

ANOTHER LETTER FROM ANTONIUS LONGUS TO HIS MOTHER NILOUS¹

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Abstract. — This article presents an edition of a fragmentary papyrus that was excavated at Karanis in 2010 by the joint expedition of the University of California, Los Angeles, the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, and the University of Auckland (URU) Fayum Project. The papyrus contains a letter (second century CE) that is badly damaged but is notable nonetheless because it was written by the same author as *BGU* 3.846, the well-known “Letter of a Prodigal Son.”

One of the most frequently cited letters preserved from the second century CE is *BGU* 3.846 (= *Sel.Pap.* 1.120).² In it a young man named Antonius Longus writes a rather pathetic letter to his mother Nilous wherein the contrite Longus repeatedly beseeches his mother – who has apparently disowned him – to receive him anew. He begins by explaining that he “was ashamed” to come to Karanis because he “goes about in filth” and even claims that he is “naked”; a little later in the letter he informs his mother that he is in debt and elsewhere begs her to “be reconciled” and states that he has “been chastised” and has “sinned.” The contrition on the part of Longus and the vocabulary he employed led a number of early commentators to draw parallels to the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32;³ hence this letter was, for a time, simply referred to as a “Letter of a Prodigal Son.”⁴ As a result, this letter has

¹ The authors would like to thank Roger Bagnall, Graham Claytor, and Bethany Simpson for their helpful comments. Excavations were carried out with the kind permission of the Egyptian Ministry of State of Antiquities.

² The TM no. for this letter is 28097. It is presently housed in the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung in Berlin and has the inventory no. P. 7104. An image of this papyrus (front and back) can be accessed online at: <http://ww2.smb.museum/berlpap/index.php/01968/>.

³ A. Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten. Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (Tübingen 1908) 123-127 (no. 11). Deissmann was the first to point out the parallel with the Parable of the Prodigal Son (p. 124): “Als eine merkwürdig gute Illustration zum Gleichnis vom verlorenen Sohn Luk 15:11ff.”

⁴ G. Milligan, *Selections from the Greek Papyri* (Cambridge 1910) xiv; A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 3rd ed. (New York 1919) 178.

been frequently treated in scholarship, especially New Testament and early Christian studies.⁵

Remarkably, a second letter written by Antonius Longus to his mother Nilous has been discovered in Karanis (see Figs. 1 and 2), the location of his mother in *BGU* 3.846 (l. 8). It was unearthed on October 6, 2010 by the joint expedition of the University of California, Los Angeles, the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, and the University of Auckland (URU) Fayum Project.⁶ The URU Fayum Project work in the east area of Karanis took place between 2008 and 2012, uncovering several domestic structures, a portion of a street, and a granary (see Fig. 3).⁷ The project focused on this area, as it is to the east of both the center of the site, which had been destroyed by the *sebakhin*, and the parts of the town previously excavated by the University of Michigan.⁸

The papyrus was found in trench 22, one of several laid out on a major street that stretches east to the edge of the town and west toward the center (see Fig. 4).⁹ The street runs parallel to others in the area. However, the western ends of the series of streets are obscured by the Michigan dump piles, so it is unfortunately impossible to know how they connected to

⁵ J.G. Winter, *Life and Letters in the Papyri* (Ann Arbor 1933) 106; H. Ljungvik, "Zum Markusevangelium 6, 14," *ZNTW* 33 (1934) 90-92; J. Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past: The Archeological Background of the Hebrew-Christian Religion* (Princeton 1946) 329 (and PL. 139); J.L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia 1986) 181-182 (no. 114); M. Alexiou, *After Antiquity: Greek Language, Myth, and Metaphor* (Ithaca 2002) 67-68; R. Bieringer, "Reconcile Yourselves to God: An Unusual Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5:20 in Its Context," in R. Buitenwerf, H.W. Hollander, and J. Tromp (eds.), *Jesus, Paul, and Early Christianity: Studies in Honour of Henk Jan De Jonge* (Leiden 2008) 20-21; J. Muir, *Life and Letters in the Ancient Greek World* (London 2009) 33-34; C. Breytenbach, *Grace, Reconciliation, Concord: The Death of Christ in Graeco-Roman Metaphors* (Leiden 2010) 174; G. Horrocks, *Greek: A History of the Language and its Speakers*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 2010) 178-182; R.N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids 2011) 218; L.L. Welborn, *An End to Enmity: Paul and the "Wrongdoer" of Second Corinthians* (Boston 2011) 449.

