

Restoring the Text of Documents

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THE EDITOR or critic of ancient documents written on papyri or ostraka (potsherds) is generally free of the tribulations that visit his colleague who works with literary works preserved through a manuscript tradition, such as the relationship of one witness to another, the relative reliability of manuscripts, the value of copyists' marginal notations, and the like. Of the vast majority of these documents there was never more than one copy; of a few there were two or three, of very few indeed, more. Indeed, papyrologists are so unused to having more than one copy of a text that when two crop up (for example, an original file copy of a petition and a copy returned with a decision), it is a very unsettling experience. The papyrologist sometimes publishes both copies as separate texts, so great is his reverence for the individual document as artifact and not only as text.

But this, as I say, is rare. These documents were always intended for a finite—even a fleeting—existence, as in the case of receipts for tax installments, written on ostraka which were intended to be superseded by a comprehensive papyrus receipt at the end of the year, that in turn to be discarded when a few years had passed and it became clear that the authorities were not going to come around asking after the taxes of eight years ago. And the documents were mostly intended to be seen by only one person, or two, or a few, hardly ever by more. It is obvious that under such circumstances there can be no question of what is generally called the "transmission" of a text, though forms of document types are transmitted through time. A similar situation obtains in inscriptions on stone and other durable substances, with the important exception that they were meant to be seen and read by others—they were forms of publicity. Indeed, those who work with documents of any period in the ancient and medieval world will no doubt recognize in my description a situation all too familiar to them.

If this were all there is to it, there would be no novelty in this description. But two other points lead me to go further. First, papyri

and ostraka are very often fragmentary. This characteristic is also not unique, but compared to inscriptions on stone, for example, papyri at least are far more vulnerable to decay and damage. Secondly, the literature on the craft of the editor and critic of papyri is remarkably silent on the assumptions underlying the work of filling the lacunae in these texts which are so badly damaged. The brilliant writings of the late Herbert Youtie on just what it means to read a text written in difficult handwriting in a language we cannot encounter as spoken barely do more than allude to the process of *restoring* the papyri—restoring the texts, that is, not the physical papyri. In fact, neither “restoration” nor “lacuna” appears in the excellent indices to his collected articles.¹ The closest thing to treating restoration is Youtie’s discussion of reading damaged letters;² but in fact Youtie never really distinguished between the acts of reading and of restoration. Such silence is all the more puzzling when compared to the almost obsessive zeal with which the late Louis Robert, the greatest Greek epigraphist of our time and perhaps of any, returned to the theory and practice of restoration of inscriptions time and again throughout his works.³ I propose, therefore, to ask how we restore papyrus texts and what the implications of our practices are for our understanding of our texts.

Like inscriptions and no doubt many other types of documents, papyri are restored on the basis of two related types of evidence, as Robert often said. First, one must analyze what does survive. Often, it is immediately obvious, if the damage is not too great or diagnostic phrases survive, what kind of text we are dealing with. If it is not so clear, a rigorous analysis of the vocabulary of the surviving part will usually allow us to discover what it is. The second stage comes in finding parallels, examining texts of the same kind. These two aspects may interact repeatedly. In the simplest case, where the document type is highly standardized—a tax receipt, for example—the parallel may be so exact that almost all of the damaged text can be restored from it. The more we have of such documents the better we are able to be confident from a relatively small amount of surviving text that the remainder is restorable. In example A we have one of 250 receipts for delivery of grain from fourth-century Karanis, fairly standardized in form.⁴ The original editor of the left half of the piece (R. A. Coles, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 97 [1966]: 61–66) restored the text, on the basis of these standardized parallels, almost completely; when the actual right half of the same papyrus fortuitously turned up a few years ago, it confirmed every restoration

he made, adding only one element, namely the rest of the name of the second signer in line 25 at the end, the one thing the editor left unrestored.⁵

In other instances, standardization of elements is relatively high, but there is considerable variation in their order, extent of abbreviation, and precise phrasing, particularly from place to place and from time to time. This is the case in documents like leases of land, of which we have hundreds. Here a more exacting analysis of the remains is necessary in order to establish the syntax and flow of thought through the document, so that more or less standardized elements can be put in place. Such a restoration may be somewhat less complete than with a tax receipt, but most of it is nonetheless present; even in the most standardized texts, after all, we cannot generally restore all of the contingent information like names and numbers.

