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Alfred Chester Beatty and his Biblical (and other) Papyri at Ninety

الفريد تشيستر بيتي وبردياته في القرن التاسع عشر، جارريك ألين

In the introductory volume to the first edition of the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, a project funded by Beatty himself, Sir Frederic G. Kenyon concludes with a lengthy note of gratitude to his patron:

Biblical students will not be slow to congratulate Mr. Chester Beatty on his extraordinary good fortune in acquiring this unique group of manuscripts, and to thank him for making them so fully available for their study. As editor, I can only express my gratitude to him for placing material of such fascinating interest in my hands just at the moment when I was free to undertake it, and my regret for the imperfections of execution which more competent scholars will no doubt discover.¹

Although this statement is a stereotypical acknowledgement of funding and humility, it reflects a larger perspective that the guild owes collectors a debt of gratitude. This view that Beatty and the other large-scale collectors of that generation are ultimately responsible for the discovery, acquisition, and publication of the papyri remains largely intact in the popular imagination. Beatty is, after all, the one who purchased the material with his own funds, transported them to Europe, had Hugo Ibscher mount them in glass, brought them to London to be studied by Kenyon, paid for their publication, and eventually brought them to Dublin (along with the rest of his astounding collection) after the Second World War, finally leaving them upon trust for the use and enjoyment of the public to be housed in a museum that bears his name to this day. This is surely no insignificant series of events and, insofar as Beatty could have discharged his fortune in any way he saw fit, we might indeed be thankful that he spent his money on items that are so relevant to our field.

The portrait of Beatty as a lone actor and generous benefactor to Biblical Studies and Papyrology, not to mention the other disciplines and the broader public that

continue to profit from access to his sprawling collection,² is a persistent narrative. By all accounts Beatty was deeply generous, philanthropic, and a patron for research on this collection, a portrait promulgated most notably by his aristocratic friends³ and a biography penned by the press officer of his mining company in 1985 that has influenced “official” narratives of Beatty’s centrality to the collection for nearly thirty years.⁴ Ninety years after the announcement of the acquisition of the Biblical Papyri in *The Times* by Kenyon on 19 November 1931, the goal of this book is to take stock of the scholarship on the papyri and the narrative that stands behind the collection in an effort to explore new avenues of research, to emphasise the collaborative nature of Beatty’s enterprise and the scholarship that it has enabled, and to point to the many agents, ancient and modern, who made it possible for us to saunter through the glass doors of the Chester Beatty to engage with some of the earliest copies of the New Testament and other works. We do this by combining close study of the papyri in the Beatty collection, especially by scholars who offer new approaches to the material, with an exploration of the popular narrative around Beatty himself that accrues importance and cultural value to these manuscripts. This approach is not to deny the critical value and cultural importance of the manuscripts that Beatty acquired, nor is it to deny the important text-critical value that these manuscripts have for reconstructing “original” or “initial” texts,⁵ but to contextualise the material as it now stands in the broader discourse on Papyrology, to reflect upon the period in which great personal collections like Beatty’s were assembled, and to situate our scholarship within the larger historical narratives that dominate the ways we

¹ Kenyon 1933, 18.

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² See Cathcart 1989; Unkel 2019 for general information on the biblical collection, and see Allen 2021; Allen / Royle 2020 for research on other biblical manuscripts in the collection.

³ Powerscourt 1974, 217–44.

⁴ Wilson 1985. See also Kennedy 1988; Horton 2003; Horton 2004.

⁵ There is absolutely no doubt that the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, not to mention the other aspects of the papyrological collection and copies of biblical works preserved in multiple languages on multiple writing supports in the museum, are of great critical value for scholars interested in textual history, palaeography, scribal practices, and social history. See Horton 2004 and Malik 2017, 2–5 for recent takes on the importance of the Biblical Papyri. On the textual value of the Biblical Papyri see Aland 2004.

write and think about our work. The careful philological work and the larger stories we tell ourselves about the people and institutions that made these artefacts available to us for study are undoubtedly connected. Philology and ethics are two sides of the same coin.

