

Open Access to Papyrus Collections and the Future of Editing Papyri*

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Abstract

This contribution aims to answer the question «what measures can we take to secure the future of editing papyri?». The main suggestion is to find ways to secure in the long term the survival, updating, and function of already existing and extremely useful traditional research aids, either printed or online.

Keywords

Open Access, editing papyri, risks and benefits

On the last day of the 22nd International Congress of Papyrology at Florence in 1998, the obituary of the Dutch papyrologist Ernst Boswinkel (1913-1995) brought to light an interesting episode.¹ Following an agreement between Boswinkel's supervisor at Leiden, Bernard Abraham van Groningen, and Hans Gerstinger, director of the papyrus collection at Vienna, the subject of Boswinkel's doctoral dissertation consisted of the edition of 17 papyri from the Vienna collection. So Boswinkel spent a couple of weeks going by bicycle to Vienna, where he studied between September 1938 and July 1939 "einige Wiener Papyri" to appear in his 1942 doctoral dissertation, which are now known under the abbreviation P.Vindob.Boswinkel.²

Two aspects of this episode are especially interesting. Firstly, the immense logistical difficulties which had to be met at that time by those who wanted to study papyri belonging to a collection far from their home. Secondly, the willingness of a director of an important papyrus collection to give young papyrologists access to groups of inedita – and indeed more young foreigners, like Eefje Prankje Wegener (1908-1958) and Herbert Joseph Liebesny (1911-1985), who later became an

* This paper was presented in the Plenary Session dedicated to the discussion on "Future of editing papyri: aspects and problems". Links and information on doctoral dissertations as of 26 may 2021.

¹ See Andorlini / Bastianini / Manfredi / Menci 2001 vol. I, p. XVI.

² Boswinkel 1942.

important scholar of the Middle East, were invited to study and to publish unpublished Vienna papyri.³

In the second half of the last century many papyrus collections made high quality photographs of papyri, so that the papyri could be studied even from distant locations. However, one had to contact the person in charge of the collection, asking for permission to study the papyrus and for a photo which often had to be paid for in advance. The arrival of the photo, weeks or months later, could cause heavy disappointment in the case that the traces which interested the papyrologist were not as visible as one had hoped. And of course, one would only order photographs of papyri which were already known, either by having been published or at least by being mentioned in the papyrological literature.

The situation changed completely in the 1990s when digital images of papyri started to be made easily available in the internet. A groundbreaking initiative, the *Advanced Papyrological Information System* (APIS), was started in 1995 by Roger Bagnall, Traianos Gagos, and John Oates.⁴ Now hosted by *papyri.info*, APIS today offers images and data of about 30 collections in and outside the United States. Among other gateways which offer joint access to digitalized papyri of different collections, the *Papyrus Projekt* certainly deserves a special mention. It is based in Leipzig and combines at present the digitalized papyri of 14 collections in and outside Germany.⁵ Other important collections, such as Berlin with its fine *Berliner Papyrusdatenbank* (*BerlPap*),⁶ Vienna,⁷ the Sorbonne at Paris,⁸ or Geneva,⁹ to name but a few, now present digitalized papyri on their own independent homepages.

In this way, access to papyrus images has become easy and fast – and sometimes, unfortunately, perhaps too easy and too fast! Indeed, several papyri have been published without the prior authorization of the owning collection. Such cases are unpleasant for all parties involved: for the person who has not complied with the rules – no matter whether deliberately or not –, and for the publisher and for the collection itself.

A great advantage of many presentations of digitalized papyri consists in the fact that they contain information on unpublished papyri as well. This happens, for example, in Vienna, in the German *Papyrus Projekt*, and in APIS. I quote from the APIS homepage: «APIS includes both

³ Gerstinger 1951, 412-413.

⁴ [<https://papyri.info/docs/apis>].

⁵ [<https://papyri.uni-leipzig.de/content/start.xml>].

⁶ [<https://berlpap.smb.museum>].