⁶ To date, the URU Fayum Project has only unearthed a handful of fragmentary Greek papyri at the site.

⁷ R.T.J. Cappers, E. Cole, D. Jones, S. Holdaway, and W. Wendrich, "The Fayyûm Desert as an Agricultural Landscape: Recent Research Results," in C. Arlt and M.A. Stadler (eds.), *Das Fayyûm in Hellenismus und Kaiserzeit. Fallstudien zu Multikulturellem Leben in der Antike* (Wiesbaden 2013) 35-50; H. Barnard, W. Wendrich, B.T. Nigra, B.L. Simpson, and R.T.J. Cappers, "The Fourth-Century AD Expansion of the Graeco-Roman Settlement of Karanis (Kom Aushim) in the Northern Fayum," *JEA* 101 (2015) 51-67.

⁸ The bibliography for excavations at Karanis by the University of Michigan is too extensive to list here. For the most recent discussion of that work, see T.G. Wilfong and A.W.S. Ferrara (eds.), *Karanis Revealed: Discovering the Past and Present of a Michigan Excavation in Egypt* (Ann Arbor 2014).

⁹ The papyrus has the project find number: FY10-18718-da. The trench supervisor of KAE 22 was Daniel Jones, assisted by Noha Shokry Mansour and Sarahi Villalobos.

the central residential areas. The street (Street 200 of Karanis East) was made of compacted layers of *sebakh*, mostly composed of animal dung and other garbage, and it had no paving of any kind, which is typical for streets at Karanis.¹⁰ Before the collapse and abandonment of the buildings lining the street, organic deposits in the street were mined for *sebakh* on several occasions. The process left a series of depressions that seem to then have been intentionally filled with sand and debris to provide a smooth surface. The papyrus was found in excavation unit 220015, which was the latest, upper-most occupational layer directly under several units of tumbled mud brick, large amounts of windblown sand, and other modern surface debris (see Fig. 5).¹¹ This unit contained material that was deliberately put in place to create a flatter road surface. Although it was the last organic deposit, *sebakhin* made a final cut (220009) in the Late Antique period through the material before the area was abandoned and covered by windblown sand.

The unit in question was approximately 4.4 by 1.8 meters with a maximum thickness of 0.5 meters and was built up against the outer surface of the limestone wall of the granary (220034) on the north side of the street (see Fig. 6). The granary wall was composed of a foundation of roughly carved limestone blocks on top of which was placed a wall of unfired mud brick (130001), for which the exact dating is uncertain. The exterior of this wall was covered in a coarse mud plaster of roughly the same composition as the mud bricks. The deposit reached the lower edge of the mud plaster (220039) that was applied to the exterior of the limestone wall.

The compact deposit in which the letter was found was composed of silty sand and organic materials. It contained a range of broken objects, some of which were intentionally discarded, while others may have blown into the street from adjacent areas.¹² Ceramic finds from this unit are particularly interesting, as they are of *Amphore égyptienne* 3 (AE3) type dated to the second century CE, despite occurring in units stratigraphically later

¹⁰ The one exception is street CS190, a dromos, which was paved. See E.M. Husselman, *Karanis Excavations of the University of Michigan in Egypt, 1928-1935. Topography and Architecture* (Ann Arbor 1979) 12-13 and 29-31; P. van Minnen, "Archaeology and Papyrology: Digging and Filling Holes?" in K. Lembke, M. Minas-Nerpel and S. Pfeiffer (eds.), *Tradition and Transformation: Egypt under Roman Rule. Proceedings of the International Conference Hildesheim, Roemer- and Pelizaeus Museum, 3-6 July 2008* (Leiden 2010) 465-466.

¹¹ All units are referred to by six digit codes. The first two numbers represent the trench (i.e. 13 or 22) while the other four are the unit number (i.e. 0001, 0002, 0003, etc.).