Exploring the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, the Beatty narrative, and the larger papyrological collection side by side is an important undertaking because Beatty's activities and the stories around his collection are far from unique among his contemporaries. They have ongoing relevance for those who work with manuscripts in institutional contexts of many kinds. For example, consider the narrative surrounding another American art enthusiast whose collection is also housed in a museum bearing his name, Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919).⁶ Kent Clarke's 2006 biographical sketch of Freer describes him, in idealistic language, as an industrialist who was a "self-made millionaire," and as one who eschewed the "self-interested pursuit of wealth," instead putting his riches to good use to "encourage a sensitivity of 'the beautiful' that would arrest the materialism of the Industrialist Age."⁷ Freer had broad artistic tastes, including a focus on material from the Far East, worked diligently to institutionalise his collection before his death, and cultivated a deep bench of agents in Egypt and elsewhere to seek out purchases on his behalf.⁸ He even worked with Maurice Nahman, a Cairo dealer known also to Beatty.⁹ Moreover, Freer, like Beatty, paid a reputable scholar handsomely for the publication of his manuscripts¹⁰ and he later took on the role of patron to scholars and art collectors, all the while overcoming the spectre of a genetic illness.¹¹ Freer's story as a self-made, generous, persevering American who pulled himself up by his bootstraps to create a world-renowned collection of manuscripts and *objets d'art* has striking parallels to Beatty's narrative as described by Wilson and previous generations of curators.¹² Beatty's collection is indeed unique and enduringly relevant to biblical and other kinds of scholarship, but he is part of a larger tradition of wealthy American industrialists and capitalists who emerged from the Gilded Age with for-

tunes to build, money to spend, an aversion for taxes and meddlesome bureaucracy, and a taste for manuscripts and beautiful things. The larger issues that contributors explore in this book, whether they explore the fine textual details of Manichaean psalms, histories of acquisition, or the stories we accept about "great men," are relevant for many (if not all) institutional collections that preserve the most primary sources of our disciplines.

Inextricably bound up in the narratives surrounding Beatty and his collection are the manuscripts themselves, artefacts that, when taken together, offer us chance glimpses at the many cultures, individuals, and communities that produced, used, and transmitted these works. In addition to larger critical questions, the essays that follow work to connect the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri to the other ancient works preserved on papyrus in the collection and to trends in the broader discipline of Papyrology. For example, Brian McGing walks us through the emerging trends of Papyrology in its second century, highlighting the monumental nature of the editorial task that still remains from the material uncovered over a century ago, pointing to the work involved in the indebtedness of Papyrology to colonialism, and unpacking the historical narratives that remain to be crafted from the documentary material.

Similarly, Usama Gad examines the embeddedness of colonialism and Eurocentrism in Papyrology, arguing that this trend is not something unique to the earliest generations of papyrologists; it is something that continues today when Egypt's glorious past is emphasised to the detriment or ignorance of modern Egypt and its agency in the antiquities trade. We can begin to "decolonize" the archive through detailed historical research that seriously considers the good, the bad, and the ugly of the history of the discipline. Exploring the collection and its materials from this angle highlights the often-invisible role of Egyptians in producing, using, and working to discover the papyri that have become almost entirely the domain of European and North American scholars. This volume works to address this issue by including Arabic titles and author names at the start of each article and an Arabic summary at the end of each piece, prepared by Gad. We also address issues of access by making the book open access, thanks to funding from the Irish Research Council and European Research Council.

Next, the detective work of Daniel B. Sharp and Brent Nongbri complements the broader strokes of McGing and Gad by taking up the call for detailed work in the archives, showcasing the complexity that the ad hoc and unprovoked collecting of the early twentieth century has wrought on the discipline. Looking at the Bodmer Papyri and Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri in particular, we see that the story of the manuscripts we work with are entangled

⁶ The Freer Collection is part of the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. For its relevance to biblical studies and Beatty manuscripts, see Hurtado 2006.

⁷ Clarke 2006, 19, 21.

⁸ Clarke 2006, 22–3, 32.

⁹ Clarke 2006, 32. Freer also used US consular and diplomatic services to transport his purchases out of Egypt (p. 34–5). See Jill Unkel's article in this volume for more on Nahman.

¹⁰ Sanders 1910; Sanders 1912; Sanders 1917; Sanders 1918; Sanders / Schmidt 1927.

¹¹ Clarke 2006, 39–41. Beatty famously struggled with silicosis.

¹² Wilson 1985; Horton 2003; Horton 2004, 149–53.

with the realities of divided collections and opaque, or even intentionally constructed, origin stories. More work in the archives of various collecting institutions is required if we are to better understand the manuscripts and their texts.

Jill Unkel, the Curator of the Western Collection at the Chester Beatty, gets more specific than Sharp and Nongbri, focusing on the acquisition of the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri in particular. The details of the acquisition remain vague, but Unkel emphasises the collaborative and international endeavour that stands behind the collection of the material, a reality that demonstrates the complex and variegated social ties that lead to a collection like the one we have in Dublin. The collection bears Beatty's name but it is not the fruit of his labour alone. Unkel concludes by arguing for renewed attention to museum archaeology, or "mining the archive," as one route forward for better understanding the origins and contexts of the manuscript we continue to engage.