As documents become less standard, the task becomes harder. In petitions to the king or emperor, there are numerous standard phrases which we find in many texts. But in each case, naturally, the petitioner must not only flatter the king's penchant for justice or express his own wretchedness, he must tell the story. Many stories are similar, but no two quite the same; and even the same story might be put quite differently by two people, or even in different petitions from the same person, as we occasionally can see from multiple surviving drafts of such a petition. Here the editor's task moves increasingly away from the mechanical utilization of parallels and into the attempt to understand the text on its own terms, borrowing phrases where appropriate, seeking to figure out what parts of a construction are missing, and in effect trying to become a member of the writer's time and culture.

Documents which are not at all standard can often not be restored at all if they are damaged even moderately severely. I do not mean, of course, that the editor or critic cannot sit down and write Greek or Latin phrases to fill the gaps. But that, as the nineteenth-century French scholar Letronne said, is to remake rather than to reestablish the document.⁶ For all that such reconstructions may display the ingenuity and imagination of their creators, they are not restorations, for we may have no real assurance that they represent the sense, let alone the words, of the original.⁷ In effect, those who cannot learn to recognize what texts cannot be restored, at least not now, are writers of fiction. Example B is an Alexandrian decree of the second century B. C., as restored by F. M. Heichelheim.⁸ This is not the place to

criticize these restorations (which received little comment because of their appearance in 1940), but they were described by one scholar quite correctly as "very conjectural, and often quite foreign to normal documentary formulation."⁹ Heichelheim, one may say, had a tin ear for the Greek of civic decrees. But even a good scholar could not restore those parts of this that are not formulaic at all. Perhaps a third to a half of it can be restored with something approaching certainty, but, as the same scholar (Fraser) said, "restoration is mostly impossible."

All of this would come as no revelation to any reader of Robert, nor even to any thoughtful editor of documents. But not even Robert, for all his concern for method, nor any papyrologist I have seen, appears to have written about a central problem: why do we restore texts at all? What precise standing does a restored text have? What exactly is the contribution of the restorer of such texts? It is to some tentative thoughts about this problem that I will devote the remainder of my essay.

There is, after all, a fundamental problem of circularity. We can restore in a document with confidence only what we already know. This was clear in Example A: the one thing not restored by the original editor was a name—the only new information gained from the discovery of the missing part. In a lease of land, we can restore provisions because some part of them survives and they are paralleled in other texts. Let us suppose that a few letters in a lease allow us to restore a provision that the lessee must return the land free of reeds. We can restore it because we have other leases in which the same obligation is laid on the lessee. So restoring it does not increase our repertory of lessee's obligations. And we can restore it because some bit of it survives to tell us it was there. So restoring it does not really increase our knowledge of what clauses were in the lease—that comes from the remains. The same is true of simple supplements demanded by grammar or sense. And what we cannot restore is precisely what was unique and not preserved in the remaining scrap—the number of artabas of wheat to be paid in rent each year, for example, or the names of the parties, or the location of the land. If enough of these items are preserved to allow us to restore the remainder of the words that embodied them, we have again gained nothing in evidence; we have merely fleshed out the expression of what we already had, i.e. completed the process of reading and understanding. It is a reading

with comprehension, an understanding of what kind of text was written, that is the editor's contribution.

This is not frivolous hairsplitting, obvious though it may seem. What I said earlier about the impossibility of restoring nonformulaic texts also seems obvious, and yet the history of papyrology and of epigraphy is full of the bleaching bones of the "exempli gratia" restorations offered by those who could not tolerate emptiness, not to speak of the historical theories founded on their "texts." Anything put on the page as a restoration—between square brackets according to the Leiden convention which papyrologists use—is almost certain to wind up being used by some later scholar or, just as bad, the presence of restoration will lead to the entire text's being discounted. It is easy enough to blame the secondary user for this incaution, but the apparent solidity of printed Greek is seductive to all but those most firmly lashed to the mast. And, after all, if we do not mean such texts to be used as evidence, why do we print them at all?

So also with the problem of circularity: we must think, before printing texts with restorations, what we mean by them and what gain is expected to offset the potential for harm. Example C is pertinent here. Youtie restored a papyrus¹⁰ with what he called "purely illustrative supplements, which make no claim to being the ipsissima verba of the writer." Fair enough, although such things soon turn into texts used by others for purposes beyond illustrating what Youtie thought was happening in the papyrus, which was all he had in mind. But he goes on to say, "I offer them only for what they may do to confirm the suggestion that the petition is directed against Elias, the son-in-law of Melas." And that is precisely what they cannot do. They can provide a Greek text that embodies Youtie's interpretation, but they *cannot* confirm that interpretation, except to the limited extent that the restorations show that the interpretation is *possible* within the space and remains available. The interpretation, rather, grows out of what is preserved. If it needs the restorations to be confirmed, it is not capable of confirmation. In fact, I think this particular interpretation imposes itself; in writing this paper I found that I had in taking notes on this papyrus some while back arrived at exactly the same view of what was happening in ignorance of Youtie's note on it. If Youtie could make a statement which so fundamentally misdescribes what a restoration does, we must indeed be on our guard.

