



“Fill my hand with a papyrus sheet so that I  
can tell you a lot!”

A papyrus bundle for Bridget Leach

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**“Fill my hand with a papyrus sheet so that I can tell you a lot!”<sup>1</sup>**

## **A papyrus bundle for Bridget Leach**

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It is my privilege to introduce this special issue of the *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* (BMSAES) dedicated to the recently retired papyrus conservator Bridget Leach in recognition of her extraordinary contributions to the field. The British Museum holds one of the most important collections of papyri from Ancient Egypt and Sudan, including the famous Rhind Mathematical Papyrus, the largest collection of Book of the Dead papyri and copies of the most celebrated Ancient Egyptian literature and poetry. Scholars from around the world regularly consult the collection (whether in the departmental study room or online) which continues to be the focus of monographs, articles, exhibitions, lectures and tours. Safeguarding and conserving this collection is a fundamental Museum activity.

Bridget Leach has been a conservator in the British Museum since 1990 and is a leading expert in the restoration and conservation of papyrus. Her work encompasses every aspect of this, from removing past repairs that obscure the writing and completely reconstructing fragmentary manuscripts to checking and preparing papyri for loans, displays, or publication. Her scientific approach to the observation and testing of adhesives and colour pigments has led to the development of new conservation techniques and opened fresh lines of inquiry, described in a substantial number of international publications.<sup>2</sup>

The identification of pigments, particularly orpiment and realgar, which fade when exposed to light, is Bridget's special interest. She has shown that illustrated papyri in the British Museum collection exhibit varied degrees of fading depending on how much light they have received in the past and often reveal where different paints were used to obtain what was originally a relatively uniform colour. Bridget's findings have directed the Museum's policies towards lending and displaying papyri in exhibitions and galleries.

A pioneering and respected scholar, Bridget has effectively stressed the importance of integrating conservation science with the field of Egyptology by considering the material aspects of papyrus when studying the texts written upon them. She familiarised herself with the British Museum collection and its history while publishing on past restoration practices and previous research carried out by external scholars. Her in-depth, virtually encyclopaedic knowledge of the Museum's papyrus holdings is astonishing. It always surprised me how she could recall the 5-digit inventory numbers of thousands of papyrus frames!

Known as a generous colleague who is willing to share her knowledge, Bridget's erudite, confident advice is regularly sought by conservators and scholars. She applied her skills beyond

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1 Excerpt from a satirical letter from Deir el-Medina dating to the 19th-20th dynasty, 7.1-8.3 (line 11: *j:mh dr:t=i [11] m Dma Dd=i n=k qu[w]*), preserved in oDEM 1001 and pAnastasi I. Line count after the ostrakon; H. Fischer-Elfert, *Satirische Streitschrift (KÄT 7)*, Seite 14, Vers 1. See also E. Wente, *Letters from Ancient Egypt (SBL Writings from the Ancient World Series 1)*, Atlanta 1990, 98-110 for a translation.

2 A list of publications is attached below.

Bloomsbury to collections throughout the UK and internationally. Bridget has conserved papyri for the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, the Petrie Museum at University College London and Queen's College Oxford. She has also worked on site, conserving fragments excavated by the Cambridge Theban Mission at Luxor, by the Egypt Exploration Society's Mission to Qasr Ibrim in 2003, and the 2006 Spanish-Egyptian Mission to Dra Abu el Naga.

In tribute to a career of exceptional scope and impact, the current BMSAES issue presents recent research in papyrology and conservation by twelve scholars who worked closely with Bridget in the past. Authors of the papers in this 'Festschrift' include British Museum staff (from the departments of Ancient Egypt and Sudan and Conservation and Scientific Research), external scholars from the British Library, the University of Oxford and University College London, as well as conservation specialists from renowned papyrus collections abroad. Given Bridget's professional focus on Egyptian and Sudanese artefacts from the British Museum, discussions of objects that she conserved, most notably but not exclusively papyri, comprise the lion's share of this issue.

Julie Anderson's contribution on the leather amulet cases from Kulubnarti in northern Sudan helps illustrate the scope of Bridget's work. Such leather cases are made to house a magical religious text normally written on paper (*hijbat*) and thus designed to protect the wearer. As the exterior casings of such *hijabat* are similar in appearance, only through the study of their contents was it possible to determine whether a complete *hijabat* was of Christian or Islamic origin. Such unpacking or unrolling as well as freeing papyri from their old backings is where conservation and Egyptology intersect.