⁷ [<https://www.onb.ac.at/bibliothek/sammlungen/papyri/bestaende/bestandsrecherche>]: «Unser Katalog QuickSearch bietet Ihnen Informationen zu publizierten und einem Teil der unveröffentlichten Objekte der Papyrussammlung. Er umfasst alle in der Sammlung aufbewahrten Beschreibstoffe (Papyri, Ostraka, Pergamente, etc.) sowie alle Sprachgruppen (u. a. Ägyptisch, Griechisch, Koptisch, Arabisch) und wird laufend aktualisiert. Neben Basisangaben (Datierung, Herkunft, Publikationen etc.) stellen viele Einträge auch Abbildungen zur Verfügung.»

⁸ [<http://www.papyrologie.paris-sorbonne.fr>].

⁹ [archives.bge-geneve.ch/archive/founds/papyrus].

published and unpublished material in all languages. Generally, much more detailed information is available about the published texts. Unpublished papyri have often not yet been fully transcribed, and the information available is sometimes very basic. If you need more information about a papyrus, you should contact the appropriate person at the owning institution».¹⁰

Concerning the inedita, the individual institutions of APIS adopt rather different policies. While Berkeley, for example, offers high resolution images of many unpublished Tebtunis papyri,¹¹ the Princeton collection offers images only for about 25 inedita.¹² Practice also varies between the different collections presented in the German *Papyrus Projekt*. The detailed search distinguishes between «published», «unpublished – free», «unpublished – blocked», and «unpublished – reserved».¹³ However, the Giessen collection, for 2197 objects categorized as “unpublished – blocked”, shows at times quite decent images, as in the case of P.G.U.B. inv. 75,¹⁴ while at Leipzig the currently 180 blocked and the 658 reserved objects appear in low resolution, as we see here in P.Lips.inv. 83, a 6th cent. A.D. lease agreement.¹⁵ However, since the colleagues who reserved the pieces are always named in the metadata, they will obviously help if colleagues contact them for more detailed information. Nearly 20 years ago, I personally took part in the discussion about this feature of the joint digitalization project of the collections at Halle, Leipzig and Jena. The aim of offering low resolution images of inedita was to make it immediately clear to colleagues, whose attention had been triggered by pieces of information contained in the metadata, whether the size and/or state of conservation of the fragment made it worth contacting the person in charge of the collection.

However, in recent years there have been voices expressing frustration about such thumbnails or low resolution images of inedita. They come from colleagues who have become well accustomed to the obvious advantages of swift access to all data and to images of papyri via the internet. This issue seemed, at first sight, to be congruent with the general trend in favour of open access, openly

¹⁰ [<https://papyri.info/docs/apis>].

¹¹ Christopher Loga, a student of Greek Philology at the Bergische Gesamthochschule Wuppertal, spent part of his one-month stay at Cologne University in September 2019 checking the first 150 unpublished Greek and Demotic Tebtynis papyri in the APIS Berkeley database (source: [https://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/apis/apis2?sort=Author_Title&invno=&persons=&geographica=&genre=&subject=&context=&provenance=&date1=&date2=&keyword=&lang=&ucinvno=&apisid=&institute=]). 76 of them (=50,76%) were accompanied by high solution images, for example P.Tebt.0815 Fr.11 Verso (2): [https://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/apis/apis2?invno=&sort=Author_Title&item=3]. In the case of 74 (=49,33%), images were lacking completely, as in P.Tebt.UC 1615: [https://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/apis/apis2?invno=&sort=Author_Title&item=29].

¹² For example Princ. inv. GD 7887 B verso (=princeton.apis.p847): [[https://papyri.info/apis/princeton.apis.p847?rows=3&start=268&fl=id,title&fq=\(images-int:true+OR+images-ext:true\)&fq=series_led_path:princeton;*,*;apis&sort=series+asc,volume+asc,item+asc&p=269&t=303](https://papyri.info/apis/princeton.apis.p847?rows=3&start=268&fl=id,title&fq=(images-int:true+OR+images-ext:true)&fq=series_led_path:princeton;*,*;apis&sort=series+asc,volume+asc,item+asc&p=269&t=303)]

¹³ [https://papyri.uni-leipzig.de/search_form_complex.xed?XSL.lastPage.SESSION=/search_form_complex.xed], drop-down menu for the category «publication».