¹² Apart from the fragments of papyrus, the unit frequently contained pottery, charcoal, textile fragments, pieces of wool, cordage, animal bone, dung, seeds, one piece of basketry, one piece of red and gold painted plaster, and one clay sealing with rope fibers.

than those with fourth/fifth-century CE ceramics (e.g. Unit 220019).¹³ Given the date of the letter (II CE) and the presence of this early pottery, this material was no doubt moved from another space. It is likely that debris that had accumulated in a structure not far away was used to fill in the uneven road surface, produced by those gathering *sebakh* in Late Antiquity.

Despite the fact that unit 220015 was deposited to fill in potholes in the street, the context still provides further information about this letter and individuals involved. After the letter was read, it seems that it was discarded along with other common household items, including a broken sealing with a piece of rope still attached (see Fig. 7). Moreover, because the unit contained amphorae that originally date to the second century CE, which may have been used secondarily to carry water, the original depositional context is likely to have been a domestic structure. Garbage at Karanis was generally discarded either within an unused room in a house or, more likely in this case, in an adjacent courtyard.¹⁴

The URU Fayum Project fragment preserves fourteen partial lines and an address on the back. While only the beginning of each line is preserved, comprising anywhere from 10 to 14 letters (for ll. 1-12), because Longus begins the letter with the same formula he employed in *BGU* 3.846, the first few lines can be completely reconstructed.¹⁵ The hand of the present letter is the same as that of *BGU* 3.846 and contains a number of phonetic interchanges: most notably $\epsilon > \alpha$ and $\iota > \epsilon$ (ll. 2 and 3 cf. *BGU* 3.846.3, 4, 20, 22). Establishing the relationship and order of the two letters is difficult; in *BGU* 3.846.9-10 there is mention of a previous letter being sent but it cannot be determined whether the present fragment is that letter. While an apparent complaint about not receiving a letter from his mother is found in the present letter (ll. 5-7), which might suggest that it could have been written after *BGU* 3.846 since this complaint does not appear at the beginning of that letter, this is by no means conclusive. Thus, the chronological relationship of the two letters remains uncertain.

¹³ J.-Y. Empereur and M. Picon, "Les ateliers d'amphores du Lac Mariout," in J.-Y. Empereur (ed.), *Commerce et artisanat dans l'Alexandrie hellénistique et romaine: actes du Colloque d'Athènes organisé par le CNRS, le Laboratoire de céramologie de Lyon et l'École française d'Athènes, 11-12 décembre 1988* (Athens 1998) 77; R. Tomber, "Early Roman Egyptian Amphorae from the Eastern Desert of Egypt: A Chronological Sequence," in S. Marchand and A. Marangou (eds.), *Amphores d'Égypte de la basse époque à l'époque arabe* (Cairo 2007) 527. Sonali Gupta-Agarwal provided the analysis of ceramic materials at Karanis in 2010.

¹⁴ Husselman (n. 10) 8.

¹⁵ In *BGU* 3.846 lines tend to average between 30 and 35 letters. The initial layout of each letter is virtually the same with the address on the first line being set off and the text on l. 2 being indented before the following lines form a uniform left margin.

FY10-18718-da

H × W = 10.5 cm × 6.5 cm

Karanis, II CE

→ Ἀντῶ[νις Λόνγος Νειλοῦτι]
 vacat
 [[μο καί]] μητρει [πλῖστα χαίρειν καὶ διὰ πάντων]
 εὐχομαί σαι ὑγ[ειαίνειν. τὸ προσκύνημά σου ποιῶ]
 κατ' αἰκάστην ἢ[μαίραν παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ Σαρά-]
 5 πειδεῖ. [γ]εινώσκ[ειν σαι θέλω ὅτι ±10]
 [.]οι τῆγ [.]ῆν ἐπ[ιστολὴν γράφω καὶ μοι οὐδε-]
 μείαν ξ[γ]ραψες [±22 δι-]
 ηγήσατο ὅσα α[±24]
 με ὅτι . ωφω . [±24]
 10 οὐ προεδήλω[σ ±22]
 ων συγκατα . [±24]
 πες οὕτω χρονω[±24]
 εἰδου . [.] . π . [±24]
 [±10]σ[±24]

Back (along the fibers)

15] ἀπόδος Νειλοῦτι ἀπὸ Λόνγου ὑε[τιοῦ.]

