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Historical Discovery? Well, Yes and No

By SARAH LYALL

OXFORD, England - Unearthed from centuries-old garbage dumps in central Egypt in the late 19th century, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri - a trove of classical material dating from the second century B.C. to the seventh century A.D. - have yielded gem after gem: plays by Aristophanes, Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides; early fragments of the Gospels; accounts of daily life in the Greco-Roman empire 2,000 years ago.

But the papyri, old forms of paper made from reeds that grew along the Nile, are fragmentary and fragile, and the pace of translating them and placing them in context is mind-numbingly slow. Scholars have become accustomed to the decorous pace of the Oxyrhynchus work, which is published as it goes along, in a new volume every year or two. With only 5,000 or so of the estimated 500,000 fragments translated so far, Volume 69 is being published this month. There is no end in sight.

So in the small but passionate world that follows such things, it came as something of a shock when the British newspaper The Independent printed an article in April announcing a major Oxyrhynchus breakthrough.

"Decoded at last: the 'classical holy grail' that may rewrite the history of the world," the headline said. The newspaper went on to say that, that week alone, new infrared technology had allowed researchers "to make a series of astonishing discoveries, including writing by Sophocles, Euripides, Hesiod and other literary giants of the ancient world."

Immediately, phone lines were buzzing and e-mail was flying. Important discoveries from the collection are generally announced in academic journals and on the Oxyrhynchus Web site before the world at large hears about them. But no such announcements had been made; few people, if any, seemed to know what in fact was going on.

At Oxford, Dr. Dirk Obbink, a lecturer in Greek literature and papyrology who directs a project that among other things puts images of the papyri on the Internet, took the unusual step of issuing a statement that tried to put some of the assertions in context. "The article surely should not have said (if it did) that all the papyri had been discovered yesterday, only that we made significant (and sufficiently exciting) advances," the statement said.

As is so often the case with British newspapers, the Independent article turned out to be both true and not true. It was right to say that new technology was indeed making it easier, in some cases, to read the Oxyrhynchus material, and that new discoveries were being made. But it was not right to say that the technology had just been discovered, or that it was functioning as a sort of Rosetta stone, or that so many new revelations were emerging as to herald "a second Renaissance."

"This stuff has been coming out for years now, and some of the things mentioned in the Independent story are months or years old," said Dr. James Romm, an associate professor of classics at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., and the director of its classical studies program. He called the article "very much overhyped" in a field where any public attention at all is rare.

"I'd love to know who first talked to whom in order to generate such good P.R.," Dr. Romm said in an interview. "There is material coming out from those authors, but it's coming out in dribs and drabs."

The technology in question, developed at Brigham Young University in Utah, uses a digital camera with a series of ultraviolet and infrared filters. It can increase the contrast between text and background and so is particularly useful in reading texts written on dark, charred or stained surfaces, allowing researchers to see the ink in ways conventional methods cannot. In past years, it has been used to fine effect on blackened and previously unreadable documents unearthed from the ruins of the ancient Herculaneum library, destroyed in the first century A.D. during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius near Pompeii.

It has helped decipher some of the Oxyrhynchus works, too, but by no means all of them. Dr. Obbink said many of the dozens of papyri identified recently are fragments, snatches of existing works that can be plugged in to fill gaps in historical knowledge about various authors.

But others are new, including a poem by the seventh century B.C. poet Archilochus about the events preceding the Trojan War. Like much of the collection's artistic material whose originals date to antiquity, the poem was set down in writing by a professional scribe centuries later. In some cases, the newly deciphered material helps shed light on works that were repeatedly copied, in varying forms, over the years.

In addition, Dr. Obbink said, there is a newly discovered poem about Narcissus that appears to have been the basis for Ovid's poem on the same subject. He said he was hopeful that the technology would help provide new insights on biblical history by helping to decipher New Testament manuscripts in the collection - including books that did not make it into the New Testament, bits of which are contained in the papyri.

The papyri were unearthed by two Oxford undergraduates from the rubbish heaps of Oxyrhynchus, about 100 miles southwest of modern Cairo, and other prominent lost towns in Egypt that had been under Greek and Roman rule nearly two millennia earlier. The material was brought to Oxford from 1898 to 1907; successive generations of scholars have worked on it since.

The collection includes poetry, prose, plays, religious texts and official documents pertaining to the daily life of the city, much of it fragmentary.

About 10 percent is literary; the rest comprises documents like wills, census rolls, correspondence, bills and accounts.

A visit to the project, deep inside Oxford's handsome Sackler Library, shows that work is proceeding much the same way it always has - that is, slowly. Scholars surrounded by fat, obscure reference works sit outside the main office, poring over minute scraps of dirty, frayed material that to an outsider appear wholly undecipherable. Inside, more than 800 boxes are used to store the whole collection. Fragments are mounted on glass when they are being worked on and once they have been published.

The first task is to translate the work into English, usually from ancient Greek. The next is to try to place it somewhere - perhaps within the existing literature, perhaps as something that stands on its own and has yet to be categorized, perhaps as part of a lost work by a known author. The plays of Sophocles would fall into the last category. Though he is known to have written 120 of them, only 7 have survived intact; many of the rest appear in bits and pieces scattered throughout the collection.

Researchers try to date the work from clues like spelling and the way certain words are used; they analyze the writing style to discern whether it is prose or poetry, old or new, history or oratory, and who may have written it.

But the technology can go only so far. "You have to put all your knowledge of language and literature to put a story together and provide a context," Dr. Nikolaos Gonis, the administrator of the project and curator of the collection, said in an interview. "There has been a boom in technology, but it doesn't replace the knowledge of the language and the eye that has to focus on the details."