PROJECT REPORTS

ADVANCED PAPYROLOGICAL INFORMATION SYSTEM

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The Oriental Institute has been participating as a minor but active consortium member of the Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS) since 2001. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, APIS is a cooperative research project conceived in 1996 to unify information on texts written on papyrus into a single database so as to facilitate scholarly research on both published and unpublished documents. Inspired by a pilot project at Duke University, the original purpose of APIS was to focus on the roughly 16,000 Greek papyri located in museum collections at Columbia, Duke, Berkeley, Michigan, and Yale. Other institutions with less extensive collections have recently begun participating, among which is the University of Chicago, incorporating the relevant holdings at the Oriental Institute Museum and the Special Collections of the Regenstein Library. The standard database entries for APIS include physical descriptions of the papyri; transliterations and translations of the text; information on provenance, date, authorship, and parallel sources; lists of proper names to facilitate searching; and bibliographies for published papyri. Ideally, scans are also made of the papyri according to agreed standards, so that scholars as well as the general public may access not only the textual information but clear images of the documents as well. The conservation of the papyrus documents is also a priority for APIS, and information is routinely shared on how best to achieve this goal.

The Oriental Institute was invited to join the project in 2000 and since then has added 251 documents to the overall database. One of the challenges for this institution has been the adaptation of the central database to languages and chronological time frames that pertain to societies other than ancient Greece. The transliteration of ancient Egyptian, for example, has required the use of a temporarily expedient font since the keystroke system for APIS did not originally foresee the necessity for Egyptian diacritics. Similarly, the several hundred Arabic documents in the Oriental Institute Museum will eventually require a separate solution to the multifarious problems of transliteration in that language. Moreover, the ancient documents at the Oriental Institute Museum are written on materials other than papyrus; and while the project as a whole was instigated by papyrologists, it was decided from the start of the Chicago involvement to include hieroglyphic and cursive texts written on limestone ostraca and potsherds. Other scripts in our collection include hieroglyphic, Demotic, and Coptic as well. Greek papyri that do not bear unequivocal dates are usually categorized according to the century (or partial century) in which they were written, a method which cannot be easily adapted to ancient Egyptian chronology. Consequently, Chicago has devised a different system for periodization according to dynasty and/or reign that makes better sense for pharaonic Egypt. Doubtless such customizing of the greater APIS system will expand with the database itself.

The most recent data entries for APIS-Chicago have been two lengthy Book of the Dead compilations known as Papyrus Ryerson and Papyrus Milbank, as well as fragmentary excerpts from the Coffin Texts on Papyrus Gardiner III. The immediate task ahead is to enter the pertinent information on our database for the Greek papyri in the Regenstein Library, for which additional funds have been made available in order to rehouse them in new mounts this year.

Another task that lies ahead is digital image capture for documents already uploaded into the central database.

For the first three years of APIS-Chicago, Hratch Papazian served as an extraordinarily able research assistant, who not only had to face the daunting task of adapting the central APIS standards to our own collection, but was instrumental in devising workable solutions to the questions of Egyptian transliteration font and chronology. Vanessa Davies has taken his place this fourth year and has continued to make excellent progress on data entry. I also wish to acknowledge my co-investigators for APIS-Chicago, Robert K. Ritner and Alice Schreyer of the Regenstein Library, for their support and assistance, and to thank W. Raymond Johnson, director of the Epigraphic Survey, for allowing the project to usurp part of the Survey's office as our ad hoc work space.

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