Getting more specific still, Yii-Jan Lin focuses not on acquisition history, but on Beatty himself, the popular narrative that supported his collecting activities, and the reception of the narrative by later generations. She takes direct aim at the narrative propagated by Wilson (1985) and others, pointing out the deeply one-sided portrayal and its obvious factual inaccuracies about Beatty's family and wealth. For Lin, collections like Beatty's are built upon generational exploitative practices and enabled by colonial regimes, a stark contrast to the stories we tell about the collections as exquisite things acquired on a great adventure. She decentres Beatty as a figure and turns our attention to those who had no role in the popular narrative and whose labour enriched Beatty and his family before him, including those who worked in his mines and those who were enslaved by Beatty's ancestors in the Caribbean. These anonymous people too played a role in bringing us the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, and her paper begins to give them a voice in our scholarship on these materials. When we read across archives – historical, scholarly, economic, and popular – we can begin to gain a view of the larger story that stands behind the enduring, simplified narratives.

In a similar vein Jennifer Knust's essay explores Papyrology not as the philanthropic result of wealthy men seeking the purity of beauty and antiquity (like Clarke 2006 describes Freer's activities), but as an "art of destruction." By this she means that the papyri are the souvenirs of destructive practices and attitudes supported by colonialism and capitalism. Just as mining destroys the landscape to extract precious minerals, so too does text collecting leave collateral damage, both in the process of amassing enough wealth to collect manuscripts in the first place (as

Lin argues) and also in the communities from which these items are extracted, especially in the political context of the "great powers diplomacy" of the early twentieth century (as Gad points out). Her work, in concert with Gad's perspective, makes us attentive to the ongoing illicit trade of antiquities and helps us to remember that at the other end of a smuggled papyrus there's often an Egyptian child crawling through a narrow mineshaft.

Turning from direct questions around the ethics and complexities of collecting, the remaining articles explore more specifically critical questions relevant to particular literary traditions represented by the Beatty collection. These essays are not disconnected from the metacritical issues that open the volume but are more attuned to larger issues classically relevant to Papyrology. Kelsie Rodenbiker, for example, uses the papyri as a way to analyse scholarly language around faithfulness, fidelity, scripture, and scribal activity, especially as it relates to the New Testament. For her, language pertaining to scribal fidelity in the process of copying is used as a cipher for the canonical and textual imaginaries that undergird perceptions of the scriptural in New Testament studies. We ought to view manuscripts like the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri as unique instances of reception, and as a space where scribes and communities co-mingle to create the New Testament anew.

Taking a more material approach, Kristine Rose-Beers engages the Chester Beatty's papyrological collection to explore the evolution of the book, moving from scroll to single-quire codex to multi-quire codex, with a special focus on binding procedures. When we explore the papyri from this perspective, we gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between text and material and of the actual reading experiences that these manuscripts would have engendered when they were first made and used.

Tommy Wasserman also pays attention to the scribal aspects of early New Testament papyri and what they reveal about channels of tradition and cultural transfer in the ancient Roman world, particularly the relationship between Jewish and Christian scribal cultures that both used the Greek language. For Wasserman, shared Jewish and Christian scribal practices suggest perhaps an earlier date for some of the more substantial New Testament papyri, pushing back against recent challenges to the early dating of the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri and other collections.¹³

The New Testament is not the only ancient literary collection preserved on papyri. The Septuagint – the Greek translations of Jewish scriptures, or the Old Testament – are

¹³ See Nongbri 2018.

also preserved among the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri. Kristin De Troyer's essay examines the complicated textual history of the book of Esther, focusing on the variations internal to its Greek traditions. Her careful textual analysis illustrates the text-critical importance of the papyri as early witnesses to these traditions. And although the Biblical Papyri have been privileged for their text critical value, over and against other possible uses, De Troyer shows us that there is still much to uncover and recategorize when it comes to the ancient texts of scriptural works.

The final two articles in the book turn to an area that has until quite recently been overlooked when it comes to thinking about Christian writings preserved on papyrus: Coptic literature. Hugo Lundhaug examines the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, one manuscript of which is part of the Beatty collection, concluding that, although interest in the work appears to have died off in late antiquity, themes preserved in it appear in much later Coptic apocrypha. Nonetheless, it is an ideal example of what we owe to the papyrological material uncovered in Egypt around the turn of the twentieth century; without the papyri, much early Jewish and Christian literature would be lost. Kimberley A. Fowler's essay also addresses a Coptic tradition, this time focusing on the Manichaean psalms, their presentation of women, and interpretation of female figures in the New Testament Gospels and other ancient Christian literature. Fowler argues that when we coordinate the literary evidence with the documentary papyri from a location like Kellis, where we know an active Manichaean community existed, we can gain a deeper understanding of the role of women in the community and in early Christianity more broadly. The Coptic papyri should not be overlooked because they can shed important light on genuine instantiations of early Christian literature and practices.

