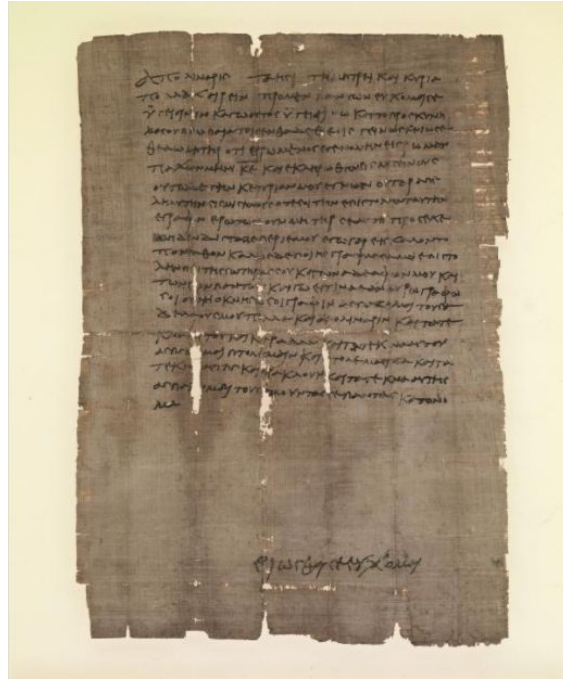


A Papyrus Letter from the Past



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English translation of Papyrus, “Apollinarius to Taesis, his mother and lady, many greetings. Before all else I pray for your health. I myself am well, and I make obeisance on your behalf before the gods of this place. I wish you to know, mother, that I arrived in Rome in good health on the 25th of the month Pachon and was assigned to Misenum. But I have not yet learned my century, for I had not gone to Misenum when I wrote you this letter. I beg you then, mother, take care of yourself, and do not worry about me, for I have come into a fine place. Please write to me about your welfare and that of my brothers and all your kinsfolk. And for my part, if I find someone <to carry the letters>, I will write to you; I will not delay to write to you. I salute my brothers often, and Apollinarius and his children, and Karalas and his children. I salute Ptolemaios, and Ptolemais and her children, and Heraklous and her children. I salute all your friends, each by name. I pray for your health.

(Verso) Deliver to Karanis, to Taesis, from Apollinarius, her son, of Misenum”¹

¹ “P.Mich.inv. 4528; Recto.” (University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, Advanced Papyrological Information System. Accessed: November 15, 2019).

Today, as in the past, humans and the environments that they choose to settle and attempt to tame interact in complex and often devastating ways. The Egyptian town of Karanis, believed to have been inhabited from roughly the 3rd Century BCE to sometime between the 5th and 8th Centuries CE, is no exception.² Throughout its existence Karanis experienced repeated sandstorms which threatened the agricultural economy of the town and made residents vulnerable. Eventually, these persistent disasters caused residents to abandon the town.³ A University of Michigan team led by Professor Francis Kelsey began excavating the site of Karanis in 1924.⁴ The artifacts found at this site reveal information about Egyptian life during this time period. Due to the nature of the town's decline, these objects offer a complex view into the relationship between humans, the man-made environment they create, and their natural surroundings. This paper will examine what can be learned from a papyrus uncovered during excavations in 1927, as well as what questions its discovery unearthed. Many of the concepts surrounding human interaction with nature in the face of impending disaster that this object, and others like it, reveal about Karanis draw parallels to the modern issues of man-made climate change. In both scenarios, humans chose to build in places that are difficult to sustain in the face of environmental challenges and changing climates. Humans briefly prosper from misusing the land, but ultimately are pushed away by nature, punishing the poorest and most vulnerable.

Papyrus and artifacts containing written information are unique from material objects with no written history, because information can be learned from both the physical object as well

² Terry Wilfong, and Andrew Ferrara. *Karanis Revealed: Discovering the Past and Present of a Michigan Excavation in Egypt*. (Ann Arbor MI: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 2014), 1.

³ "Ancient Disasters: Karanis an Egyptian City Molded by Sand." (Ann Arbor, MI: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 2015).

