That dress I want

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At a time when it is becoming more and more difficult to learn ancient Greek at a British state school, the public appetite for information about the papyrus texts from Oxyrhynchus, a Greek-speaking community in ancient Egypt, remains undiminished. As was shown by the packed and enthusiastic audience for "Pulp Fiction: The Ancient Greeks and their leisure reading", a public event at the British Academy last month, Oxyrhynchus, however offputting its name, continues to exert its fascination.

And so it should. The Oxyrhynchus texts offer an unparalleled window on the way an ancient community recorded its everyday life and relationships. They have put the lived experience of non-elite people, from semi-literate shopkeepers to much-sold slave girls, at the centre of the academic radar. They have required scholars to acknowledge the complex ethnic identities of an ostensibly "Greek" community. They have preserved literary texts lost to the Byzantine manuscript tradition because they were not deemed appropriate for inclusion in the ancient school curriculum. They have helped drag the Victorian Classical syllabus, with its narrow philological focus and idolatry of the elevated genres produced by venerated Great Men of Athens, into the modern world. They have even been instrumental in the genesis of a whole new academic discipline – Garbology, first pioneered at the University of Arizona in the 1970s – whose practitioners assume that a whole society can be analysed from the perspective of what it discards.

Even that unappetizing name, Oxyrhynchus, once explained, is educational. It is evidence of the cultural complexity of the community which it labelled. Greek cities were often named after Greek gods and heroes (Athens, Heraclea) or Greek founders (Alexandria). But the name Oxyrhynchus means the city named for the sharp-nosed (*oxy-rhynchos*) fish which flourished in the local waters and which had a starring role in Egyptian mythology, having eaten the dismembered Osiris' penis. That antique myth reminds us that the identity of the "Greeks" of Oxyrhynchus was only a thin sedimentary layer resting on a much older Egyptian subsoil. Oxyrhynchus is more than 100 miles south-west of Cairo, at what is now el-Behnesa. It prospered for twenty-five centuries. It was already active from the Egyptian New Kingdom in the second millennium BC until at least AD 1200. The archaic Egyptian religion of the area can still be glimpsed not only in the toponymic sharp-nosed fish, but in references to Thoeris, the hippopotamus goddess.

Oxyrhynchus survived the rise and fall of several administrations – Persian, Ptolemaic after Alexander's conquest of Egypt, Roman, Byzantine, Arab. But from the late medieval Mamluk sultanate until the late nineteenth century, it was an insignificant village. Its leap into the consciousness of the modern world came in 1897 when the curious mounds encircling the sandy lunar landscape of the site of the ancient city were opened up by two British excavators. Bernard Pyne Grenfell and Arthur Surridge Hunt were both classicists educated at the Queen's College, Oxford. Supported by the Egypt Exploration Fund, they arrived to test their intuition that this significant centre of early Christianity (indeed, Coptic and Arabic traditions held that it had been visited by the Holy Family) might have preserved the kind of papyrus texts produced by early Christians.

They were soon rewarded by a page of papyrus containing previously unknown "Sayings of Jesus", subsequently identified as belonging to the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. Hundreds of papyri began to emerge from the hillocks. The Oxyrhynchites seem to have used special dumps for papyri; in one case the basket in which a whole armful had been discarded was found preserved along with them. Within three months the two Britons, aided by a large team of workmen hired locally, had stuffed 280 boxes with crumbling papyri.

Grenfell and Hunt returned to the area in each of the winters between 1903 and 1907, when they retrieved parts of works by famous ancient authors, including several which had been missing since the early Middle Ages: songs by the lyric poets Sappho, Alcaeus, Pindar and Bacchylides, a tragedy by Euripides, and learned poems by the doyen of Alexandrian aesthetics and inventor of the ancient library classification system, Callimachus of Cyrene in Libya. Altogether, more than 50,000 pieces of papyrus were amassed, ranging from rolls to tiny scraps. The majority of them are housed in the Sackler Library in Oxford. The task of deciphering and publishing them has been keeping the new species of classical scholar known as the "papyrologist" quiet ever since. The project has been led for more than two decades by Peter Parsons, the former Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, author of *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish: Greek lives in Roman Egypt* (2007; the first and best introduction to Oxyrhynchus and its texts), and the leading speaker at the British Academy's event (he was joined by Professor Ian Rutherford and myself).

Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2652 (2nd or 3rd century AD); an ink drawing showing the goddess Agnoia from an illustrated edition of Menander's comedy *Perikeiromene*

Just as the discovery of the Alexandrian mimes of Herodas in the Faiyum desert, published in 1891, informed Constantine Cavafy's poetic evocations of demi-monde social life in ancient Alexandria, so the Oxyrhynchus papyri have stimulated poetic creativity. Inspired by the shreds of a satyr drama by Sophocles, his *Trackers*, which tells the story of the rediscovery of the stolen cattle of Apollo by satyrs who track the animals' dung, Tony Harrison wrote a tragicomedy incorporating Sophocles' fragments but also dramatizing their discovery. *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, voted one of the best plays of the twentieth century by the National Theatre Millennium Poll, premiered at Delphi in 1988 and was revived at the National Theatre, in revised form, in 1990. Harrison's play makes Grenfell change into an Apollo of astounding intellectual snobbery. He is horrified to discover that high poetry has become noisome refuse, "Converted into dust and bookworm excreta, / riddled lines with just ghost of their metre. / All my speeches, all my precious words / mounting mounds of dust and millipede turds". He disdains the carnivalesque, boisterous satyrs, who begin the play as Egyptian labourers hired to work at Oxyrhynchus. Harrison thus used the very history of the papyri to explore, through creative adaptation of Sophocles' precious text, the contrasts between "low" entertainment and "high" art – intellectual property monopolized by elites and used to exclude their inferiors from education, power and privilege.

Most years since 1907 have seen the publication of new texts, ranging from passages of Homer to contracts for the sale of donkeys: seventy-nine volumes of *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* are available. The twenty-first century alone has already given us a stunning series of mythological narratives, in elegiac couplets, about handsome youths (Narcissus, Adonis) and the nymph who turned into the Cycladic island of Delos; what connects them is that they all underwent metamorphosis. These elegant verses may well have been used by Ovid, the peerless poet of transformation, in his *Metamorphoses*. Earlier discoveries included the anonymous historical narrative known as the "Oxyrhynchus Historian" or *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia*, which continues the story of the Peloponnesian War and its aftermath from where Thucydides leaves off. Oxyrhynchus has also produced the majority of the significant Christian papyri and transformed our understanding of law, society and commerce. The papyri have introduced us to a prosperous class of shipowners and skippers and to pubic doctors. We can overhear officials squabbling over salary advances, and tenant farmers over rent rises. We perhaps glimpse marital infidelity in a letter from a married man to someone else's wife, where the tone seems inappropriately steamy. We overhear negotiations between a father and his discontented son, who has enlisted in a legion but now wants to be a cavalry officer. We appreciate the many different skills involved in viticulture, the minutiae of the laws on wheat prices and the sale of mortgaged land, and the vast amounts of oil needed to run a gymnasium. We salivate at the list of goods for sale at a bakery outlet. Our attention is drawn to powerful female landowners and employers, such as Platonis, who apprenticed her female slave to a weaver; a daughter writes to her mother about procuring expensive saffron-coloured robes for a festival. There is evidence that girls could attend school.

My own favourite papyri furnish real-world experiences of Oxyrhynchites which illuminate scenes in important ancient literature: several papyri describing slaves demonstrate the importance of scars in a society before photography or DNA tests. Slaves are said to have a scar on the left shin, or over the eyebrow, reminding us that when Odysseus' nurse recognizes him by his scar after two decades, the poet was drawing on familiar practice. The *Odyssey*'s absent husband is also brought to mind by the sad petition of a wife, asking the local magistrate to punish a sailor whom she accuses of complicity in her husband's mysterious disappearance. The domestic arrangements of Tryphon the weaver resemble the plot of a comedy by Menander, whose plays were themselves recovered on Egyptian papyri, some of them from Oxyrhynchus.

Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of working-class life* (1957), the foundation text of Cultural Studies, is rarely celebrated by classical scholars. And yet the phrase "the uses of literacy" was central to Peter Parsons's opening presentation at the British Academy. The papyri have demanded that we think about the functions that written

documents performed in ancient society as much as about their intellectual or aesthetic qualities. Some even contain accounts from administrative archives, including information about the cost of writing materials; some reveal widely varying degrees of competence in grammar and spelling. The aspect of Oxyrhynchite life under the microscope in February – one of the Oxyrhynchites' most striking "uses of literacy" – was leisure reading. Parsons kicked off with the art of falling in love. Libidinous Oxyrhynchites could consult a manual attributed to Philaenis, with advice on seduction techniques, including adopting an appearance of careful self-neglect so that the desired person does not suspect. Fleas and garlic are mentioned in a magical handbook, showing that "magic" was involved in tips to help both affairs of the heart and household management. Oxyrhynchites could cure garlic-tainted breath by eating baked beetroot. They could also calculate their chances of success in love by throwing dice and relating the number to a verse in Homer, or consult a manual on dream interpretation. If they wanted to ensure that the truth was revealed in their dreams, they needed to pray to the goddess Neith (equated with Athena). If desperate, they could recite a magic spell asking Hecate, goddess of witchcraft, to wake their beloved and bring her to their bed.

If at bedtime they preferred a good book, a wide range was available, some enhanced by illustrations. Plutarch, the highly readable moralist and biographer, was much enjoyed; but those with short attention spans could consume philosophy in summaries and selections of maxims resembling an edition of *Reader's Digest*. The lives of the renowned philosophers could be read in collected excerpts. The gospels were read, perhaps less as devotional literature and more as comforting tales of the moral triumph of poor fisherfolk and carpenters over adversity and the Roman Empire. The same narrative arc was offered by the ever-popular Life of the fable-teller Aesop, an ill-favoured slave whose superior intellect allowed him to win several satisfying victories over cruel overlords and ladies.

Such texts raise the question whether there was something approaching a "mass market" in relatively inexpensive books available to a wide cross-section of the population. There was certainly a taste for sensational narrative fiction – novels – in Oxyrhynchus. Ian Rutherford explored some of the more racy and exotic, including a version of the archetypal tale in which a woman has sex with an ass. Two versions of this story have also survived in the manuscript tradition, the North African Apuleius' Latin *Golden Ass* or *Metamorphoses*, and an abbreviated form of a Greek man-ass novel attributed to Lucian of Samosata in Syria. Some Oxyrhynchus novel fragments have opened up new vistas on the hybrid Greek-Egyptian culture of the town. There are variant narratives about a world-conquering Egyptian hero with the non-Greek name Sesonchosis. Some of the stories may have been translated from Egyptian texts, which may themselves have been produced as a result of contact with Greek mythology; we are witnessing a complex and long-standing process of cultural cross-fertilization, which Rutherford is to illuminate in the forthcoming volume he has edited entitled *Aegypto-Graeca: Interaction and translation between Greek literature and Egypt*.

Several forms of public entertainment were available in Oxyrhynchus – athletics contests, races, and musical and theatrical performances. The Oxyrhynchites were prepared to pay substantial sums for entertainment. One second-century account details 496 drachmae for a day's performance by a mime actor, 448 drachmae for a reciter of Homer, and payments to a dancer. One local official curried favour with his public by subsidizing theatre tickets. This tallies with the size of the theatre, apparently designed to include large numbers and therefore lower-class audience members. The theatre has disappeared, but when the archaeologist Flinders Petrie saw it in 1922, he estimated its capacity at 11,000 spectators, out of a population of between 15,000 and 30,000. This sizeable civic space was the scene of festivals where the whole city greeted the proclamation of a new emperor or applauded military displays.

