ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP-REVIEW

November 2018 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

Papyrology and the EES: Riches from Rubbish Tips
Dr Margaret Mountford

At the beginning of November Margaret Mountford came to talk to us about the Egypt Exploration Society (EES) (of which she is Chair of the Board of Trustees) and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri (on which she did her PhD).

She began by talking about the history of the EES, which she framed as a very early exercise in crowd-funding! In 1873 Amelia Edwards visited Egypt for a cruise down the Nile, and when she came back wrote a best selling book about her trip. She was appalled at the state of the Egyptian antiquities at the time, and at how they were deteriorating rapidly due to both neglect and vandalism. Mountford told us that Amelia Edwards was one of those rather formidable Victorian spinsters who when they saw something that needed done went out and did it. And so rather than just write letters about how terrible it was, she founded the Egypt Exploration Fund (which later became the EES) in 1882. She badgered a lot of prominent people into subscribing to the Fund, including several bishops (who were interested in investigating the truth of the Biblical accounts of Egypt). This meant that they were quickly able to send archaeologists into Egypt to work on the antiquities.

Margaret Mountford giving her talk (photo by John Patterson)

Mountford talked us through a list of the prominent sites that the EES has excavated, showing us where they were on the map. The first excavations were in the Delta, but were soon extended to cover the whole of Egypt and across the modern border into Sudan. I didn't attempt to make an exhaustive list of the sites she named - there are a lot of them - of course one place she pointed out was Oxyrhynchus where the papyri she worked on were discovered. The first excavator that the EES sent out was Édouard Naville - the original suggestion was Schliemann (who dug up Troy) but thankfully his methods weren't considered suitable. Naville thought he'd found the ancient site of Pithom in his excavations at Tell El Maskhuta - Pithom was interesting to the EES's early subscribers as it is said in the Bible to have been built by Israelite slaves. Mountford said that even though Naville wasn't right the pamphlet he wrote about this identification is still the best selling publication from the EES!

The next archaeologist that the EES sent to Egypt was Flinders Petrie who is one of the best known 19th Century Egyptologists and is now regarded as the father of Egyptian archaeology. Mountford gave us an overview of his achievements, including mention of his development of a chronological pottery series to help to date archaeological sites. One detail she mentioned was that he paid his workers the market rate for finds they brought to him, to stop them from being sold off on the black market. And of course mentioned that early in his career Howard Carter worked for Petrie.

The next section of Mountford's talk focused on giving us context for why the discovery of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri was so exciting. Papyrus documents are not often preserved, the material doesn't last long under most conditions. One place they survive quite well is the Middle East and particularly Egypt where the very dry climate of the desert regions helps to preserve them. Herculaneum is one of the other places, which was a bit of a surprise to me as I would have expected the heat of the volcanic eruption that destroyed the town to also destroy any papyri there. Mountford said that the pieces in the library that's been found looked a lot like lumps of charcoal - so quite a bit ended up on workmen's fires before anyone realised what these lumps were! In the part of the library that's been excavated are works of just one philosopher, but archaeologists think that other unexcavated parts of the library probably contain works by other authors. Sadly there is damp spreading into the site which is damaging it, and no decision has been made as to whether to excavate more or preserve the already excavated portions.

Written texts survive from the ancient world in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons, and Mountford gave us some examples of the materials and types of texts that are found. Some texts are written on stone, and intended to survive into the future - the example she showed us was of a Roman tomb marker. These are generally top quality work as the original intent is for permanence. Texts of this sort include memorials, laws and edicts. Other texts were never intended to be more than ephemeral. Some were written on ostraca, which are pieces of broken pottery (often cooking pots) used a bit like we would use post-it notes. The space on each piece is limited and the material is fragile so they're mostly used for short notes. An example she showed us was of a receipt for work done on a dyke.

Mountford also talked about some groups of surviving texts from the Roman period in Britain. The best known of these are the Vindolanda tablets, preserved this time by the damp ground in northern England. The texts were written on wood, and included things like letters. One of the more famous examples is an invitation to a party. For some time

the Vindolanda tablets were the oldest known texts found in the British Isles, until excavations at the site of the Bloomberg Building in London turned up some earlier wooden tablets. These were originally wax covered, so the text that is preserved are the bits where the person writing had pressed too hard and scratched the underlying wood. Another Roman example from Britain are the Bath curse tablets. These were etched onto lead, which was used for curses as it was a useless and horrible material. The curses are for small scale personal things - like against someone who'd stolen their clothes in the baths - and would have been paid for by ordinary people to be etched by someone literate and then buried. An example that Mountford gave us was of a curse on a chariot racer which was buried at the race track where it would've been run over by the chariot at the start of the race.

As well as ostraca another material used in Egypt to write everything from notes to bureaucratic documents to literary texts was papyrus. The Nile is now too dirty for papyrus to thrive but in ancient times it was a common plant along the banks of the river particularly in the Delta. The triangular stem is sliced into thin strips which are then laid out first horizontally next to each other, and then vertically across the first layer. The sheet is hit with a hammer to flatten the strips and bond them together and this is then left to dry. The resulting piece of papyrus has two distinct sides, and it's easier to write on the side with the horizontal strips. When the sheets are joined together to make a roll the seam will have a bump, so this was oriented so that one wrote "downhill" over it.