Two possible answers suggest themselves to me. First, the very danger posed by the restored text is part of its value. That is, the

restoration makes the text more or less continuous and comprehensible to the nonspecialist, and at the same time illustrates a particular interpretation. For specialists, the same thing can be accomplished by writing notes to each line, explaining what the tattered remains signify and what the parallels to them show must have been at stake here. One needs these notes in any case, to justify these restorations. But the reader from a related discipline, or the nonscholar, will find an unrestored text simply unreadable. No amount of line notes will help. A continuous text, preferably accompanied by a translation liberally seasoned with brackets, is accessible.

Secondly, there is often a kind of negative gain from restorations. If we can be certain that some phraseology stood there, and that it would have occupied all of the available space, we know that something else *did not* stand there. In other words, a well-grounded restoration will help to define what is and is not possible in the remainder of the lacuna. Particularly where highly standardized language exists side by side with more free-form parts of a document, the standardized parts, when restored, will tell us just what is left for the rest. By that fact, some possibilities can be eliminated, some others confirmed. In short, second-order consequences of restorations may be extremely valuable. I offer one small example (Example D).¹¹ This Berlin papyrus opens with an invocation of Christ and a regnal formula of Heraclius, the last Byzantine emperor to rule Egypt. The restoration of line 4 is far too long. How do we know? Because those of lines 1–3 and 5 are as certain as anything can be, and they range from 12 to 18 letters. Thirty letters is definitely impossible. We can thus show that Heraclius Jr. cannot have been mentioned, for want of space: a scribal error perhaps, but something worth knowing. It is difficult to describe exactly the limits of the gains possible through narrowing of the possibilities through restoration. It must be remembered, though, that these are attainable through argument and exemplary restoration in notes; printing restorations in the text does not in itself advance the argument.

These are more modest claims for restoration from parallels than an unreflective editor might think—and some have thought—justified. But they are real, not hypothetical, gains, both for presentation and for substance. All the same, the editor of documents who engages in this splendid exercise in circularity needs as far as possible to educate readers and students to recognize restorations for what they are, rather

than looking at them as simply another form of primary evidence messed up with some funny brackets.

NOTES

1. *Scriptiunculae*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1973–1975); *Scriptiunculae Posteriores*, 2 vols. (Bonn, 1981–1982).
2. *Scriptiunculae*, 1: 25–33 = *GRBS*, 7 (1966): 251–58.
3. For example, see the references in *Index du Bulletin épigraphique de J. et L. Robert* (Paris, 1975) 3: 5, s.v. “Méthode: restitutions.”
4. For a list, see *Columbia Papyri*, 7 (1980): 75–91.
5. See *Chronique d’Egypte*, 59 (1984): 310–11.
6. Karl Popper remarked that textual restorations can often be tested in a manner similar to the testing of scientific hypotheses: *Objective Knowledge: an Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 185–86, n. 36. One might well add that a restoration that cannot be tested in one of the manners described above has no standing at all as evidence.
7. From the point of view taken here, restorations which later turn out to give the sense but not exact wording have the same standing as those which get the wording, for both are elucidations of an interpretation, not evidence in their own right.
8. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 26 (1940): 154–56 = *SB* 8993.
9. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford, 1972) 2: 174, n. 5, cf. also 164, n. 318.
10. *P. Ryl.*, 4, 706; *Scriptiunculae Posteriores*, p. 314.
11. *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*, 17 (1980): 105.

Example A. Receipt for delivery of grain from fourth-century Karanis.

