

## SARAH CLACKSON AND COPTIC PAPYROLOGY

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It is customary nowadays for events held in memory of an individual, whether a simple service, an elaborate set of recollections, or an entire conference, to be described as celebrations. It is generally hard to quarrel with the justice of the sentiment underlying this characterization without seeming churlish, because these occasions are opportunities to remember the gifts the person brought to life and work and to express our thankfulness that in some measure, large or small, we as individuals and as communities benefited from these gifts.

At the same time, however, it must be said that celebrations require a cheerfulness not easy to summon on demand in the face of great loss. We seem at times to be in danger of losing the ability to acknowledge grief and to mourn our losses—to absorb properly and in just measure what Roger Angell called “this accompanying trickle of rotten news” that goes along with even the most privileged and fortunate of lives. In the following remarks, I shall try to balance celebration and grief in offering a few words about Sarah Clackson as a figure in the history of Coptic papyrology. Our loss in the truncation of her passionate and brilliant scholarly career is very great, and it is essential in coming to terms with the magnitude of that loss that we see just how great it is.

As I began thinking about how to sketch the place that I see Sarah occupying in that history of scholarship, I had a moment of simultaneous panic and elation when the last volume of *BASP* (40 [2003]) arrived, bearing Terry Wilfong’s eloquent evocation (pp. 7-10) of Sarah and her scholarship. Here my work was done for me—he says beautifully many things I had been thinking—but I could hardly just plagiarize it. I shall in fact quote from it here and there. But I shall begin with a bit of faintly quantitative reflection, perhaps a peculiarly personal form of comfort-seeking, one taking its starting-point from something Sarah contributed to the *Checklist of Editions*, the year-by-year list of editions of Coptic papyri and ostraka.

If one leaves out of account the volumes in which there are only a few Coptic documents annexed to a mass of something else, along with pure catalogues of literary manuscripts, the forty years before the publication of Sarah’s volume of papyri from the Hermopolite monastery of Apollo saw exactly four volumes of Coptic papyri, along with seven of ostraka (some of them not very substantial).<sup>1</sup> Of the papyri, one is the slender volume of Florence texts published by Michael Browne, whose death last month was an unhappy loss to my generation of papyrologists, and another is the barely commented booklet of Yale papyri given in preliminary editions by Leslie MacCoull. In 2000, it had been 13 years since *CPR* XII and a third of a century since *BKU* III, the only volumes of Coptic papyri even remotely comparable to *P.Mon.Apollo*. That is a sobering thought.

The previous forty-year period was a bit richer. It was an era that knew Crum, Jernstedt, Kahle, Schiller, Till and Worrell. Even so, that period saw only five volumes of Coptic papyri and three of mixed papyri and ostraka, plus a few volumes of ostraka alone: about one for each undergraduate

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<sup>1</sup> The ostraka are *O.Vind.Copt.*, *O.Mon.Phoib.*, *O.Deir el-Bahari* (just 19 texts), *O.Bawit*, *CPR* XX, *O.Ashm.Copt.*, *O.Brit.Mus.Copt.* II.

cohort or American presidential term.<sup>2</sup> And again, probably only one of the editions of papyri is of a scale and density comparable to *P.Mon.Apollo*. Editors of Coptic papyri have always been few, and Sarah filled a vast gap in our studies. Indeed, it is somewhat shocking to realize that, apart from the incomparable Crum, no editor of Coptic papyri in the last three-quarters of a century left a legacy of published documentary papyri larger than hers, when one takes into account the second volume that is still to come. Terry Wilfong's notice summons up Paul Kahle, Jr., as a comparable figure: in his words, "a brilliant Coptic papyrologist who was also a Lady Wallis Budge Fellow, author of a major monograph (a collection of texts from a single site that also addressed subjects of wider significance) and a series of important articles, a scholar whose untimely death was a severe loss to Coptic studies." That seems just right; it is in fact Balaizah that of the volumes of Coptic papyri published in the 80-year period I have surveyed is the most similar in all respects to *P.Mon.Apollo*.