2 l. μητρί; l. πλεῖστα 3 l. σε ὑγαιίνειν 4 l. καθ' ἐκάστην ἡμέραν 4-5 l. Σαράπιδι
 5 l. γινώσκειν; l. σε 6. l. σοι 6-7 l. οὐδεμίαν 15 l. υἱοῦ

“Anto[nius Longus to Nilous] his mother, [very many greetings. Continually] I pray for your health. [I make your supplication] every day [to the lord Sara]pis. I want you to know [that ... I wrote you] ... letter [and to me] you wrote nothing ...

(Back) Deliver to Nilous from Longus her son.”

1 Ἀντῶ[νις Λόνγος Νειλοῦτι. Cf. *BGU* 3.846.1: Ἀντῶνις Λόνγος Νειλοῦτι. In both letters written by Antonius, the first line that contains the address is set off and there is a deliberate gap between ll. 1 and 2.

2 [[μο καί]] μητρει [πλῖστα χαίρειν. Cf. *BGU* 3.846.2: [τ]ῆ μητρὶ π[λ]ῖστα χαίρειν. The deleted text at the start of the line that is crossed out with two horizontal strokes is legible, although why Antonius initially wrote it remains unclear. As is *BGU* 3.846.2, this line is also indented.

2-5 [καὶ διὰ πάντων] | εὐχομαί σαι ὑγ[ε]ιαίνειν. τὸ προσκύνημά σου ποιῶ | κάτ' αἰκάστην ἡ[μαί]ραν παρὰ τῷ κυρίῳ Σαρᾷ|πειδεῖ. [γ]εινώσ[κ]ειν σαι θέλω ὄτι. The very same formula with misspellings appears in *BGU* 3.846.2-5: καὶ διὰ πάντων[ν] εὐχομαί σαι ὑγειαίνειν. τὸ προσκύνημά σου [ποι]ῶ κατ' αἰκάστην ἡμαίραν παρὰ τῷ | κυρίῳ [Σαρ]άπειδεῖ. Misspellings in the lacuna have been taken from *BGU* 3.846. Given the use of the *proskynema* formula to Sarapis in ll. 3-5, this letter (as well as *BGU* 3.846) may have originated in Alexandria; see R.S. Bagnall and R. Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC – AD 800* (Ann Arbor 2006) 89-90. On what might follow [γ]εινώσ[κ]ειν σαι θέλω ὄτι see comm. on ll. 6-7 below.

6-7 [.]οι τῆν [.]ῆν ἐπιστολὴν γράφω καὶ μοι οὐδε]μείαν ἔ[γ]ραψες. These lines seem to contain some kind of complaint that while Antonius has written his mother she has not written back. Based on parallels, the most likely sense could be something like: “I have written to you X number of letters and you have written to me nothing.” Cf. *P.Vars.* 22.5-6 (third century CE; Arsinoite nome?): ἤδη σοι τρίτην ἐπιστολὴν ἔγραψα καὶ σὺ μοι οὐδεμίαν ἔγραψας; *P.Oxy.* 14.1770.8-11 (third century CE; Oxyrhynchus): θ[αυμάζω ὅ]πως καθ' ἐκάστην [ἡμέραν] ὑμεῖν γράφω κα[ὶ] οὐδεμίαν μοι ἐγράψατε; *P.Oxy.* 14.1757.4-7 (ca. 138 CE; Oxyrhynchus): δευτέραν σοι ἐπιστολὴν γράφω {σοι} καὶ οὐδεμίαν μοι ἀντέγραψας; *SB* 12.10876.6-9 (II CE; provenance unknown): ἤδη σοι τρίτην ἐπιστο[λ]ῆν ταύτην πέμπω καὶ σὺ οὐδεμίαν μοι ἔπεμψας; *O.Claud.* 1.176.4-6 (early second century CE; Mons Claudianus); *P.Mich.* 3.208.4-5 (second century CE; provenance unknown); *P.Mich.* 8.484.3-5 (second century CE; Alexandria?); *SB* 3.6263.6-7 (late second century CE; Alexandria?); *SB* 16.12982.4-5 (third century CE; Alexandria?); *SB* 18.13593.15-18 (third/fourth century CE; provenance unknown); *P.Ross.Georg.* 5.6 (fourth century CE; Oxyrhynchite nome). It seems that this kind of complaint may have been included mainly in letters between family members; similar to the present letter, *P.Oxy.* 14.1770, *SB* 3.6263, and *SB* 12.10876 were addressed to a mother from a son and *SB* 18.13593 was addressed to a father from a son.