¹⁴ [https://papyri.uni-leipzig.de/rsc/viewer/GiePapyri_derivate_00006723/pbug-inv075recto-R72.jpg].

¹⁵ [https://papyri.uni-leipzig.de/rsc/viewer/UBLPapyri_derivate_00002913/PLipsInv83R72.jpg].

demanded and vigorously promoted by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG - German Research Foundation).¹⁶

The DFG is by far the most important sponsor of projects in the Humanities in Germany and has generously funded many important digitalizing initiatives in German papyrus collections.¹⁷ We all know that open access is a pressing issue in the field of academic publishing.¹⁸ It is felt to be unacceptable that publishers of books and periodicals benefit financially from the results of our research – research which we achieve with the help of public funding, be it our salaries, research grants, funding for publications or the whole public research infrastructure.

This argument has – wrongly, I believe – been transferred to the discussion about unpublished digitalized papyri. The difference lies in the undeniable fact that digitalized papyri and their metadata – even if these metadata, when describing the content of a papyrus and dating the document or the hand, have been prepared by competent papyrologists – are just not more than material and a starting point for the research itself, which includes the edition and interpretation of the unpublished object. It is true that digitalization itself has been largely enabled by public funding. But it is also true that not all information obtained by public funding has to be published. No-one would expect all raw data collected in a scientific laboratory to be immediately divulged, while it is reasonable to wait for the publication of the results deriving from research based on such data. Moreover, there is some temptation to consider everything which can be downloaded from the internet to be *publici iuris*. Instead, awareness is needed for the fact that the images and metadata of unpublished papyri constitute intellectual property, too.

Therefore I do not see any moral reason for making all digitalized inedita of all papyrus collections openly available. Of course, I am not against open access to any ineditum in any papyrus collection. For example, the German *Papyrus Projekt* offers at present for the Leipzig collection full information and high resolution images for 2745 unpublished objects, compared to 175 blocked and 495 reserved inedita.¹⁹

One may ask for what reason a number of inedita in some papyrus collections are blocked at all. In most cases, I believe, it is in the interest of the future of editing papyri. As a result of more than a century of intensive and still increasing papyrological work on collections whose material is not likely to increase any more in the future, the amount of material suitable to train young scholars has dramatically diminished. Nevertheless, the challenge of exploring unknown documents exerts a high degree of fascination on our most promising students of Classics and/or Ancient History. This

¹⁶ See [https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/infrastructure/lis/open_access/index.html].

¹⁷ The DFG has financed the digitalization of papyri at least, to my knowledge, in the collections of Berlin, Gießen, Köln, and for the joint papyrus project Halle-Jena-Leipzig.

¹⁸ The underlying strategy of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) is explained in [<https://www.bmbf.de/files/open-access-strategien.pdf>].

¹⁹ Result of a query in the search section of the homepage of the *Papyrus Projekt* made on 15 April 2020.

is why I believe it to be extremely important that curators of papyrus collections identify and reserve groups of unedited papyri to train future papyrologists, particularly doctoral students. I personally have had the chance to closely observe for years how my colleague Charikleia Armoni, curator of the Cologne collection, has chosen from among the unpublished papyri of our collection those pieces not only likely to serve our students to put their ambitions and abilities towards the challenge posed by completely unknown evidence, but which have also been enough to form the subject of three recent doctoral dissertations and one doctorate in progress.²⁰

Of course, such foresight is only possible if papyrologists are in charge of, and themselves working in, a collection. And I am well aware that many papyrus collections – not at all of minor importance and potential – are not curated, at least at present, by papyrologists. Would it be advisable, in such circumstances, to make all high resolution images and all additional information about any *ineditum* widely available on the internet? I strongly disagree, at least as long as there is some person in charge of the collection, even if not a papyrologist, and even if only on a part-time basis. By keeping control over the material offered on the homepage, such a person would have the means to:

- inform upon request whether other scholars are interested in the same object;
- ensure that the images and data offered on the homepage are properly acknowledged by potential users;
- consult with papyrologists as to whether some unpublished material should be withheld for the instruction of future papyrologists or for projects of larger importance.

