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Crossing Invisible Boundaries

An Erased Letter to the Chief of the Storehouse *Ḥwy*

1. THE RAMESSIDE HIERATIC MATERIAL IN TURIN

Since Jean-François Champollion's visit to the Museo Egizio in 1824, the Egyptological community has been aware of the incredible richness of the papyrological collection acquired from Bernardino Drovetti.[1] Next to entire rolls and large pieces of hieratic papyri, the father of Egyptology provided a vivid description of his discovery of a table covered by countless fragments in the roof space of the museum: in a letter to his brother of November 6, 1824,[2] he famously talked about the "*Columbarium de l'Histoire*".

These fragments have been investigated ever since[3] and revealed numerous documents that are essential to our knowledge of the ancient Egyptian history and culture. Since 2019, they are at the center of the interdisciplinary project "Crossing Boundaries: Understanding Complex Scribal Practices in Ancient Egypt", a joint endeavor between the Museo Egizio, the University of Basel and the University of Liège.[4] This project deals specifically with the Ramesside hieratic papyri of the Turin collection that stem from Deir el-Medina (ca. 1350-1050 BCE) and adopts a contextual approach to this written material.[5]

1.1. FRAGMENTS OF HIERATIC PAPYRI

The Crossing Boundaries project focuses mostly on the so-called 'CPs'. 'CP' is the abbreviation for '*Cartelline Papiri*', namely cardboard folders used for storing fragments of papyri. These

1. Borgi, Donatelli 2019.
2. Hartleben (ed.) 1909, p. 84.
3. E.g. Roccati 1975, 2015.
4. Polis et al. 2020.
5. E.g. Demarée, Gabler, Polis 2022.

fragments belong both to larger well-known documents and to papyri that still have to be entirely reconstructed. They were collected in Egypt by Bernardino Drovetti and by the Italian mission led by Ernesto Schiaparelli, respectively at the beginning of the 19th and 20th century.

Around 200 CPs are kept at the Museo Egizio. Among them, nearly 75% are relevant for the project, since they date back to the Ramesside period and allegedly come from Deir el-Medina. The project-relevant CPs contain more than 11,000 fragments of papyri, ranging from the tiniest piece (with some traces of ink) to the (almost) complete letter, and potentially including all kinds of administrative and literary texts usually attested in the Deir el-Medina documentation.

Over time, the CPs came to be organised in Turin following the traditional division between 'administrative' and 'literary' texts. Administrative texts are predominant in CP1 to CP100, while CP101 to CP200 contain rather literary fragments. This distribution is, however, quite theoretical: most CPs are actually made up of a mix of fragments, containing various kinds of administrative and literary texts, and a significant number of fragments are actually 'heterogeneous papyri', i.e. documents bearing different text types, which are particularly relevant for the study of complex scribal practices in ancient Egypt.

Despite continuous work on this material over the last 200 years, the majority of CP fragments remain unpublished and are generally undescribed.[6] Therefore, each fragment has to be studied individually in order to improve our general understanding of the collection and to allow for future reconstruction of larger documents. To meet this goal, we resort to the *Turin Papyrus Online Platform*,[7] a digital database launched by the Museo Egizio in 2019.[8] Each fragment is first encoded in TPOP as a material object with metadata of all sorts. TPOP further allows to connect fragments originally belonging to the same papyrus as a preliminary step to reconstruct documents.

1.2.   JOINING FRAGMENTS WITH A VIRTUAL LIGHT TABLE

The encoding in TPOP is supported by the creation of high quality scans at a resolution of 1,200 ppi by the staff of the Museo Egizio. These digital copies are not only necessary documentation, but also allow to shift the reconstruction process to a virtual level. To facilitate this undertaking, the project is developing a digital research tool, the Virtual Light Table (VLT).

This application will enable scholars to access and filter the fragments in TPOP, to add them to a digital worktable and to move, rotate, or flip them around as needed. The resulting reconstructions can be annotated, exported, or saved and exchanged with other scholars. Future work will add additional features like graphical filters to enhance readability and the results of the project's machine learning research, e.g. algorithms helping to find joining fragments or to position them accordingly. The VLT will be published as open source software at the end of the project phase.[9]

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6. Notable exceptions are the administrative fragments transcribed by Rob Demarée, who kindly made his work available to the project.