While it is tempting to read τῆν [.]ῆν as τρίτην, the η following the first τ is secure. Maybe therefore the reading is either τῆν {[τ]ῆν} or <ταύ>την [τ]ῆν; for ταύτην τῆν ἐπιστολήν see *P.Paris* 18.13 (III CE; provenance unknown); *W.Chr.* 21.21-22 (III CE; Arsinoite nome); *O.Kell.* 140.2-3 (III/IV CE; Kellis); *SB* 5.8003.19 (IV CE; provenance unknown); *P.Lond.* 6.1915.29-30 (330-40 CE; Kynopolite nome); *P.Lond.* 5.1684.4 (566/67 CE; Aphrodito); *P.Ant.* 2.94.15 (VI CE; Antinoite nome?). In *P.Col.* 10.252.6-7 (late I CE; Alexandria?) there is a complaint that five

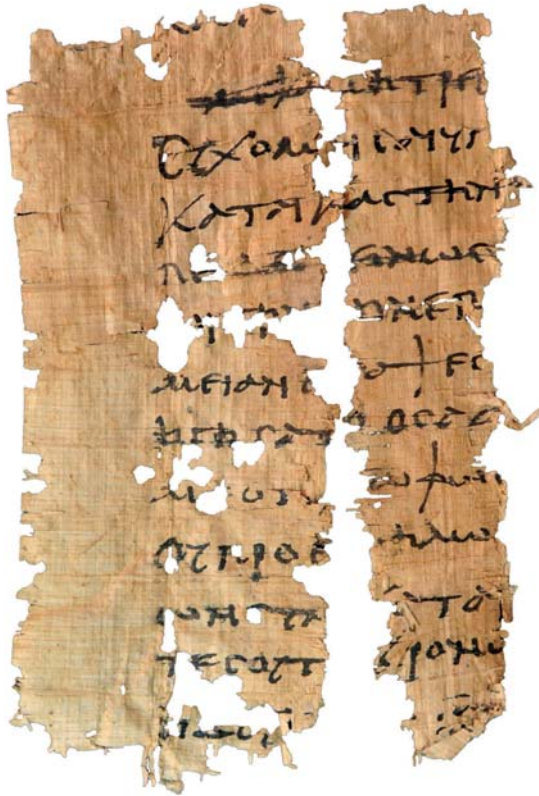


Figure 1: URU Fayum Project – FY10-18718-da (recto)
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letters have been sent without any return mail; in *P.Tebt.* 2.583 descr. (published by G. Adamson, “Letter from a Soldier in Pannonia,” *BASP* 49 [2012] 83, l. 20) there is a complaint that six letters have been sent without any return mail.

For the beginning of l. 6 another possibility might be [μ]οι τὴν [σ]ῆν ἐπ[ιστολὴν with the sense being something like: “I want you to know that as soon as so-and-so brought me your letter I responded but you haven’t written in reply ...” Alternatively, if μείαν could just be for μίαν (i.e. “one letter”), ll. 5-7 could potentially be something like: “I want you to know that so-and-so gave me ([μ]οι) your ([σ]ῆν) letter. He/she wrote you one letter (ἔ[γ]ραψέ σοι) ...”

7-8 [δι]ηγήσατο ὅσα α[...]. In *BGU* 3.846.14-15 Antonius uses διηγέ-ομαι: πάντα σοι διήγεται.