Indeed, we have to be well aware that the decision to offer open access to images of unpublished papyri is irreversible. Moreover, this measure would be likely to encourage institutions not to appoint any person in charge of such a collection. This would not only be harmful for the collection itself, but also for those papyrologists who want to have easily available images and data. Many of us have experienced that digitalized images, even if of high quality, are sometimes not sufficient for serious research. Autopsy is still needed, and it can be provided, on request, if there are still persons in charge of collection who either have a papyrological background themselves or who can swiftly contact papyrologists living not too far from the institution to have a look on the original.

Furthermore, we should not forget that access to all *inedita* would severely damage the chance of obtaining funding for larger research projects on items of such a collection. It is remarkable that on the one hand the DFG requires complete access to all digitalized *inedita*, but on the other hand applications for DFG-funding (and, of course, for funding from other institutions as well) will always require a very accurate description of the objects to be investigated – a description which

²⁰ Backhuys 2018; Skarsouli 2020; Charlotte Lehmann, *Literarische und dokumentarische Papyri aus den Sammlungen Jena und Köln*, doctoral dissertation defended in 2018, publication being prepared; Riccardo Vecchiato, *Literarische und dokumentarische Papyri aus der Kölner Papyrussammlung*, doctoral dissertation defended in 2020.

would be virtually impossible if it cannot be ruled out that the papyrus in question is already in the focus of research of other scholars or will be in the near future.

As a result of such a development one would have to expect not more, but less study of such digitalized inedita. Instead of more, valuable editions we would just have more images and more metadata. These consequences can already be seen. At the beginning of the last decade the Cologne collection put hundreds of high resolution scans of Demotic, Coptic, and Greek papyri into open access.²¹ To our knowledge, no work has been done on these fragments since then.²² Technically, access to unpublished material could be made swiftly available. But editing unpublished papyri is normally very time-consuming.

So, what measures can we take to secure the future of editing papyri? I have argued that complete open access to all inedita would not be a great help. Before taking any new initiatives into consideration, I strongly recommend that our first urgent need and obligation be to find ways to secure in the long term the survival, updating, and function of already existing and extremely useful traditional research aids, either printed or online, such as the *Berichtigungsliste*,²³ the *Sammelbuch*, the *Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden (HGV)*,²⁴ or the *Bulletin of Online Emendations to Papyri (BOEP)*.²⁵ The future of those papyrological institutions which curate these important research aids is crucial for the future of papyrology as a whole. More experienced papyrologists could also contribute both to the future of editing papyri and to the valuable instruction of new generations of editors if they considered, from time to time, withdrawing some of the papyri they have reserved, if they do not feel they will have time to return to them in the nearer future.

Besides these general considerations, many other measures and initiatives may be likely to improve the future of editing papyri. One of these, I believe, could offer a useful help for editing more of the immense number of unpublished papyrus fragments which are neglected because it seems impossible to put them into a context. It is obvious, and has been already argued in Epicurean epistemology, that scientific investigation starts from evident facts ($\delta\eta\lambda\alpha$) in order to understand better those which are not evident ($\alpha\delta\eta\lambda\alpha$).²⁶ Likewise, papyrus documents which recall already known formulae and/or practices can be studied, edited and explained more easily than those which do not offer such clues. However, many more such clues may be found if we had a new, comprehensive investigation and presentation of the complicated reality of Egyptian administration

²¹ [<https://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/ifa/NRWakademie/papyrologie/inedita/index.html>].

²² Of course, we may have overlooked publications in which some of these Cologne inedita have been used. But this fact would confirm my assumption that uncontrolled open access can impair the transparency of papyrological research.

²³ [<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/humanities/berichtigungsliste>].

²⁴ [<http://aquila.zaw.uni-heidelberg.de>].

²⁵ [<https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/fakultaeten/philosophie/zaw/papy/projekt/bulletin.html>].

²⁶ Epic., *ep. Hdt.* 38.

in Hellenistic and Imperial times, in other words, a new Mitteis/Wilcken.²⁷ If this urgent desideratum could be fulfilled, many apparently enigmatic texts which have figured in part for long time among the inedita of our papyrus collections would probably be better understood and finally edited, contributing to a deeper understanding of the reality of life in antiquity.

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²⁷ Mitteis / Wilcken 1912.