What struck me from the very beginning of our acquaintance, however, was not simply scholarly productivity but Sarah's strong bent for mainstreaming Coptic papyrology, a field that even in some of its greatest practitioners—like Crum—remained stuck in editorial and presentational methods of a bygone era. Terry has spoken of "her intense desire to bring to Coptic papyrology the methods, principles and organization found in Greek papyrology, and indeed to help unite the various language-differentiated branches of papyrology into a unified scholarly endeavor." That is an accurate and insightful assessment. But there is room to be more specific. Many editions of Coptic papyri have been unrewarding reading for someone used to Greek papyrology, because they often lacked things that Hellenists take for granted—translations, for example, or dates, or line notes, or introductions, or all of these. These absences are not universal, and I think it is important to point to those who adopted more comprehensive approaches—Jernstedt, for example, although the use of Russian in his editions does not make them more accessible for most of us, Kahle himself, Michael Browne—a documentarist wishes he had edited more Coptic documents—, and Monika Hasitzka. But the deficiencies were widespread, and I think we may fairly judge that the extremely small population of the field contributed to preventing the development of a disciplinary consensus of the sort that Greek papyrology had developed for the most part by the time of the first world war. This is a point to which I shall return later.

Before leaving editorial practice, however, we must recognize that the achievement of *P.Mon.Apollo* is not only to provide a proper edition of the texts themselves with all of the presentational elements that a first-rate edition should have, but to historicize the texts. Here, again, the example of Kahle is important. And here we see how Sarah did not simply pick up standard practices from the edition of Greek papyri, but best practice. Even now, after all, the editors of many volumes of Greek papyri, even when their contents form some kind of unity, do little to tie the material together and exploit its contribution to understanding the society of ancient Egypt and of the Mediterranean world. But of course many of the best have done so, going back to magisterial examples like Wilcken's *Urkunden der Ptolemäerzeit*. It was this inspiring vision of what documents could be used for that Sarah adopted at an early stage of her work. It is worth adding, in passing, that although proper commentary on texts requires space, it also requires discipline, focus, and selection and is not to be

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<sup>2</sup> Papyri: *P.HermitageCopt.*, *P.MoscowCopt.*, *CPR IV*, *P.Bal.*, *P.CLT*. Papyri and ostraca: *P.Sarga*, *P.Mon.Epiph.*, *P.Mich.Copt*. Ostraka: *O.CrumST*, *O.CrumVC*, *O.Medin.HabuCopt*.

confused with dumping onto paper everything one knows. The professionalism and maturity that Sarah's editorial work displayed from an early stage was essential to its character.

Closely and necessarily linked to this historical approach was the integration of scholarly work across the lines of language-based disciplinary boundaries. No one would claim novelty for stating the desirability of such a method, I think; it has been a staple of thinking about Hellenistic history and documents, for example, for a couple of generations now, and the more integrative approach to late antiquity prevalent in the last three decades has also favored such attitudes. But it is, as we all know, easier to praise integration than to practice it, and practice has tended to lag advice by about a generation. The ambivalence toward Greek displayed by Crum's *Coptic Dictionary* is perhaps emblematic of the historic state of affairs in the field of Coptic studies, even though Crum himself knew the relevant Greek papyri well. But is still worth saying that Sarah embodied to an unusual degree, at an operational level, the conviction that our Greek, Coptic, and eventually Arabic papyri are all the products of a single society, one that we can understand only by seeing it as the complex and multilingual matrix that it was. Her frame of reference, in a collegial sense as well as a documentary one, was broad.

