

The Carbonized Papyri from Bubastos: Current Work on the Unpublished Material¹

Matias Buchholz
University of Helsinki
matias.buchholz@helsinki.fi

Abstract

Several papyrus collections hold parts of an archive of carbonized papyri that derive from the administration of the Bubastite nome in the Nile Delta. So far, six long scrolls have been published in the three volumes of the P.Bub. series (1990, 1998, 2016). However, a large part of the material remains unpublished. I report here on my work on this material, with a focus on one large scroll that I am hoping to publish soon.

Keywords

Bubastos (Boubastos, Bubastis), carbonized papyri, administrative archives

Introduction

Several papyrus collections, most notably those of the University of Cologne and of the Austrian National Library, hold fragments of carbonized papyri that derive from the city of Bubastos (or Bubastis, as it is also known), the capital of the Bubastite nome in the Nile Delta. This is a region from which very few other papyri survive, making the Bubastos papyri rather important, even though they are broken into literally thousands of carbonized fragments of various sizes. Despite the present scattering of these fragments over several collections, their common origin is clear. In some cases, fragments from different collections can even be physically joined.

As has already been well established, the archive is an administrative one, with many of the documents relating to the *strategus* of the nome himself, and it dates to the early third century A.D.

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Three volumes have been published so far in the P.Bub. series.² These volumes feature a total of six long scrolls, all from the Cologne collection. Of the published documents, P.Bub. I 1-4 and P.Bub. II 5 are archival scrolls that contain collections of letters between the *strategus* and other officials. P.Bub. III 6, the best preserved of the scrolls that have been published so far, is a register relating to the inspection of land administered by the state.

However, the published documents are only a relatively small portion of what is preserved. Within the framework of my postdoctoral research project, which is financed for three years by the Academy of Finland (2017-2020) and based at the University of Helsinki, I have been able to get some overview of the total material. My project builds upon previous work done by J. Frösén, who, already in the 1980s produced, among other things, preliminary reconstructions and transcriptions of almost all the Bubastos papyri.

The total material

In the preface of P.Bub. I (published in 1990), Frösén gives an overview of the total material from Bubastos that was known at the time.³ No up-to-date overview has been published since. Therefore, it might be useful to present an overview of the material that I am aware of now. The University of Cologne has the biggest collection of Bubastos papyri with more than 3000 fragments. When these fragments are pieced together, an estimated number of 25 original scrolls can be reconstructed to at least some degree (of which, as already mentioned, six scrolls have already been published). The Austrian National Library in Vienna also has a substantial collection with more than 2000 fragments (not including minor fragments), coming from ca. 22 original scrolls, all thus far unpublished. The fragments from the remaining collections are also unpublished. These collections are the University of Athens (170 fragments plus 150 minor ones, from four scrolls⁴), Duke University (ca. 22 fragments from one scroll) and the Palau Ribes Collection in Barcelona. As for the latter collection, there is an ongoing project aimed at extracting the fragments – which are quite considerable in number, but mostly relatively small in size – from the three cigar boxes in which they have been stored for decades, untouched.⁵ A further two cigar boxes from Barcelona were lent to the University of Trieste and there is a preliminary edition by S. Daris of 29 fragments from one scroll belonging to this material.⁶

² P.Bub. I (eds. J. Frösén & D. Hagedorn, 1990); P.Bub. II (eds. D. Hagedorn & K. Maresch, 1998); P.Bub. III (ed. K. Maresch, 2016).

³ P.Bub. I, p. 7.

⁴ Livadaras 1988. A couple of fragments were already published in Livadaras 1984.

⁵ See Nodar 2011.

⁶ This is based on information provided by J. Frösén personally and in documents from his archive dating to 1995-1997. I have no information on the current status of these fragments.

Finally, there are four unopened roll pieces belonging to the University of Cologne that are currently stored at the University of Helsinki.

The above numbers need to be taken with a grain of salt, as there are inconsistencies in what exactly has been counted as one fragment (small scraps are not always accounted for). As for the number of reconstructed scrolls, one should note that the reconstruction process is quite difficult and cannot yet be considered finished. When trying to determine the overall number of scrolls, one should also note that the numbers of reconstructed scrolls from the various collections cannot simply be added up because some of them actually belong together and should not be counted twice. The exact overall number still needs to be confirmed, but the figure of 38 scrolls given in the preface of P.Bub. I is probably too small. Thus, with only six scrolls published so far, it is obvious that a considerable amount of work remains to be done. While it is true that many of the unpublished scrolls are so fragmentary that they may not be published anytime soon, there is also some quite interesting material left, about which I hope to give you a glimpse in the following.

