

FIEC 2009 Abstract

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Address for congress program: The Center for the Tebtunis Papyri MC-6000,
Berkeley, California 94720-6000, USA

Panel: "Recent discoveries"

Title: Reading the papyri from an Egyptian temple; or Of *paideia* and the crocodile

Lecture language: English

Equipment needed: Data projector (Beamer)

Abstract:

In the 110 years since Grenfell and Hunt first excavated it on behalf of the University of California, the temple of the crocodile god in the village of Tebtunis has yielded a considerable number of papyri in both Egyptian and Greek. The 400 or so Egyptian narrative and religious manuscripts that have been recovered from the site, thought by many to comprise the remains of the "temple library," have received significant scholarly attention over the last two decades, thanks in large part to the Carlsberg Papyri Project. The Greek papyri discovered alongside these Egyptian manuscripts have, however, been largely ignored. With a view to remedying this situation—for we have no better opportunity for "holistic" study of the Egyptian priesthood under Roman rule—I have been working to recontextualize and decipher these Greek temple papyri, which likewise number in the hundreds and are scattered between at least nine collections in Europe, North America, and Africa.

The Egyptian texts from the temple, which would seem to represent a renaissance of indigenous literary and cultic activity, have often been interpreted as the work of cloistered guardians of a dying (and unadulterated) pharaonic tradition. The Greek temple texts, however, reveal that these same individuals were quite engaged with the "Greek" culture of the world beyond the *temenos*. Through them we encounter priests writing Greek; some priests, in fact, have hands that are comparable to those of professional scribes, and it appears that the hierarchy of the temple in the second half of the second century even preferred Greek to Egyptian. It should come as no surprise, then, that priests were also reading Greek, but it is noteworthy that their interests extended beyond the predictable medical and scientific texts to include works that are typically associated with an elite "Hellenic" context. In truth, the priests seem to have been learning Greek with same techniques and texts, the *paideia*, that served to form and bind Hellenic elites across the Roman East. What might we make of

this apparent paradox, of the “insular” versus the “emulative”? I propose a “post-colonial” solution, one that traces cultural developments in the priesthood to the Roman reorganization of Egyptian society in the wake of the fall of the Ptolemaic state.