ANOTHER LETTER FROM ANTONIUS LONGUS
TO HIS MOTHER NILOUS

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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). 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; hence this letter was, for a time, simply referred to as a “Letter of a Prodigal Son.” 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.”
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 Rijks-universiteit 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

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


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. 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). 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. 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


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).\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{BGU} 3.846, the first few lines can be completely reconstructed.\textsuperscript{15} The hand of the present letter is the same as that of \textit{BGU} 3.846 and contains a number of phonetic interchanges: most notably \(\varepsilon > \alpha \varepsilon\) and \(\iota > \varepsilon \iota\) (ll. 2 and 3 cf. \textit{BGU} 3.846.3, 4, 20, 22). Establishing the relationship and order of the two letters is difficult; in \textit{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 \textit{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.


\textsuperscript{14} Husselman (n. 10) 8.

\textsuperscript{15} In \textit{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.
Antōniς Λόνγος Νειλοῦτι vacat
[[μο καὶ]] μητρεί [πλίστα χαίρειν καὶ διὰ πάντων]
eὐχομαί σαί ύγ[ειαίνειν. τό προσκύνημά σου ποιῶ]
κατ᾿ αἰκάστην ἡμαίραν παρά τῷ κυρίῳ Σαρά]-

5 πειδει. [γ]εινώσκ[ειν σαι θέλω δτί ±10 ]
[ . ]οι τήν [ . ]ήν ἐπ[ιστολῆν γράφω καὶ μοι οὐδε-]
μείαν ε[γ]ραφεῖς [ ±22 δί-]
ηγάσατο ὅσα a[ ±24 ]
με δτί . οφω . [ ±24 ]

10 οὐ προεθήλωσι[σ] [ ±22 ]
ον συγκατα . [ ±24 ]
πες οὔτο χρονω[ ±24 ]
εἰδος . [ . ] . π . [ ±24 ]

Back (along the fibers)
15 ἀπόδος Νειλοῦτι ἀπὸ Λόνγου ψε[ιοῦ.]

2 l. μητρί; l. πλείστα 3 l. σε ύγιαίνειν 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 Ἀντῶνις 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 καὶ]] μητρεί [πλίστα χαίρειν. Cf. BGU 3.846.2: [τ]] μητρὶ π[λ]ίστα 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 \text{ καὶ διὰ πάντων | εὐχομαι σαι ύγειαινειν. τὸ προσκύνημα} \text{ σου ποιῶ} | \text{kat' ἀικάστην ἡμαίραν παρὰ τὸ κυρίῳ Σαρά|πειδεῖ.}] \text{ [γ]εἰνώσξει ειν σαι θέλω ὅτι.} \text{ The very same formula with misspellings appears in BGU 3.846.2-5; καὶ διὰ πάντων εὐχομαι σαι ύγειαινειν. τὸ προσκύνημα} \text{ σου [ποι]ὸ̃ κατ' ἀικάστην ἡμαίραν παρὰ τὸ | κυρίῳ Σαρά|πειδεῖ. Misspellings in the lacuna have been taken from BGU 3.846.} \text{ 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]εἰνώσξει ειν σαι θέλω ὅτι see comm. on ll. 6-7 below.} \[6-7 \text{ [ . ]οι τὴν [ . ] ἡν ἐπιστολὴν γράφο και μοι οὐδε]μειαν} \text{ ἔ[γ]ραψε. These lines seem to contain some kind of complaint that while} \text{ 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?): ἡδη} \text{ σοι τρίτην ἐπιστολὴν ἐγράψα και σύ μοι οὐδεμίαν ἐγράφασ; P.Oxy. 14.1770.8-11 (third century CE; Oxyrhynchus): ἦν} \text{ καὶ πάς καθ' ἐκάστην [ἡμέραν] ὑμεῖν γράφο και[ι] οὐδεμίαν μοι ἐγράψετε; P.Oxy. 14.1757.4-7 (ca. 138 CE; Oxyrhynchus): δευτέραν} \text{ σοι ἐπιστολὴν γράφω {σοι} και οὐδεμίαν} \text{ μοι ἀντέγραψα; SB 12.10876.6-9 (II CE; provenance unknown): ἡδη} \text{ σοι τρίτην ἐπιστολὴν ταύτην} \text{ δευτέραν σοι ἐπιστολὴν γράφω μοι οὐδεμίαν} \text{ μοι ἀντέγραψα; SB 12.10876.6-9 (II CE; provenance unknown): ἡδη} \text{ σοι τρίτην ἐπιστολὴν ταύτην} \text{ πέμπω καὶ σὺ οὐδέμιαν μοι ἐπέμψας; 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).} \text{ 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 τὴν [ . ] ἡν as τρίτην, the η following the first τ is secure. Maybe therefore the reading is either την {την|} or {ταύ|ταύ} την [την; for ταύτην την ἐπιστολὴν 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 ome); 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}
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]ὴν ἔπιστολὴν 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]ὴν) letter. He/she wrote you one letter (ἐγράψε σ[οί]) …”

9 μὲ δότι 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 τῷ φω. [. Alternatively, it might also be a κ. The reading κοφω is rare in the papyri with only a handful of attestations; it could be the dative form of the name Kophos (i.e. Κώφος: P.Oxy. 7.1050.15 [II/III CE; Oxyrhynchus]), or the dative form of the adjective κοφός “deaf” or “dull”: P.Mich. 15.751.23-26 (late II CE; Alexandria?): ν[ῦ]ν γράφω σοι [όπος] μνημονεύσῃς αὐτο[τά] πάντα γάρ κωφὸ σοι ἐγραψεν. [καὶ ἐγραψας περί] τούτων τὴν δευτέραν ἡμῖν ἐπιστολήν. (“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 τῷ κοφῷ Διονυσίῳ ἵνα καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ ἐὰν εὑρῇ ἔγοράσῃ (“I also told dull Dionysius to buy whatever he could find”).

Taking κοφω 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 αὐτῷ συνέπεσεν. In BGU 3.846 he repeatedly apprised his mother of his difficult circumstances.

10 οὖ προδηλω[σ]. With the letter string προδηλω- there are only a handful of options for the termination of this verb: προεδήλωσα, προεδήλοσας, προεδήλωσας, 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 προδηλώσω in the aorist tense only occurs one other time: SB 6.9230.6 (III CE; Syene): καθὼς προεδηλώσαμεν σοι.

11 οὖν 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 οὔτω 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. εἵπες μοι. The reading -τες might also be a possibility. The letter combination οὔτω appears secure, although the letter division is uncertain: οὔ τώ? Perhaps an alternate reading for this line might be τε σου τῷ χρόνῳ (-τε might be the third person singular middle -ται given the many spelling variations in the letter).

13 εἰδο[. [. [. The ε is mostly lost in a lacuna but the crossbar is visible and ligatures into the τ in the same way as the ει combinations in ll. 2 and 5. There are many possibilities for ειδο at the start of the line: l. ἱδοῦ; 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 ν is not entirely secure, perhaps it could be ειδοτ so it is some form of οἶδα.


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. © UCLA-RUG-UoA Fayum Project

Figure 7: Fragmentary clay sealing attached to rope fibers (FY10-18713-gj). Photo by Joseph Lehner. © UCLA-RUG-UoA Fayum Project