7. TPOP; Töpfer 2018.

8. https://collezionepapiri.museoegizio.it.

9. For more details on the software design and features, see Unter 2021. An illustrated list of implemented and planned features can be found on the project website: http://web.philo.ulg.ac.be/x-bound/virtual-light-table/.

FRAGMENTS OF REUSED PAPYRI

Many fragments show traces of ink indicating that the manuscript to which they belong was used more than once.[10] The remains of previous inscriptions appear in all degrees, from a few dots of ink to complete sign groups, words, or even sentences which were clearly meant to be removed, but for some reason still remain visible. While a vast number of fragments feature evidence of a previous stage of use, occasions where more than a few signs can be reconstructed are rare.

Preliminary research on the corpus of reused manuscripts in the Museo Egizio suggests that the papyri were not reused following any systematic structure. Both recto and verso sides are frequently inscribed and re-inscribed with texts of different types. While this could be coincidence and the result of the incompleteness of the preserved material, it would not be surprising if this assessment actually represented the historical reality, where the choice of reusing a papyrus was dictated by factors like necessity, writer's preference or material aspects of the manuscript.[11]

2.   BEGINNING OF A LETTER FROM A MOTHER TO A SON

The fragment presented here (CP158/006) is an informative example of erased text: while the ink was intentionally removed in antiquity, this fragment shows no trace of secondary use. Due to the lack of context, however, it is impossible to say whether this fragment was part of a manuscript which was actually reused, or whether it was just prepared for such an occasion. Further research on the Turin papyri might reveal related fragments that will clarify these questions.[12]

2.1.   MATERIAL DESCRIPTION

The fragment measures 20.5 × 4 to 7cm. Traces of three lines belonging to the beginning of a hieratic letter written in black ink (and subsequently erased) are found on the recto (fig. 1a); the verso is blank, except for some red signs/marks, which are not readable and might even belong to a drawing (fig. 1d–e). The width of 20.5cm points to the use of a halved Ramesside roll,[13] which is the norm for letters at this period.[14] More unusual is the fact that the scribe began his text on the papyrological recto (along the horizontal fibers), since letters normally open on the vertical fibers. Letters beginning on the H/V side are usually palimpsests,[15] which suggest at least three stages of use for this papyrus sheet: (a) a first text was written, then (b) the present letter was penned, and (c) erased to prepare the sheet for a third use (of which we might have traces on the verso).

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10. Some early observations on the reuse of papyri are found in Caminos 1986. For a more recent summary and further references to reused papyri, see Eyre 2013, pp. 33–35.
11. Contra Pestman 1982, pp. 156–158, who suggested a rather rigid system of use and re-use for the papyri in the Ḳn-ḥr-ḫpš-f archive.
12. The drawing presented here is based on a high-resolution scan (1,200 ppi). It has been collated with the original papyrus in September 2021 (https://papyri.museoegizio.it/d/622).
13. Černý 1952, p. 16.
14. Janssen 1991, pp. 48–50.
15. Bakir 1970, pp. 19–21.

The scribe began writing the message ca. 2–2.5cm below the upper end of the fragment. The top was certainly left empty on purpose: when done with his letter, he could roll the sheet bottom-up and this empty rim would protect the text. The missing part at the top (ca. 10 × 2.5cm) supports this scenario, since the exposed outer part would have broken first. Four horizontal folds are visible and at least 12 vertical ones, which means that CP158/006 may have formed a little package,[16] first rolled horizontally and then folded vertically.

2.2.   **DRAWING AN ERASED TEXT**

When documenting an erased text, several options are available. In some cases, a high-resolution photograph or scan already suffices to give a good impression of the remaining ink. Digital image enhancement software like Adobe Photoshop or the ImageJ plugin DStretch can be used to enhance the contrast between ink and surface, making the erased inscription easier to discern. The use of such software, however, has two major disadvantages:

1. The results depend on the information gathered by the respective scanning or photography process, which can only map the reality to RGB pixel values. In other words, image manipulation cannot reveal more than what is already captured on the image. Through the process of enhancing the contrast, data of the mid-tones is lost which, in a case like the one presented here, results in skewed and misleading shapes and loss of detail.
2. The automated contrast enhancement by the software is objective, thus does not distinguish between the nature of the darker pixels on the image—be they ink, a dark brown fiber, a shadow, a hole in the papyrus, or other disturbances on the image which again creates misleading patterns.

