The Papyrus Carlsberg Collection & Project

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The Papyrus Carlsberg Collection houses an invaluable collection of ancient papyrus manuscripts. At its center are the remains of the Tebtunis temple library, a unique archaeological discovery that represents the only large-scale institutional library preserved from ancient Egypt. The papyri, which date to the first two centuries of the common era, were found in cellars below a building within the temple enclosure where they had been left when the temple was abandoned in the early third century AD. Estimated at several hundred manuscripts, this is the richest assemblage of Egyptian literary papyri known to date. It preserves a broad range of texts, including detailed manuals on the performance of various rituals, religious compendia and treatises, scientific texts concerned with divination and medicine, and narrative literature. The texts shed detailed light on the operation of a temple and its priesthood, and many of the literary works are otherwise unknown.

The Papyrus Carlsberg Collection was founded in the 1930s by H.O. Lange with funds provided by the Carlsberg Foundation and presented to the University of Copenhagen in 1939. The Augustinus and Carlsberg Foundations have generously funded several recent acquisitions. The largest is the important private archive of the mercenary Horos son of Nechoutes, who was stationed in the military camp of Pathyris in Upper Egypt and saw battle as far away as Syria. His archive provides detailed information on the socio-economic life of an Egyptian soldier who invested in real estate in collaboration with his brothers. The camp and his home was destroyed during a rebellion in 88 BC. An international research collaboration was established in 1989, under the direction of P.J. Frandsen, in order to identify, catalogue, and publish texts from the collection. Since 1999, when the 10-year project came to a successful conclusion, the Papyrus Carlsberg Collection & Project has been directed by Kim Ryholt. The project continues to attract leading international experts and as of January 2016 more than twenty volumes of text editions have been published, in addition to numerous articles. Several further volumes in The Carlsberg Papyri series are currently in active preparation.

Director: Prof. Kim Ryholt (ryholt@hum.ku.dk).
Conservation: PhD fellow Thomas Christiansen.

Papyrus Carlsberg 1 (detail), inscribed with a fundamental treatise on the celestial bodies known as the Book of Nut, second century AD. The temple library held several versions of the text, which is first attested nearly 1,500 years earlier in the reign of Sety I where it was engraved in stone in the underground temple of Osiris at Abydos. A master version from the library was written in hieroglyphs and included detailed illustrations, while other simpler versions contained only the text and were written in the hieratic script. The version here shown contains both the original text in the hieratic script and later commentary on the ancient composition written in demotic. Photo: The Papyrus Carlsberg Collection.

Other manuscripts provide insight into different aspects of ancient society. Examples include an archive of contracts, also from Tebtunis, through which individuals obtained the status of temple slaves in order to avoid compulsory labour; an archive belonging to a family of embalmers at Hawara, who owned a building inside the renowned Labyrinth described by Herodotus and other classical authors; two exceptionally long accounts, each about 9 meters, concerning the construction of the famous temple of Edfu; and carbonized papyri from an imperial tax office at Mendes, which was deliberately burnt down during a rebellion. Among the oldest papyri in the collection are the Teaching for King Merikare and medical papyri of the New Kingdom, c. 1550-1100 BC. Later manuscripts, written in Coptic, include codices inscribed with medical texts and speeches by bishop Agathonicus of Tarsus, dating around the 5th/8th centuries.

Papyrus Carlsberg 36, legal document in the demotic script from Hawara, through which a husband ceded one third of a house to his wife. Photo: The Papyrus Carlsberg Collection.

Papyrus Carlsberg 250, detail showing the opening vignette of a Book of the Dead written c. 1000 BC. The funerary document belonged to a man named Atenihiptep who held various priestly offices at the great temple of Amun at Karnak. Photo: The Papyrus Carlsberg Collection.

The University of Copenhagen participates in the Franco-Italian excavations of the town of Tebtunis (dir. Prof. Claudio Gallazzi), here seen emerging below the desert sand. Ancient life in this society is documented in extraordinary detail owing to the wealth of papyri and other archaeological remains. Photo: Kim Ryholt, 2012.

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