Mountford now returned to the Oxyrhynchus papyri that are in the EES collection and that she worked on for her PhD. These were discovered in the Graeco-Roman town of Oxyrhynchus by Grenfell and Hunt who were a pair of archaeologists working for the EES. In 1895 the EES expanded the types of sites they were excavating to include non-biblical sites such as Oxyrhynchus. The mudbricks at Graeco-Roman sites like this were disappearing to be used as fertiliser and so it was recognised that even if they weren't of as much interest to the Fund's subscribers as the biblical sites were they were still in dire need of attention.

In the Roman period Oxyrhynchus was a thriving town with around 30,000 residents including a broad mix of people. The city was inhabited through to Byzantine times, but isn't any longer and there were no physical remains on the site except for the rubbish dump. They used papyrus as scrap paper and most of it ended up in the town dump when it was finished with. Grenfell and Hunt found so many of these pieces of papyrus that in 1897 an offshoot of the EES was set up to excavate and publish the papyri. The first publication was within 11 months of the first excavation and the society is now up to 83 volumes which still only represents a small fraction of the papyri. The bulk of the papyri were found about 3m down where conditions are best for preservation (both above & below are too damp). They mostly date to after the Ptolemaic Period and most of them are written in Greek. The quality of the writing varies greatly.

Before we broke for coffee and cake Mountford did a practical exercise to demonstrate the difficulties of papyrology with us! She handed out pieces of paper to everyone, then half the room wrote a thank you letter and the other half of the room wrote an invitation. We then all swapped papers with someone, and wrote a shopping list on the back of our piece of paper. And then we ripped up the paper, kept one piece for ourselves and piled the rest in a messy heap on the slide projector table. During our coffee break we could then try and piece the fragments back together. Once we reconvened Mountford talked about how piecing together this sort of jigsaw puzzle is

the essence of papyrology. She then led us through a discussion of what we'd used to piece together the pieces - the handwriting, the paper type, the way the tear marks looked. She also talked about other information you could glean if this was a real part of the rubbish dump. For instance all the pieces were together so they must have been thrown out at the same time. And that means that any dated pieces give a guide to the dates of nearby pieces. You can also make educated guesses as to which side was written first - people don't generally write invitations on the backs of old shopping lists, so the date on the invite is probably before the shopping list was written.

Mountford spent most of the rest of the talk showing us interesting examples of documents from the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. The first one she showed us was a literary piece - it had nice, clear writing and was well laid out with generous margins and straight lines. This was obviously (even to non-Greek speakers like me) a piece that had been written for others to read. It can only really be dated by the handwriting style, which isn't particularly accurate as it just narrows it to the lifetime of a scribe who may have worked for decades. Context is very important with these sorts of pieces.

The next few pieces were legal documents. One was a deed of guarantee for tenant farmers - the brother of the tenants is guaranteeing they'll stay on the land. It rather usefully for the papyrologist begins with a precise date in terms of the Emperor's year, the Consul's year, the month and the day - this can then be calibrated to a date in our own calendrical system. Interestingly the very last bit is in a different hand to the rest of the document - perhaps written by the guarantor himself while the bulk was written by a scribe.

She also showed us a model form for a deposit agreement - the clerk or lawyer would just have to copy it out with the right names in it, and presumably then charge a fortune for it! Another interesting legal document was a 2nd Century CE lease of a mill. It's quite short by modern standards, but even though there are clearly large parts missing there's enough that it's clear that they have both the beginning and end of the document. There are conditions applied to the lease - the tenant can't keep hens or run a bakery. Normally that's something a tenant would expect to be able to do, so perhaps the landlord had a nearby bakery and didn't want competition? We also get an insight into social customs of the time that feel very odd to our modern eyes - the landlord is a woman so the lease is signed by her legal guardian: her brother-husband. Clearly marrying your own brother wasn't as eyebrow-raising then as it would be today!

Another piece has the same line from the Aeneid written out three times - looking a bit like a schoolboy who's been given lines, but Mountford said was more plausibly a scribe practising his writing before he had to write the "real" document. As with the Vindolanda tablets there were letters and invitations to parties - the letter she showed us used a whole set of abbreviations for standard greetings etc. which she compared to modern textspeak!

The next several pieces were examples of orders of proceedings for chariot races. In the earlier examples (c. 5th/6th Century CE) they were mostly chariot races with intermission entertainments. As time went on the chariot races declined and by the end the bill was for the entertainments with no races - the origins of circuses as we know them.

After a few more examples (including an illustrated one) the last piece she showed us was a contract to fix a boys wrestling contest - contracted between the parents or

trainers as the boys wouldn't be old enough. The deal was for one boy to fall three times so that the other boy would win the contest. There was even an agreement in place for what would happen if the boy did his part but the judge didn't rule the other boy the winner. Interestingly the agreed price was 3000 drachma to the boy who would lose, which was much much much lower than the money the winner would get. And the penalty for reneging on the deal was much higher than a contract of that value would normally attract - a hint that there was cheating going on between the cheaters & the loser wasn't getting paid fairly for his cheating?

Mountford finished up her talk by returning to the EES, this time bringing us up to the modern day. She talked about where the current excavations are taking place, and about the EES's role in training a new generation of Egyptian archaeologists. And the problems of Amelia Edwards's day are still problems - sites are disappearing through damage from the elements and from the demands an expanding population puts on the land. The EES is still working to combat this, and she encouraged all of us who aren't members to join up.