The time-consuming method of manually drawing the ink traces is preferable in many cases where an accurate and unambiguous result is aimed for, and was chosen for revealing the presence of ink on CP 158/006 (fig. 1b).[17]

**2.3.**   **ANNOTATED TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION**

The hieroglyphic transcription (fig. 1c) is based on the drawing and is quite tentative given the poor state of preservation of the ink. However, the regularity of the letters' introductory formulas helps significantly to ascertain the suggested transcription.

r° 1   *ḏd.n*[(a)] *ꜥnḫ-n-njw.t* […][(b)] *sꜣ{.t}≠s*[(c)] *ḫry-šnꜥ Ḥwy*[(d)], *m ꜥ.w.s m ḫ[s.t]*
r° 2   [*Jmn-Rꜥ nsw.t*] *nṯr.w*[(e)], *r-nty mk <wj> ḥr* [*ḏd*[(f)] *n Jmn*], *Ptḥ, Pꜣ-Rꜥ*[(g)], *jmy snb≠k*[(h)]
r° 3   [*jmy ꜥnḫ≠k…*] *jmy wn≠k*[(i)] [*m ḥs.t Pr-ꜥꜣ, pꜣy≠j nb,*] *tw≠j* […]

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16. Krutzsch 2017.
17. The drawing was created with the help of a Wacom Cintiq 16 and Adobe Photoshop, here applied on top of the original image with lowered opacity. The same method (though not digitally) was already applied by Rob Demarée (2006, pl. 28) for visualising the erased text of the palimpsest papyrus P. BM EA 75025.

r° 1   The lady [...] says [to] her son, the chief of the storehouse Ḥwy, in L.P.H., in [the favour of]

r° 2   [Amun-Ra king of the] gods: look, <I> am [saying to Amun], Ptah, Prâ, to keep you in good health

r° 3   [to keep you alive, and] to keep you [in the favor of Pharaoh, my lord;] I […]

a.   The introductory formula ḏd.n X n Y[18] is typical of the 19th Dynasty (and is attested mostly under Ramesses II).

b.   The name of the ꜥnḫ-n-njw.t sender filled a space of roughly 3cm. The few traces do not allow to identify a proper name with any certainty. The feminine name might have begun with the group ⬚ or ⬚.

c.   The hieratic group before the suffix ⸗s looks more like sꜣ.t than sꜣ. Similar unexpected writings of sꜣ are attested in other 19th Dynasty letters, see e.g. O. Černý 19, r° 1 (*HO* 54,4) or O. DeM 10249, r° 1.[19]

d.   The title ḥry šnꜥ is common during the Ramesside period, while jmy-r šnꜥ is usually attested under the Thutmosides.[20] Note that the spelling with ⬚ and ⬚ is also typical of the Ramesside period and especially common for the 19th Dynasty.[21]

e.   The name of Amun-Ra king of the gods fits the length of the lacuna, but is not beyond doubt from a palaeographic point of view.

f.   The introductory formula r-nty mk wj ḥr ḏd n DIVINE NAMES is characteristic of late 18th–early 19th Dynasty letters. For the omission of wj after mk, see e.g. O. DeM 581, r° 2[22] and P. Sallier 4, v° 1,3.[23]

g.   For the sequence of deities Jmn, Ptḥ, Pꜣ-Rꜥ, see e.g. O. Toronto ROM 906.19.5 (A 11), II, 16[24] and O. Turin N. 57093, r° 2.[25]

h.   For the 2SG.M suffix pronoun ⸗k written ⸗kwj in the formula jmy snb⸗k, see O. DeM 581, r° 3.[26]

i.   This part of the transcription is an educated guess based on the few remaining traces.

3.   ### CONTEXTUALIZATION

The šnꜥ-institutions of the New Kingdom were linked to temples; these institutions were responsible for processing agricultural products (food and clothes/linen) for the daily offerings and other special purposes.[27] With the ḥry-šnꜥ Ḥwy in the present letter, we add a new titleholder to the list of 27 men bearing this title during the Ramesside period,[28] six of which have tombs in Western Thebes: TT 3 (at Deir el-Medina), 198 (at el-Khokha), 285, 302 and 303 (at Draꜥ Abu el-Naga).