- (1 H.) Ἐπεὶ κγ. παρήνεγκεν Παιᾶ/νος Οὐαλερίου
 12 ὑπὲρ τρίτης ἰνδικτίονος κ/ωμητῶν Πτο-
 λεμαΐδος Καρανίδος πυροῦ κ/αθαροῦ ἀρτά-
 βας δύο ἡμισυ τρίτον δωδέκατ[ον]/ (ἀρτ.) β/γ ιὼ μόνας.
 (3 H.) Ἡρώδης σε(σημείωμαι). (2 H.) Θεό/δοτ[ο]ς σε-
 σ(ημείωμαι).
 16 (1 H.) καὶ τῇ κε ὁμοίως ὁ αὐτὸς Παιᾶν/ος Οὐαλερίου
 ὑπὲρ τρίτης ἰνδικτίονος κωμ/ητῶν Καρα-
 νίδος πυροῦ καθαροῦ ἀρτάβας τ/ρεῖς, (ἀρτ.) γ μόνας.
 (4 H.) (ἀρτ.) γ (2 H.) Θεό/δοτος σεσ(ημείωμαι).
 20 (ὦν) Οὐφριᾶς Ἐλᾶ (ἀρτ.) γ.
 τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ ὁμοίως ὁ αὐτὸς ὑ/πὲρ τῆς αὐτῆς
 ἰνδικτίονος κωμητῶν Πτολε[μ]/αΐδος Καρανίδος
 πυροῦ καθαροῦ ἀρτάβας τρεῖ[ς]/ (ἀρτ.) γ μόνας.
 24 (2 H.) Θεόδο/τος σεσ(ημείωμαι).
 (5 H.) Φι/λέας ἐση(μειωσάμην).

Example B. Alexandrian decree of the second century B.C.

10 [Ἐν ἡμέραις κ(?) τοὺς Ἀλεξανδρέας τοὺς ἐν] τῇ χώρῃ κατοικοῦντας ἀπογράφεσθαι
 [τὰ σώματα τὰ ὠνηθέντα παρὰ νόμον, μὴ ἐν τασσομένοις, μετὰ τὴν
 [ἡλικίαν σώματος ἐκάστου (ἐτῶν) εἰς, προστιθέντας καὶ τὸ τῆς μητρὸς ὄνο-
 [μα τῶν παιδίων εἰς τὴν ἀπογραφὴν, ἐπὶ ἡ (ἐτῇ) γένηται, ἄγοντας
 5 [ἐπὶ τῶν ἀγορανόμων(?), ὅπῃς τὰς εἰκόνας ἀποδῶν. Ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τοὺς
 [Ἀλεξανδρέας πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐτοῖς οἰκονεῖν σῶματα ἐπὶ τῶν
 [ἀγορανόμων(?) ἀπογράφεσθαι] ἐν ἡμέραις κ, τὰ μὴ εἰς (ἐτῇ) εἰς, προσ-
 [τιθέντας τὰς εἰκόνας καὶ τὸ τῆς μητρὸς ὄνομα, τὰ δὲ ἀπὸ ἡ (ἐτῶν)
 [σώματα κατὰ τοὺς νόμους.] Ὑπερήσαντες δὲ τῆς ἀπογραφῆς τῶν
 15 [σωμάτων ὡς προστέτακται ἀπογράφεσθαι, τασσόμενοι τῇ πόλει τὸ
 [ἐπίτιμον ἐπὶ τῶν ἀγορανόμων ἀπογράφεσθαι] ἀκολουθῶν τοῖς
 [νόμοις. Ὡς δὲ νῦν ὁ βασιλεὺς Πτολεμαῖος Θεὸς Φιλομήτωρ οὐ μόνον
 [εὐηργέτησε τὴν πόλιν ἡμῶν Ἀ]λεξανδρείαν καὶ πάντας ἀνθρώπους, ἀλλὰ
 [καὶ ἡμῖν τὰ σωματικά τέλη] περὶ π[ολύ]ας εἵρηστα πολλὰ βουλόμενος
 20 [ποιεῖν παρέδωκε καὶ εἰς π[όλιν] ἡμῶν ἀσφαλεστάτη διαθήσει
 [τε καὶ εὐνοίαι ἐχρήσατο, | δ[ι]δοῦναι | [ἡμῖν] χρ[υ]σοῦν ἀργαλμα βασι[λ]είῳ
 [Πτολεμαίου ποιεῖν πᾶν] | ἐκ χρυσοῦ | τε κ[αὶ] κατα[μερίσσει] αἱ τῶ γενηθεί-
 [ω θησαυρῷ βασιλέως τὸ ἀγαλμα] | τοῦτο νῦν | τὸ σεμνον. Κ[α]τὰ τὰ αὐτ[α] δὲ
 25 [τοὺς θησαυροφύλακας ἡμῶν(?) | λαβόντας | πάντα ἐκ τῆς καθ[η]κούσης εἰ[ς]
 [τῶν κατοικούντων ἡμῶν | ὧν τῶν | τελῶν ὡς προστέτακται τὸν τῆς
 [δαπάνης λογισμὸν(?) ποιεῖν] | καθάπερ | χρεὶν κατὰ τὰ νόμιμα. Θύσαι δὲ
 [καὶ ἡμᾶς τῷ βασιλεὶ Πτολεμαίῳ Θεῷ | Φιλομήτωρ, ὅταν ἰδρῇ τὰ
 [νῦν πρωτοκλῆσια(?), | στεφανώσθαι δὲ αὐτὸν | καὶ χρυσῶν στεφάνων, θύ-
 [σαι δὲ | κ[αὶ] τῇ | βασιλίσσῃ Κλεοπάτρῃ Θεῷ(?) ὡς περὶ Θεῷ Φιλομήτωρ
 25 [μήτορι, | ὅσον | ἀμφοτέροις ἀξίον ἐστίν(?) |]

