

PAPYRUS DISCOVERIES

The dry climate of Egypt is responsible for the preservation of the many literary memorials of the country, the ostraca as well as the sources written on papyrus, parchment, and (later) paper, which may be subdivided into literary and nonliterary. They were and are found either by chance, mostly by fellahin digging for manure in the remains of old settlements, but also through systematic licensed excavations by archaeologists since the end of the nineteenth century. An example of such scientific excavations for papyri is those of OXYRHYNCHUS, which were undertaken between 1896 and 1907 by the Englishmen Grenfell and Hunt, and thereafter by the Italians Pistelli (1910, 1913-1914) and Brecchia (1927-1928). The publication of the rich finds of papyrus is not yet complete.

Chance discoveries made by local [inhabitants](#) greatly outnumber papyrus discoveries made by scientific excavators. Dealers who have sold papyri to libraries and museums have related stories about the circumstances surrounding their discoveries that have led scholars to discern the following pattern. The fellahin sold their finds to dealers in the neighborhood. From there the papyri came to dealers in Cairo who had connections with the international antiquities trade. Because of the risk, the dealers often divided large finds into several lots. Scholars are interested in the circumstances of a discovery, since these may be of importance for a number of reasons.

The place of discovery (tomb, hiding place, or building) shows whether the papyrus was the property of an individual, who in accordance with a custom that can be traced back to early Egyptian times, had Holy Scriptures laid beside him in the grave (in earlier ages it was books of the dead). Thus, for example, the *Apocalypse of Peter* is said to have been found along with the *Gospel of Peter* and the Greek *Book of Enoch* at Akhmim in the grave of a monk (Hennecke and Schneemelcher, 1964, p. 468). In a scientific excavation at the Coptic cemetery of al-Mudill, about

28 miles (45 km) from al-Bahnasa, a [Coptic Psalter](#) in the dialect of Oxyrhynchus was found in a grave under the head of a twelve-year-old girl (Gabra, 1986).

Discovery in a hiding place at a spot of difficult access shows that some danger threatened the manuscripts, which had to be brought to a place of safety. This danger may have come from external or internal enemies, from hostile troops, from the state (when Christianity was not yet recognized as a *religio licita*), or, in the case of a library containing writings that did not conform to the doctrinal views of the church, from the state church. Papyri discovered in the ruins of a building may have belonged to the library of a community that was not endangered. It must be made clear how large the library was, and whether it was divided. The place of discovery of Coptic manuscripts is of further importance for the localizing of Coptic dialects.

The interests of the finders and dealers are at variance with those of the scholars. The former have to reckon with penalties for failure to report the discovery, and with subsequent excavation by archaeologists, which would mean the loss of their “gold mine.” Hence caution is advisable with regard to their statements, not so much about the time of the discovery as about its precise location. Their information must be checked, preferably by an excavation at the site named. If an excavation is not possible, as happens in most cases, the statements of the manuscripts themselves must be set against those of the finders regarding the place of discovery.

Among these statements in Coptic manuscripts are, for one thing, the dialect. It allows an approximate localization by indicating the part of the country in which the dialect was spoken. In the case of manuscripts with covers, one must investigate whether old papyri, especially documents, were pasted into the binding. They often name persons and places that may have been connected with the codex. The checking of the information from the finders is simpler with later manuscripts, which contain a COLOPHON with information about the scribe and the place of

writing.

Let us now deal with the most important discoveries, first of Greek, then of Coptic manuscripts. The place of discovery of the great find at Turah is certain, since it was found in August 1941 in the caves under the monastery of Arsenius, by Egyptian workers who were clearing rubbish from a cave. The majority of the manuscripts were put in a place of safety after the discovery and brought to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The pages that were not handed over by the workers, but came to the antiquities dealers, are today scattered over several countries and several collections (Australia, South Africa, Switzerland, France, England, Germany, and the United States; cf. Mackay and Griggs, 1985). Found were writings of ORIGEN and DIDYMUS THE BLIND, in Greek, extending to eight codices and at least 2,016 papyrus pages (Koenen and Muller-Wiener, 1968; Koenen and Doutreleau, 1967). The copying is dated to the sixth century.