18. Bakir 1970, p. 49.
19. Grandet 2010, p. 358.
20. Polz 1990, p. 48; Eichler 2000, pp. 30–38.
21. Polz 1990, p. 54.
22. *KRI* III, 536,4.
23. *LEM* 89,2.
24. *KRI* III, 41,11.
25. López 1980, pl. 51.
26. *KRI* III, 536,5.
27. Eichler 2000, pp. 97–113.
28. Polz 1990, p. 52.

Assuming that the fragment presented here belongs to one of the two lots of Turin papyri from Deir el-Medina (the Drovetti and Schiaparelli collections), the sender or the addressee must have been part of the workers' community in some way.[29]

The only members of the community known to hold *šnꜥ* related titles belong to the family of *Pꜣ-šd* (x), foreman of the left side at the beginning of the reign of Ramesses II and owner of TT 3.[30] He and his brother *Nfr-sḥr.w* are the only ones who are known so far to have borne this title. Accordingly, it is tempting to connect the *ḥry šnꜥ Ḥwy* to the family of *Pꜣ-šd* (x). This connection would be supported by following pieces of evidence:

1. Orthographical, grammatical and phraseological features of the letter point to the (early) 19th Dynasty.
2. A daughter of *Pꜣ-šd* (x) is named *Nwb-nfr.t*,[31] and the proper name following *ꜥnḫ-n-njw.t* could begin with the ⌐▨⌐-sign.
3. The name *Ḥwy* is attested within the family of *Pꜣ-šd* (x), usually for females (his mother and one of his daughters). Using this (common) name would therefore be a likely option.

This hypothetical grandson of *Pꜣ-šd* (x) might have become another *ḥry šnꜥ* thanks to the family connection with this institution around the middle of the reign of Ramesses II. In this scenario, it remains however difficult to assess whether the sender or the receiver was living outside of Deir el-Medina, even if the latter option seems overall more likely. Further fragments of the letter still to be identified among the CPs of the Museo Egizio might help clarify this question or alternatively show that the papyrus had been acquired by the Deir el-Medina gang from somewhere else and then prepared for their own use.

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29. The fragment discussed here seems to be a similar case to the two 19th Dynasty letters discussed in Demarée, Gabler, Polis 2022, and might therefore originate from Schiaparelli's excavations.
30. Davies 1999, pp. 166–167, 279. His titles in TT 3 (*Wsjr ḥry šnꜥ* appears twice) indicate that he had worked in Karnak before he (and probably his family) moved to Deir el-Medina (see also Stela Cairo JE 36671, where he is a *ḥry šnꜥ n Jmn*). On a wooden coffin fragment stemming from TT 3, *Pꜣ-šd* is a *Wsjr bꜣk n šnꜥ n Jmn*, which leads to the conclusion that his tomb and funerary equipment must have been almost fully prepared when he entered the community. When becoming foreman of the left side, he apparently constructed a second tomb, TT 326, which consists of a chapel solely (for representational purposes?), in which he is entitled *ḥry js.t* and *ꜥꜣ n js.t*. Cf. Černý 1973 (ed. 2001), pp. 292–293; *KRI* I, 380.
31. Zivie 1979, pp. 68, 121.

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Fig. 1.a. CP 158/006 recto, original.

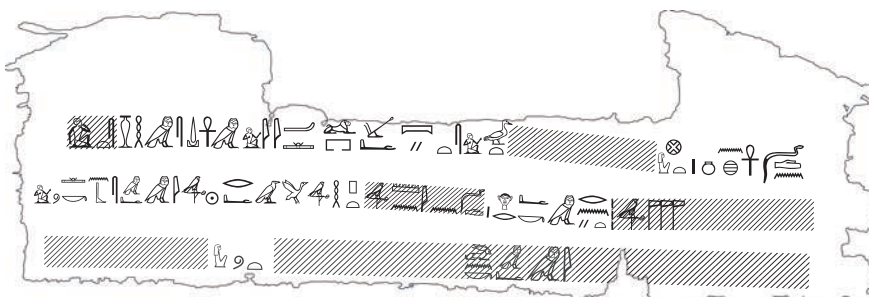

Fig. 1.b. CP 158/006 recto, drawing (Elena Hertel).

Fig. 1.c. CP 158/006 recto, transcription (Stéphane Polis).

Fig. 1.d. CP 158/006 verso, original.

Fig. 1.e. CP 158/006 verso, drawing (Elena Hertel).