Example B. Translation.

'[The Alexandrians] with residence in the Egyptian country-side are to register [slaves acquired] illegally [within 20(?) days] free of charges, when [each slave has reached the age of 15] years, and are to add the name of the mother [of slave children of this kind at the] registration when they reach the age of 15 years, and are to take [such slaves to the office of the *agoranomi*], so that "personal descriptions" may be made. In the same way [the Alexandrians], in addition, are to register all houseborn slaves under 15 years of age belonging to them within 20 days at the office of [the *agoranomi*], adding [the "personal descriptions" and] the name of the mother, and also those over 15 years [in accordance with the laws]. Those who register [the slaves] later [than it is prescribed] are to pay [the penalty] at the office of the *agoranomi* into the town's treasury and to register in accordance with the [laws].

'[Seeing that at the present time] the king, Ptolemy, god Philometor, not only [has done good services to our town] Alexandria and to all men, but [also conceded us the slave tax] intending to be of great benefit to the citizens, and has treated us all with the most benign grace [and goodwill], we decree that a golden image of king [Ptolemy is to be made, entirely] of gold, and that the costs of this divine [image] are to be apportioned(?) to the wedding [treasure(?) of the king]. For this [our treasurers] are to take [the whole cost] out of the income we derived from the lease of [the slave-tax] payable by [Alexandrians in the country-side] as prescribed, and are to [render account of the expenses], as may be [necessary in accordance with the laws]. In addition, [we are to] sacrifice to the [king] Ptolemy, god Philometor, when he inaugurates the [marriage banquet(?), and to crown] him with a golden crown, and to sacrifice, in addition, to the [queen Cleopatra, the goddess], in the same way as to the god Philometor, as [is the due of both of them. . .].'

Example C. Papyrus restored by Youtie with "purely illustrative supplements."

Example D. Berlin papyrus with a regnal formula of Heralius.

3 [ἐξέδωκα (name) τὴν ἰδίαν μου θυγατέρα πρὸς γάμου κοινωνίαν ἧλθα τι νεῖ⁴⁾

4 [καὶ μετὰ τὸν εἰθισμένον χρόνον ἔτεκ' ἐ παῖδα, ἀλλὰ πρὸ τῆς γέννας τοῦ κοινοῦ

5 [αὐτῶν τέκνου καί περ αἰσθόμενος αὐτὴν ἔλγυσεν⁵⁾ οὕσαν ὅμως ἦκεν πρὸς

μαί⁶⁾ τὸν πα-

6 [τέρα λέγων ἀποδημήσειν οὐ μακρὸν χρόνον]. πλεῖστα τούτων ἀναλάματα

πεποιήμαι

7 [τρέφομένης ὑπ' ἐμοῦ τῆς θυγατρὸς μετὰ] τοῦ παιδὸς δι' ὅλης τριετίας⁷⁾

εἰς δεῦρο καὶ πρὸς

Translation: "I gave ... my own daughter in marriage to a certain Elias, and after the usual time she bore a child. But before the birth of their common child, although he had seen that she was pregnant, he nevertheless came⁸⁾ to me, her father, and said that he would be away for a short time. I have in consequence incurred very large expenses for she and her child have been maintained by me for all of three years up to now ..."

+ ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου καὶ δεσπότη τοῦ Ἰησοῦ]

Χριστοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ [καὶ σωτήρος ἡμῶν.]

4 βασιλείας τῶν θειοτάτων δεσποτῶν ἡμῶν]

4 Φλ(αυρίου) Ηρακλείου [καὶ Φλ(αυρίου) Ηρακλείου Νέου Κωνσταντίνου]

ἔτους κα' Ἀθῆν [.. δ' ἐν(δικτίονος) ἐν Ἀρσ(ινόῃ)].

[τοῦ αἰωνίου ἀγούστου]