On the other hand, the place of discovery of the Cologne Mani Codex with a biography of Mani in Greek is not certain. It was written on parchment in the fifth century in pocket-size format (1.67 inches [4.25cm] high, 1.25 inches [3.5 cm] wide) and is so far the smallest known codex. From information given by the dealer, its place of origin had been assumed to be a grave in Oxyrhynchus, but further investigation by the editors proved that this statement was false. Rather, the codex had been for many years (supposedly fifty years) in the possession of a private owner in Luxor, and perhaps derives from the center of MANICHAEISM in Egypt, the region of Asyut (Koenen, 1973).

The origin of two Coptic manuscript discoveries is assured through the [colophons](#) contained in the manuscripts: first, the fifty- six codices from the monastery of the archangel Michael at Sopehes in the Fayyum, which are for the most part in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, and the codices bought in 1907 by Rustafjaell, which came from monasteries of Hajir Idfu and are preserved in the British Library.

The place of discovery of the library found in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, consisting of thirteen codices with mainly Gnostic writings, is assumed to be Hamra Dum, below the cliffs of the Jabal al-Tarif (see NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY). The statements of the finder about the exact place of discovery were tested through excavations in 1975 by the Claremont Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, but at the places indicated no archaeological evidence for the origin of the library could be found (Elderen, 1979, p. 226). We therefore do not know whether the manuscripts were found in an earthenware jar, as the finders affirmed, and as is frequently the case (cf. Preisendanz, 1933, p. 113), or what the exact place of discovery was, a cemetery or a hiding place. On the other hand, the story after the discovery of the library down to the making of an inventory in the Coptic Museum has been investigated by J. M. Robinson. Papyri pasted into the bindings of single volumes to strengthen the covers name persons and places in the region of the ancient Diospolis as well as dates. They are in agreement with the place of finding, ascertained in 1950 by J. Doresse (p. 133), who, like Robinson, relies on the reports of local inhabitants.

According to the statements of dealers, the place of discovery of the nine Manichaean codices in Subakhmimic, found in 1930, was Madinat Madi in the Fayyum. The dialect of the manuscripts indicates a location farther to the south, in the region of Asyut. C. Schmidt (Schmidt and Polotsky, 1933, pp. 6ff.), who for decades bought papyri for European collections and was regarded by the dealers as a reliable partner, instituted his own inquiries, as a result of which Madinat Madi was assumed to be the place. The place of discovery is probably not the place where the codices were copied. Three dealers divided the find among themselves. Sales were made to the Chester Beatty collection and to the State Museum in Berlin, and a small part went to the papyrus collection in Vienna.

The last great manuscript discovery was made in 1952, a few miles from where the Nag Hammadi codices were found, in the region of Dishna in Upper Egypt. The manuscripts went to the [Bodmer](#) Library (see BODMER POPYRI), the Chester Beatty Library (see CHESTER BEATTY BIBLICAL

PAPYRI, COPTIC PAPYRI), and the University of Mississippi. This discovery contains not only documents in Greek and Coptic but also Greco- Latin writings from the pre-Christian period (e.g., works of Menander, Thucydides, Cicero) and Christian writings from the Old and New Testaments, apocrypha, and [early Christian](#) literature in Greek and Coptic. The early biblical manuscripts found are especially important for the text of the Bible. The combination in this discovery of pagan and Christian writings presents problems in deciding about the character of the earlier library or libraries.

Finally, reference should be made also to the old manuscripts found in monasteries in Egypt by European travelers and scholars. For the Old Testament only the CODEX SINAITICUS found by K. von TISCHENDORF in the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai need be named; for Coptic literature, there is the library found by G. Maspero in Shenute's White Monastery (see DAYR ANBA SHINUDAH) at Suhaj and the books found in the monasteries of the Wadi al-Natrun, most of which were brought to European libraries. In most cases the [colophons](#) give us information about their origin.

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