Theatrical performances were certainly attractive at both ends of the social scale. One ambitious youth had gone as a student to Alexandria intending to study Rhetoric. In the letter he wrote to his prominent father (who held the office of High Priest of the Nile), there are ominous references to a scandal "about the theatre" in which they had both been embroiled. There is evidence not only of book-learning at Oxyrhynchus, but of individuals specifically interested in the academic study of drama and of booksellers who provided them with services. The writer of one letter of the second century AD asked his correspondent to make copies of parts of Hypsicrates' treatise *Characters in Comedy* and Thersagoras' *On the Myths of Tragedy*. The important biography of the tragedian Euripides by Satyrus the Peripatetic was unearthed at Oxyrhynchus.

The rubbish dumps have also yielded detailed information about the style and content of theatrical entertainments the Oxyrhynchites enjoyed, and facilitated progress i n our understanding of the way that ancient actors learned their roles and rehearsed. This was a complicated business in ancient tragedy, where just three actors normally took all the parts in a play, changing masks as they changed each role. Several papyri containing the texts of tragedies feature signs in the margins indicating changes of speaker, with numbers keyed to indicate which actor spoke which lines. These marks suggest they were used during rehearsals for performance. The best example contains six fragments of Euripides' lost tragedy *Cresphontes*; the marginal notations indicate the several different parts in the play assumed by a single actor. And a recently published papyrus has thrown unprecedented light on the self-preparation of individual actors.

Most scholars used to think that both chorusmen and individual actors learned their roles by repeating them antiphonally with their trainer. But the new papyrus proves that actors could be given texts of their own lines in a play. Dated to between 100 BC and 50 AD, it contains the thirty lines spoken by Admetus at Euripides' *Alcestis* 344–82. But it excludes the lines delivered by his interlocutors, in this case the actor playing Admetus' wife Alcestis and the chorus. The script is in large, clear handwriting, designed to be read easily by an actor who needed to practise movements as well as oral delivery. It also suggests that actors may have altered parts to suit their own or local tastes. The Admetus "part" contains a fascinating textual discrepancy from the version of the speech which has come down to us through the medieval manuscript tradition. In the manuscripts, Admetus announces his plan to have a craftsman carve a statue of his wife to lie with him in their marriage bed. But in the papyrus part, the simulacrum is, rather, to be a painted portrait. This alteration might reflect the expectations of the local audience, who were of course accustomed to seeing beautiful portraits of their dead loved ones on painted mummy boards.

One thrilling theatrical papyrus contains a rehearsal text for a comic musical drama, a burlesque of Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia in Tauris*. In the tragedy, three Greeks (Iphigenia, her brother and his friend) escape to Greece from barbarians in Crimea. The new comic text features a heroine named Charition, escaping with her brother and others from barbarians in India. The Indians speak a strange language, painstakingly recorded phonetically in the papyrus, which sounds both ridiculous and perhaps plausibly Indian to an Oxyrhynchite ear. There are also several intriguing references to India in the fictional tales found at Oxyrhynchus, which mention an Indian divinity named Maia and the "Mistress of Ganges". A story about the hero Inaros may be connected with the ancient association of Alexander the Great, as conqueror of parts of India, with the god Dionysus bringing his cult to far distant eastern peoples.

The awareness of India at Oxyrhynchus raises important questions about ethnic and cultural interaction in the southern and eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Could the barbarians in the Charition drama be speaking an ancient Indian tongue? Some scholars have noted similarities with words in Old Tamil, Prakrit and Tulu. Were Indian luxury goods regularly on the market in Oxyrhynchus? Trade in spices, silk and other luxury goods flourished between the Roman Empire and southern India; some were brought to trading centres on the Red Sea coast of Egypt (where inscriptions in south Indian scripts have certainly been found), and carried westward across the desert along the old route to Quft (Coptos) on the Nile, which flowed only ten miles west of Oxyrhynchus. The Oxyrhynchites, themselves hybrid Greek-Egyptians, were always likely to enjoy a play about the comic aspects of an inter-ethnic encounter. Had the author of Charition changed the barbarians from Black Sea Taurians to southern Indians because some of his Oxyrhynchite audience had encountered Indian traders, visited India themselves, or even enjoyed performances by visiting Indian actors? We must hope that the answers to such enthralling questions lie waiting in the Oxyrhynchus papyri yet to be published.