9 με ὄτι . ωφω . [. The ε is mostly lost in a lacuna but the crossbar and upper arch are partially extant. The crossbar of the τ is lost where some fibers have pulled away and all that remains of the ι is the bottom half of the hasta, but the reading of these letters appears fairly certain based on the extant traces and spacing. The ωφω combination is secure and while the letter that precedes it is almost entirely lost in a lacuna, the bottom of the hasta is extant below the break and it appears that a horizontal trace of ink can be detected to the left of the first ω. One possibility is to take it as a τ, so perhaps the reading is τῶ φω . [. Alternatively, it might also be a κ. The reading κωφω is rare in the papyri with only a handful of attestations; it could be the dative form of the name Kophos (i.e. Κώφω: *P.Oxy.* 7.1050.15 [II/III CE; Oxyrhynchus]), or the dative form of the adjective κωφός “deaf” or “dull”: *P.Mich.* 15.751.23-26 (late II CE; Alexandria?): ν[ῦ]ν γράφω σοι [ὅπως] μνη[μ]ονεύσης αὐ]τοῦ[.] νῦν γὰρ κωφῶ σοι ἔγραψεν. [καὶ ἔ]γραψας π[ε]ρὶ τούτων τὴν δευτέραν ἡμῖν ἐπισ[τολήν]. (“Now I write to you so that you remember. Up to now his letter to you fell on deaf ears, and you wrote your second letter to us about these matters”); *SB* 3.7242.11-12 (III CE; Arsinoite nome?): εἶπον δὲ καὶ τῶ κωφῶ Διονυσίῳ ἵνα καὶ αὐτὸς ὃ ἐὰν εὔρη ἀγοράσῃ (“I also told dull Dionysius to buy whatever he could find”). Taking κωφω as something having to do with “deaf” or “deafness” on the part of his mother is tantalizing given that a few lines earlier there is some kind of complaint about not receiving mail (ll. 5-7) and in *BGU* 3.846.9-13 he is pleading with his mother to take him back and rescue him from destitution. Alternatively, it may even be that the word is κώφωσις (“injury”) and he is informing his mother that some harm has befallen him: cf. *Gal. Hipp. prior. comm.* 3.16.536.9: ὅτι κώφωσις αὐτῶ συνέπεσεν. In *BGU* 3.846 he repeatedly apprised his mother of his difficult circumstances.

10 οὐ προεδήλω[σ]. With the letter string προεδηλω- there are only a handful of options for the termination of this verb: προεδήλωσα, προεδήλωσας, προεδηλώσαμεν, προεδήλωσαν. Perhaps the first person singular form (προεδήλωσα) is most likely given the consistent use of the first person earlier in this letter (ll. 3, 5, 6, 8) and throughout *BGU* 3.846. However, the second person aorist singular (προεδήλωσας) might also be a possibility given that second person singular verbs are used elsewhere (l. 7). The verb προδηλόω in the aorist tense only occurs one other time: *SB* 6.9230.6 (III CE; Syene): καθὼς προεδηλώσαμεν σοι.

11 ων συγκατα[. After the final α there appear to be traces of a horizontal top stroke on an extended fiber that might be the remains of

either a γ, π, or possibly τ. If it is a π maybe the word is some form of συγκαταπλέω that is attested with some frequency in the papyri.

12 πες οὐτω χρονω[. The πες combination may represent the termination of a second person singular verb: cf. l. 7 ἔγραψες. In the papyri the termination -πες most often appears as part of εἶπες followed sometimes by the dative: e.g. εἶπές μοι. The reading -τες might also be a possibility. The letter combination ουτω appears secure, although the letter division is uncertain: οὐ τῶ? Perhaps an alternate reading for this line might be τε σου τω χρονω (-τε might be the third person singular middle -ται given the many spelling variations in the letter).

13 εἰδου . [.] . π . [. The ε is mostly lost in a lacuna but the crossbar is visible and ligatures into the ι in the same way as the ει combinations in ll. 2 and 5. There are many possibilities for εἰδου at the start of the line: l. ἰδοῦ; the end of a name e.g. Ἡρακλείδου; etc. We do not think that it can refer to the Arsinoite nome division of Heraclides since μερίδος cannot be read from the extant traces of ink that follow. As the υ is not entirely secure, perhaps it could be εἰδοῦ so it is some form of οἶδα.

14] ἀπόδος Νειλοῦτι ἀπὸ Λόνγου ὑε[ιοῦ. Cf. *BGU* 3.846.26: μητρει ἀπ(ὸ) Ἀνωνίω Λόνγου ὑειοῦ.