Overall, this book is designed to reassess the critical value of the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri in relationship to Papyrology more broadly and the stories about this collection ninety years after its existence was made public. The articles that follow do this by acknowledging the

inherent connection between acquisition and exhibition and between the consequence for real, mostly anonymous people who enabled the acquisition and our own scholarship by rethinking the critical emphases that have dominated scholarship on the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri since the 1930s. It is my hope that this publication supports the institutional goals of the Chester Beatty in caring for, researching, sharing, and promoting its collection and in fostering understanding, engagement, and curiosity. The substance of this book shows that there remains much to be curious about and that there is much more to be said about the papyri, not to mention the rest of the collection that extends from cuneiform tablets to Dürer prints to deluxe Byzantine gospel manuscripts to snuff boxes and beyond. The Beatty collection and its archives remain fertile ground for researchers from many traditions and disciplines, and I hope that this book encourages new research and interest in the collection.

And while we might decide not to follow Kenyon in thanking Chester Beatty himself, especially since he is no longer our personal patron, we can certainly extend our gratitude to the staff at the museum that bears his name, along with the taxpayers of Ireland and others who fund it, for continuing to conserve, display, and make accessible some of the most remarkable papyrological materials in existence. I am grateful to the Chester Beatty for hosting a conference where these papers were first read in October 2021, especially to Jill Unkel for her logistical work, but also to the technical team, Head of Collections Sinéad McCartan, and Director Fionnuala Croke for their support, participation, and conversation. The conference and part of the funding that enabled this book to be fully open access were graciously provided by the Irish Research Council's New Foundations Scheme 2019 under the auspices of a project entitled *Greek Papyri and the Earliest Copies of the New Testament at the Chester Beatty*. The open access costs were also supported by the European Research Council as part of the *Titles of the New Testament* (TiNT) project.

في هذه المقدمة يعرض المحرر الرئيسي للكتاب موضوع هذا المجلد وهو برديات تشستر بيتي بعد تسعين عاماً من اقتنائها على يد جامع التحف الشهير هذا. حيث يقدم جارك، بعد عرض قصير عن الصورة المثالية التي رسمها تشيستر بيتي عن نفسه لمنهج المجلد في تفكيك هذه السردية فيقول: "لا يهدف هذا النهج إذن إلى إنكار القيمة الأدبية أو الأهمية الثقافية للمخطوطات التي جمعها بيتي، ولا يهدف إلى إنكار القيمة العلمية الهامة للنصوص التي تتمتع بها هذه المخطوطات في مسألة تحديد النصوص "الأصلية" أو "الأولية" للكتاب المقدس، ولكنه مناهج يهدف بالأساس إلى وضع هذه المادة العلمية في سياق الجدل العلمي الدائر الآن في مجال علم البردي وذلك لتحليل الفترة التي تم فيها تجميع مثل هذا المجموعات الكبيرة من قبل الأفراد مثل مجموعة تشستر بيتي، وكذا لتحديد وضع الدراسات البردية ضمن الروايات التاريخية الأكبر التي تهيم على وتؤثر في الطرق التي نكتب ونفكر بها في عملنا الأكاديمي. فلا يمكن أن ينكر أحد الارتباط الوثيق بين البحث اللغوي الدقيق وبين القصص والروايات الأبعد من ذلك والتي نقصها أثناء بحثنا الدقيق عن الأشخاص والمؤسسات التي أتاحت لنا هذه المكتشفات الأثرية للدراسة. فقه اللغة والأخلاقيات المهنية وجهان لعملة واحدة". وفي نهاية المقال يقدم المؤلف مختصرات باللغة الإنجليزية للمقالات التي يحتويها هذا الكتاب بالإضافة إلى قائمة مراجع. المقال مفيد لمن يريد أن يستعرض هذا المجلد بشكل سريع للتعرف على أهم الموضوعات التي يتناولها المؤلفون وقائمة المراجع في نهاية المقال مفيدة لمن يريد أن يتعمق أكثر في موضوع السردية التي نسجها تشيستر بيتي عن نفسه كجامع مخطوطات هدفه البر والنقوى.

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