No Festschrift in honour of Bridget would be complete without discussing one of the Museum's masterpieces, the Greenfield Papyrus. Belonging to the priestess Nesitanebisheru, it is the longest known funerary papyrus and was the star of the exhibition 'Journey through the Afterlife. Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead,' (2010-2011) masterfully curated by John Taylor. For the first time, the whole 37m of the papyrus was displayed together providing a unique opportunity to take detailed measurements of the individual sheet sizes. This was carried out by Bridget Leach and Helen Sharp with assistance from Vania Assis. Appropriately, Helen Sharp, who will succeed Bridget as the British Museum's papyrus conservator, outlines the intriguing facts these detailed observations revealed about the production of papyrus rolls. Vania Assis, now with the British Library, contributed a report on the salvage and conservation of the Coptic papyrus fragments from the Apa Apollo Monastery at Bawit, probably written between the fifth and eighth century AD.

In tribute to her many years of conservation work on the Book of the Dead manuscripts, John Taylor dedicates an elaborate description of a complete funerary papyrus to Bridget. The papyrus was inscribed for the Prophet of Amun-Re named Panebmontu and is of interest in combining texts from the Book of Amduat with excerpts from other Netherworld books.

Cary Martin worked closely with Bridget on the British Museum's collection of Demotic and Greek papyri, unravelling the mysteries of past handling and framing and revealing surprising new information. Martin recently identified fifteen frames of papyri in the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan's collection as administrative texts from Herakleopolis dating from the fifth century BC. His current contribution illustrates the same painstaking task of disentangling a complex set of demotic papyrus fragments.

Stephen Quirke's contribution bears witness to Bridget's commitment to training and sharing expertise while recounting the rescue of a series of famous Egyptological manuscripts at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology. As a result of this collaboration, conservator

Renee Waltham was able to complete the monumental task of conserving the papyri from the 1889 excavation seasons in Lahun for Egyptology and a wider public.

Other papers celebrate Bridget's interest in the history of the British Museum's papyrus collection. The contributions by Patricia Usick and by Melissa Downing and Richard Parkinson focus on correspondence between earlier collectors and excavators, shedding light on the original context of papyri finds and their journey into museum collections. Usick offers a true detective story about the rediscovery of the Bankes Papyri in Bankes' sprawling country home, Kingston Lacy, Dorset, where they lay forgotten for generations. Downing and Parkinson elaborate on the Ramesseum papyri, a unique private library from Ancient Egypt that Bridget worked on intensively with Richard Parkinson, who was previously responsible for the papyrus collection in the British Museum. Reassessments of Percy Newberry's notes from around 1938 yield new information about the location of the tomb shaft in which the Ramesseum papyri were discovered and the identity of the tomb's owner. The Ramesseum papyri constitute but one of the major papyrus projects that Bridget and Richard accomplished together.

Many items in papyrus collections have been poorly preserved in the past and undoing the damage of earlier treatments often poses major challenges. Sophie-Elisabeth Breternitz discusses the special treatment and new storage measures used for a collection of carbonised papyri at Cologne in Germany. Although mounting between glass is widely considered the most appropriate method to store papyri, Jörg Graf draws attention to glass corrosion as a possible cause for the white/grey precipitation that appears on the inside of the plates, using the Leipzig collection as his case study. Eve Menei, who worked on the Louvre collection, discusses recent research on the use of Japanese paper inlay for papyrus mounting. Myriam Krutzsch uses the extensive Berlin collection to survey developments and changes in papyrus size and production methods while exploring their possible connections to provenance and date. In line with Bridget's efforts to integrate conservation and Egyptological research, Krutzsch raises questions worthy of deeper investigation.

## Acknowledgements

With only a handful of papyrus conservators in permanent positions worldwide, every individual departure poses a risk to heritage preservation. I am grateful to all the colleagues who contributed to this volume celebrating the achievements of a great conservator, and to the British Museum's research board for generously supporting this publication.

I think it is safe to say that everyone working with papyri would gladly join us in extending thanks to Bridget for devoting herself to a field that she greatly helped advance. I am extremely pleased to dedicate this volume to our dear colleague and friend.

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