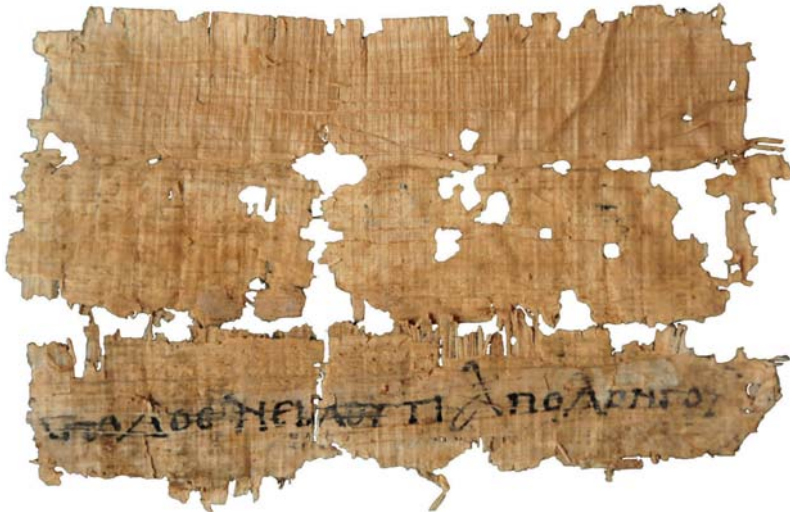


Figure 2: URU Fayum Project – FY10-18718-da (verso)
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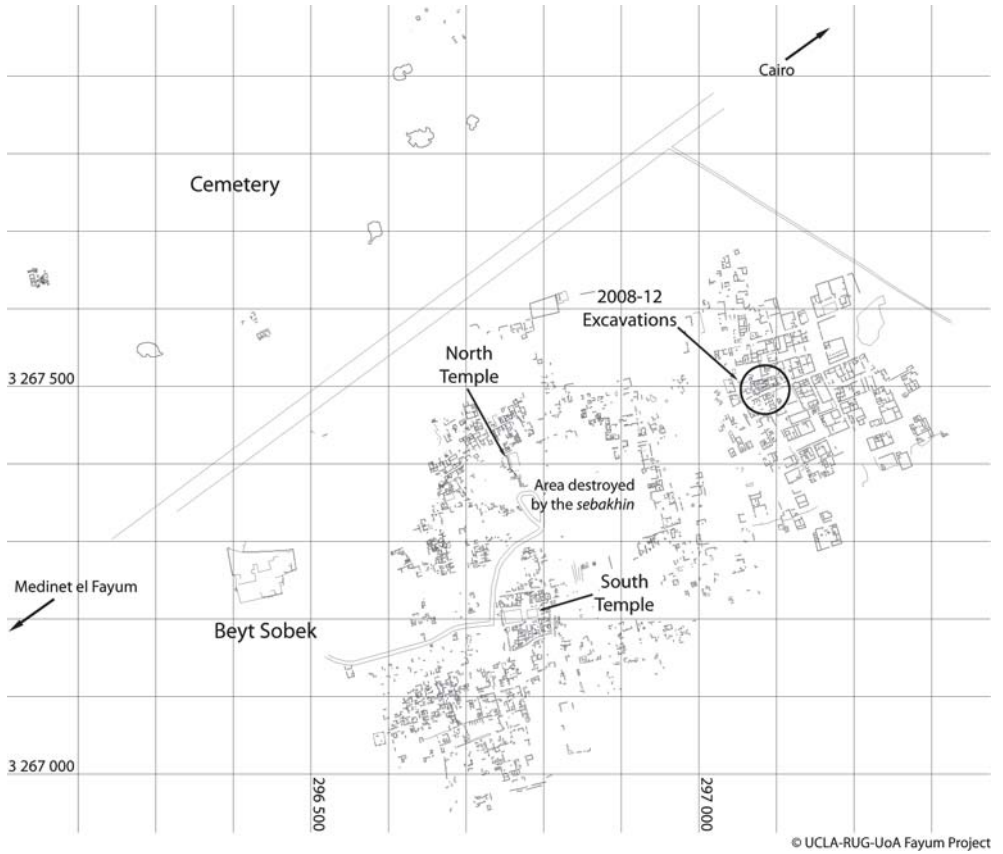


