Conservation of a group of Coptic Papyri from the Apa Apollo Monastery

Vania Assis
Conservation of a group of Coptic Papyri from the Apa Apollo Monastery

Vania Assis

The papyri discussed in this paper belonged to a large group of items acquired by the British Museum in 1996. Some fragments in the vast collection have been conserved since its acquisition, but a large part of the material remained to be treated. The fragments were excavated at Bawit (near Asyut), the site of one of the monasteries of Apa Apollo in the Hermopolite nome. They were probably written between the fifth and eighth century AD and their known content relates to daily monastery activities.

Many items were impossible to read because of their poor condition, having been left untreated since the moment they were excavated. The papyri were distributed over 9 boxes of material, each containing numerous pieces, some wrapped in tissue paper and others loose. All pieces were heavily compressed, with dust and sand accumulated between the layers. Insect damage was also present, with missing areas and lacunae patterns clearly visible on many fragments.

Before treatment, all papyri were examined for the presence of problematic characteristics, specifically salts and fugitive ink. Any adverse reaction would mean limitations to treatments using moisture, but the ink proved very stable (possibly carbon black) and no salts were found.

The surface of the papyri was cleaned using a soft brush, removing accretions and dust, taking care not to disturb archaeological evidence, such as residues that might be evidence of use. All detached fibres and loose material were kept in small sample bags, as well as the soil that was removed.

The fragments were then humidified to remove creases and folds. This was done by placing the papyri in a Gore-Tex chamber and slowly acclimatising it to a higher humidity. Moisture content was increased to varying degrees, depending on the thickness and size of the fragments, which were kept inside the chamber until becoming more flexible. This allowed the material to be manipulated slowly, recovering its original shape and format. Any additional soil residues and encrusted sand found inside the folds was removed at this point. Small weights were placed on the fragments as they were unfolded, to keep them in place to avoid distortion while they were slowly dried. The process of unfolding proved challenging, as the material was often brittle and decayed, sometimes to the point at which it consisted of only a weak fibre structure, making handling difficult and treatment time-consuming.

These weak areas needed to be reinforced, as well as areas where the material was likely to further fragment or disintegrate if no reinforcement was introduced. To repair and stabilise the fragments, consolidation of the papyrus layers was carried out using wheat starch paste, lightly applied between delaminations and split surfaces. Using this same adhesive, small Japanese paper tabs were pasted along the fibres, strengthening them while being materially and visually discrete.

Japanese paper is ideal for this type of repair, as it possesses acid-free qualities that make it chemically stable; its long fibre composition allows it to provide good structural support without adding weight to the repaired material. The paper tabs were toned to match the
different shades of the papyrus fragments, blending well with their texture while still distinct from the original material. These repairs are also easy to remove, if the need for fragments to be repositioned or joined in a different arrangement arises.

After repair, in order to flatten the papyri, they were laid between bondina and blotters, placed between boards and left with light weights resting on them for a week. Once dry, the fragments were ready to be re-housed and analysed for eventual matches. This was made possible with the help of the curator and by examining the unique pattern of each individual piece over a light box, where the fibre structure becomes more visible. The papyri were joined using the same repair method, placing Japanese paper tabs to connect the fragments and to mount them between sheets of glass. The glass was then sealed with linen binding tape.

Overall, the papyri have benefited from an improved condition, with conservation treatment adding stability while finally making access and safe handling possible. A portion of this material has been fully treated as part of the project, with some items still to be conserved.

This project was one of a group of works completed in 2014, as part of an Icon and HLF sponsored internship at the British Museum, with training in papyrus conservation under the supervision of Bridget Leach.
Fig. 1: One of the boxes before conservation (photo: Vania Assis).

Fig. 2: Detail of delaminating area with loose fibres (photo: Vania Assis).
CONSERVATION OF A GROUP OF COPTIC PAPYRI FROM THE APA APOLLO MONASTERY

Fig. 3: Repairing the fragments with Japanese paper tabs (photo: Vania Assis).

Fig. 4: After conservation (photo: Vania Assis).