⁴ "Michigan Excavations in Egypt, 1924-1935," Exhibit Sign, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Karanis Exhibit, Accessed 20 Oct. 2019.

as from the actual contents of the writing on the document. While there is some age and wear on the document generally, it has been very well preserved. The papyrus letter contains legible writing on both the recto (front) and verso (reverse) sides of the document. Letters are different from other forms of written record, especially legal documents, because of their relatively informal nature.⁵ The front of the Papyrus contains the message portion of the letter from Apollinarius in Rome to his mother in Karanis. Letters are also useful to those studying the distant past because they give basic information about the individuals who came in contact with them. The reverse side of this papyrus contains delivery instructions, or the ancient equivalent of an address, that include the sender's name and location (Apollinarius and Misenum) and the recipient's name and town (Taesis and Karanis). The document is written entirely in Greek and was being sent from Rome to Karanis. This demonstrates the mix of Mediterranean cultures that were influencing Egyptian life at the time. The letter shows that ideas and language were traveling back and forth, just like how the man who wrote the letter traveled between the regions. The letter also shows that there was a level of communication and transport between Karanis and Rome, since a messenger had to deliver the letter for it to reach its final destination.

The letter also informs readers that much like today, certain occupations require individuals to travel far from home and leave their loved ones behind. The contents of the letter itself reveals just how important the family was to Roman era Egyptian life. Apollinarius reveals the importance of his own family and community by spending around half of the word count of his message asking about the wellbeing of his relatives and referencing many individuals by name. Apollinarius also demonstrates his concern for his loved ones multiple times in the short

⁵ Roger S Bagnall, Evie Ahtaridis, and Raffaella Cribiore. *Women's Letters From Ancient Egypt, 300 BC-AD 800*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 10.

correspondence by saying that he prays for his mother's health and wants her to "take care of herself". There are multiple possible explanations as to why he is so adamant on this point.

Apollinarius might have simply been using a common well-wishing formality in his letter, or perhaps Apollinarius' mother was ill. Another possible reason for why Apollinarius was so fixated on the well-being of his family is due to the harsh natural conditions in Karanis.

Although we know that Karanis was not permanently abandoned until the fourth or possibly even the seventh century, we do know that "plague and economic problems in the late 2nd and 3rd centuries AD resulted in a significant decline (nearly 40 percent) of the community's population".⁶ It is possible that at this time Karanis was facing a minor environmental challenge that Apollinarius wanted to make sure his family overcame.

In addition to the physical characteristics of an object, the setting in which an object is found and excavated is equally informative and important in developing a modern understanding of the context of the artifact. The precise geographical location within the larger archaeological site, the layer of excavation (stratigraphy), and the proximity of the object to other artifacts can all provide clues to the artifact's context. Due to the wealth of information the location of an artifact can provide, proper archaeological procedures and documentation are critical to preserving knowledge. Apollinarius's letter was found in a structure researchers labeled C123, which originally functioned as a granary.⁷ Considering Karanis' role as a center of agricultural production, the presence of a large granary is not surprising. However, finding a personal letter from a soldier to his mother there is a little puzzling. In fact, many other artifacts were

⁶ Wilfong and Ferrara. *Karanis Revealed*, 102.

⁷ Arthur Verhoogt and Graham Claytor. *Papyri From Karanis: The Granary C123*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

discovered at the site, including a significant number of papyrus documents that belonged to Apollinarius' family. From these many documents we know that this particular piece of papyri dates to the second century BC.⁸ Unfortunately the cache of information uncovered from the Papyri did little to help archaeologists piece together information about the break in occupation of the granary because of the way all of the artifacts were excavated in "artificial and arbitrary stratigraphic layers".⁹ Although the timeframe of the changing uses of the granary is uncertain, researchers were able to piece together a significant amount of information about Apollinarius' family tree and history that they would not have known from just the letter from Apollinarius to his mother. Individual letters without context pose a challenge when interpreting them because, as personal communications, letters rely on the common knowledge the author and recipient share to be understood.¹⁰ Luckily, the letter was preserved along with many others that contained additional information about the individuals mentioned in the correspondence. From the Papyrus discovered in the granary, archaeologists were able to piece information together on Apollinarius's date of birth, details about his family tree, the fact that his father also served in the Roman military, and the promotions he received as a soldier.¹¹ One papyrus can reveal a small snippet of information, but when placed in association with other papyri, small pieces of information can be combined to help researchers formulate a more complete understanding of the context of the documents as a whole (even if information regarding the building they were

⁸ "P.Mich.inv. 4528; Recto." (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, Advanced Papyrological Information System. Accessed: November 15, 2019).

⁹ Verhoogt and Claytor. *Papyri From Karanis: The Granary C123*, 9.

¹⁰ Richara Alston. *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). (117-137).

¹¹ Graham Claytor and Birgit Feucht "(Gaii) Iulii Sabinus and Apollinarius" *Leuven Homepage fo Papyrus Collections* (2013).(5-6)

found in remains elusive).¹² In this case, synthesizing information from a collection of Papyri allowed for precise details about the life of a citizen who lived almost 2,000 years ago to be discovered.

