osiris cult. In Apuleius’ Metamorphoses, a Latin novel written in mid-second century AD, Lucius returns to his human nature thanks to a complex ritual in which a garland of roses carried by a priest in his right hand (the same as our Dion) and later ingested by the protagonist has a central meaning (XI, 6; 13). The ritual has been linked by scholars to the so-called ‘Spell of the Crown Justification’
contained in the *Book of the Dead* and preserved on papyri and temple walls (P. Derchaine, ‘La couronne de la justification: Essai d’analyse d’un rite ptolémaïque’, *Chronique d’Égypte* 30 (1955), 225-87). This ritual was transformed and integrated with Greek practices in the Ptolemaic period and linked with Isis and Osiris religious rites. We may wonder then if the papyrus roll in Dion’s left hand was actually a copy of this book or of the spell.

We will try to have a look at the back inscription of Dion soon, stay tuned!

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