It was also systematizing and pedagogical. This is another area in which time would have allowed her to do much more. Most of us, I imagine, know about her plan for a Coptic papyrological primer. She was keen on the development of databases, both of metadata and of text, again to help make Coptic papyrology a more normal field, one with the underpinnings that allow both research and teaching. Even after she knew that her chances of a normal life-span were no better than even, she kept her focus on the long-term development of her field. Her last project proposal, for the Humboldt-Stiftung, was for a Hermopolite database. The conceptualization of that database was, as always with Sarah's projects, based on a collegial view of the field, one in which one took account of what other people were doing and collaborated wherever possible. Her work on the *Checklist* was only the most fully realized of these cooperative ventures.

In pursuit of understanding, in search of documents, and in the development of collegial projects, Sarah traveled a great deal. Some of her visits to collections were focused on particular bodies of material she was seeking, especially connected with Apa Apollo. But one had the feeling that such aims were really as much justifications for travel grant requests as her actual motives. What she was really in search of was a comprehensive understanding of every possible collection containing Coptic papyri, to see how it had been formed and what its sources were. This museum papyrology, as I would call it, as a subset of the museum archaeology of which Terry speaks, was informed by the wider tendencies in archaeological circles today to try to reconstruct material assemblages scattered through museums and to resurrect material once excavated and buried in museum storerooms rather than being fully published. But her museum papyrology had a distinctive flavor related to the vagaries of the papyrological marketplace. It is, once again, Kahle and Crum of whom one is reminded in this aspect of Sarah's work. This, to my mind, is one of the greatest of our losses in her early departure from our midst. We might have had from her a proper reconstruction of the archaeology and history of the finds of Coptic papyri and ostraka, something that would have contributed enormously to our understanding of the social place of Coptic writing and reading and thus to the culture of the late antique society of Egypt. This remains a great desideratum. And even more broadly, I think that all of the pieces in the giant jigsaw puzzle would eventually have been put into their proper place, as far as it is humanly possible to do so. That could have come only at a late stage of this long-term task of seeing everything



that there is to see. If we admire the reconstructive efforts Sarah carried out in her lifetime, we can only imagine what these long-term results might have been like. Last March, when in a storage area on the stairs leading up from the second floor of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo I found three wooden crates full of Coptic ostraka, returned a few months before the 1952 revolution by the Oriental Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum and untouched since, coming from the excavations at Medinet Habu and Deir el-Bahri respectively, it was no longer possible to have that information wind up in the hands I would have wished.

Terry, like all of us who encountered Sarah in the course of these travels, remembers the side of them that was not purely professional and the joy with which she explored the larger world. That is not at first sight part of my topic in these remarks. But in another way it was, because it was a form of community-building. I mentioned earlier my sense that Coptic documentary papyrology was on the whole a fairly lonely way of life in earlier generations, and perhaps even quite recently. There were few colleagues doing the same sort of work, and although of course all Coptic papyrologists read the publications of the others, it is often hard to find a sense that they cohered in any meaningful way. These scholars give the impression of doing things their own way and in a context formed by something other than the Coptic papyrologists of their day. Arthur Schiller, for example, although he knew the other Coptacists of his period, was far more importantly shaped by Romanists, and his community of methods was with them, not with others who edited Coptic documents.

This state of affairs has not yet completely passed away. But it is on its way out. Our presence here at this conference in Sarah's memory is a testimony to the creation of a kind of community. This side of professional life is most commonly called "networking" today, and Sarah was a champion networker. But the term is too narrow to do her justice, because it tends to suggest a selfish professionalism aimed at enhancing one's own position. That is not what I am talking about. Sarah was much more community-oriented than that, and I think that community-building is a much more apt description of her activity. She was, I think, fortunate in her timing in this respect, particularly in the sense that many of those present here at this gathering have made their own contributions toward starting to shape Coptic papyrology into a coherent field, too. Sarah was only at the beginning of her work in helping to form this field and this community, and one can only imagine what several more decades might have meant for them. But the relative youth of this gathering gives me hope that Sarah's work will be carried on by others and that Coptic papyrology will become the field she sought to make it.