Figure 3: Plan of Karanis with the location of URU Fayum Project excavations



Figure 4: Trenches excavated by the URU Fayum Project in Karanis East

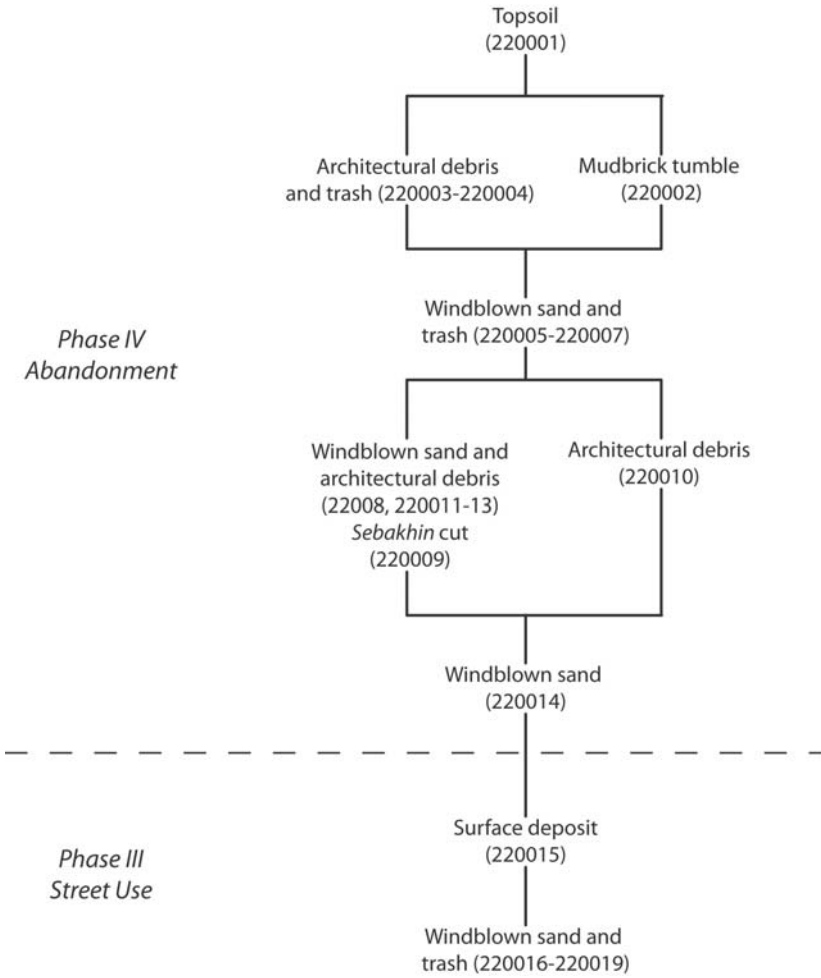


Figure 5: Abbreviated matrix of trench KAE 22. The papyrus was found in unit 220015.

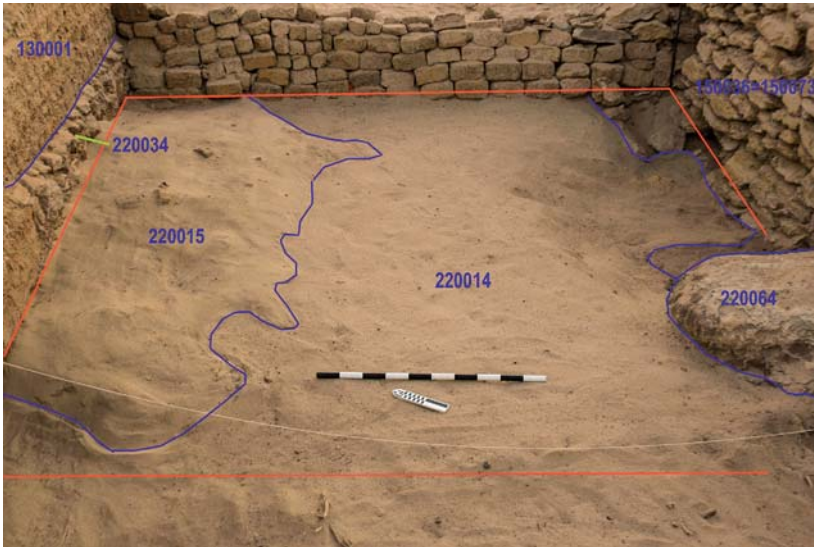


Figure 6: Full extent of the street surface layer 220015. Photo by Daniel Jones.
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Figure 7: Fragmentary clay sealing attached to rope fibers (FY10-18713-gj).
Photo by Joseph Lehner.
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