This abundance of documents revolving around a singular family in Karanis suggests a level of wealth and affluence. In fact, the majority of people in these villages were illiterate or semi-literate.¹³ The fact that Apollinarius and presumably the other members of his family could read and write shows that they were of a different social status than the majority of Karanis' residents. This, combined with the fact that other documents revealed that his family owned an estate with multiple olive groves and wheat fields, shows that Apollinarius's family was well off financially.¹⁴ This leads to interesting questions about vulnerability that this letter does not address. In the face of Karanis' persistent climate-induced challenges were Apollinarius and his descendants subject to the same kind of stressors in defending against the environment as the average resident of Karanis? Often the poorest individuals in a society are most vulnerable to disaster.¹⁵ Since the changes at Karanis were so slow moving, perhaps even poorer residents were able to react and relocate in time. Or maybe they did not have the resources to uproot their life, and that is part of the reason Karanis appears to have been inhabited for so long following the initial encroachment of the desert. Part of the reason questions like these remain unanswered is because of the disparity in education between social classes. Since the majority of workers in Karanis were probably illiterate, papyrus and letters between poorer individuals did not exist to

¹² Thomas Lanvatter, "Archaeological and Papyrological Inquiry at Karanis: Problems and Potentialities," *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology* (2016): 1493-1507.

¹³ "Writing and Reading in Roman Egypt," (Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Karanis Exhibit: Accessed 20 Oct. 2019).

¹⁴ Claytor and Feucht "(Gaii) Iulii Sabinus and Apollinarius" 6.

¹⁵ "Ancient Disasters: Karanis an Egyptian City Molded by Sand."

be preserved. Another aspect that leaves these questions unanswered is the incomplete information about the timeline of events that lead to Karanis being overtaken by the desert.

These papyri also collectively reveal information about the nature of the military in Karanis. The letter from Apollinarius to Taesis allows the reader to deduce that the man was a member of the military due to the locations he mentions and the fact that he has yet to be assigned his century (a regiment of the Roman Military). However, the collection of papyri that include multiple letters, contracts, and records allows one to see how the Roman military afforded at least one family a wealthy life. On a larger scale, the Roman military played an interesting role in Egyptian Karanis. From documentation from other towns in the Fayum, it is known that the soldier's role in the region was bureaucratic in nature, and not combative in Karanis. They collected taxes and acted as law enforcement.¹⁶ The military was there not to fight wars but to tame the wilderness and maintain civilization in a hostile environment.

Even with the specific knowledge gained from these papyri, many questions still persist. The people of Karanis were very careful about the goods they consumed. They often mended objects, reused broken pottery as ostraka for writing, and erased and reinscribed papyri.¹⁷ This leads to the assumption that since all of these papyri were stored and not reused, clearly these documents were of some significance to the people who kept them. A granary, later used as a storage/dump, plus valuable objects together don't make sense. If the papyrus were valuable enough to keep, why were they eventually all left behind in the Granary? The questions that remain unanswered have to do largely with the nature of the disaster, which, because of how slow moving it was, is hard to discern an exact time frame. Who left all the documents behind in

¹⁶ Wilfong and Ferrara. *Karanis Revealed*, 114.

¹⁷ Wilfong and Ferrara. *Karanis Revealed*, 75.

this location and why? Did a family member throw them away because they were no longer useful in the face of disaster? Were they kept somewhere for safe keeping only to be abandoned when the family moved away?

It is perhaps a little ironic that Karanis' dry and sandy climate which ultimately led to the town's downfall and abandonment (and the fact that Karanis was a dry part of Egypt with little flooding) is what allowed this papyrus and others like it to be preserved so that its history can live on in modern records. That is one way in which this ancient disaster of climate is unique from the disasters resulting from man-made climate change today. The wildfires in southern California and the flooding in Venice destroy all they come in contact with, while the sands of Karanis preserved a time capsule for the future. However, this does not mean that there are no apt comparisons. On the contrary, we can draw parallels to climate change today, since in both cases the change is slow moving and people continue with their daily lives until it is too late. Apollinarius and the people of Karanis briefly prospered in the hostile desert environment, but eventually nature reclaimed the land from the humans. Today, humans build homes in places prone to flooding or wildfires. This disregard for the natural cycles of the Earth, in combination with the devastating effects of man-made climate change that raise world temperatures and sea levels also contribute to a narrative of the Earth reclaiming the wilderness in a destructive manner. The abandoned town of Karanis suggests that human complacency isn't a new trend and will likely continue today. Unlike in Karanis, where one could flee to a new town, climate change is world-wide, and humanity only has one Earth. Humans need to act to reverse their destructive action before it is too late.

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