Some examples of unpublished documents

Given the preliminary status of the work, it is still not possible to provide an exhaustive list of all the preserved documents and their respective contents with sufficient confidence. However, there are several documents on which work has already progressed relatively far. In the following, I will give a few examples of such scrolls from the collections of Cologne and Vienna, which I know best. To begin with, there is an archival scroll containing correspondence of the Royal Scribe of Bubastos with the Royal Scribes of other nomes pertaining to the possessions of deceased people. The scroll has been reconstructed from Cologne fragments (mainly P.Köln Inv. C, Gruppe 3, but also other fragment groups) and preserves remnants of 41 columns of text, with the beginning better preserved than the end. A draft edition by T. Purola already exists. Another scroll containing official correspondence is P.Vindob. G 39894 of the Vienna collection, but the 170 fragments of that scroll are still unordered. Other noteworthy documents include a diary of the imperial cult, in which it is recorded which ceremonies were performed when (P.Vindob. G 39896). This document with its 4 columns and 16 additional fragments refers at least to processions and to sacrifices performed by the *strategus*. Then there are, for instance, court proceedings, concerning a case in which someone has apparently killed the donkey of a public donkey-driver (P.Vindob. G 39897, comprising ca. 50 fragments). Then there is a scroll that consists of two clearly separate parts that were glued together already in antiquity: the first part is a list of liturgical nominations, and the second one is an abbreviated census list (P.Vindob.

G 39898). It has an impressive total of 68 columns, albeit they are preserved in very fragmentary form.

However, let me now turn to the document that is probably the best preserved of the unpublished papyri, and that I hope to be ready for publication soon. This document is large enough to fill an entire volume in the P.Bub. series by itself.

The Vienna/Cologne scroll: final account of the strategus

This scroll, P.Vindob. G 39888 + P.Köln Inv. R, can be reconstructed from fragments that are stored in Vienna and in Cologne.⁷ Of course, this document is fragmentary too, but for a carbonized papyrus, I would characterize its state of preservation as exceptionally good.

It is a long document written in columns. The upper parts of the columns are stored in Vienna and the lower parts in Cologne, but there are many physical matches between the fragments that make it certain that they belong together. The document consists of more than 200 fragments, which, when reconstructed, yield a roll that has a preserved length of close to seven meters (including the gaps between the fragments). The content makes it clear that the scroll was originally even longer, as we know for sure that certain parts are missing (more on the content below). As for the height of the scroll, the preserved height is mostly about 20 cm, with just a couple of lines of text missing at the top and/or at the bottom of the columns. All in all, 54 text columns can be reconstructed – most of them only in part, but, especially at the beginning of the scroll, many even completely. More than 1400 lines of text are preserved at least in part. All that being said, there are, nonetheless, frequent gaps in the text that sometimes make it difficult to understand what exactly is being said, especially in less formulaic sections.

While the reconstruction of the original order of the fragments and the transcription of the writing that is preserved on them are on solid ground by now, the restoration of the gaps and the analysis of the contents (including the work on the edition's introduction and commentary) is not finished yet. However, some observations on the contents may, of course, already be presented. Broadly speaking, this is a register of tax receipts and other income of the state belonging to the account of the *Idios Logos*. In earlier publications, the document was sometimes referred to as a list of tax arrears, which seems somewhat too narrow a definition, even if arrears do indeed figure prominently. The roll could also be described as the final account of the former *strategus* of the Bubastite nome, Aurelius

⁷ An almost final reconstruction was done by J. Frösén already in the 1980s. He also prepared a preliminary transcription. Other members of his team, including M. Satama, continued his work before I took over in 2017.

Heracleides. It is he who officially drew up this document and who always appears in the first person singular. He gives an account of the income from the beginning of the year 221/222 (which is referred to as past) until the end of his official tenure nine months into that year. In reality, he seems to have already been absent during the last three months of his tenure (Phamenothe, Pharmouthi and Pachon). During these months, he was replaced by the Royal Scribe Aurelius Arabion alias Asclepiades, before the next *strategus*, Aurelius Apollon, took over in Pauni.

The document has many different sections, but generally speaking most of it consists of lists of payments and calculations of sum totals. As far as I can see, its basic structure can be summarized as follows:

1. After a brief introduction, there follows a calculation of how much was *supposed* to be collected during the period in question (cols. I-VII). We are given the totals for each income type (and partly even individual payments), which are listed by month. Additionally, we are given the totals for each type of income for the period in which the *strategus* himself was in charge (6 months), for the period in which the Royal Scribe was in charge (3 months), and for the whole period of nine months.
2. Calculation of how much was *actually* collected (broken down by month and totals as above) (cols. VII-XII).
3. Calculation of the difference between the above, i.e., how much is still missing (only the totals for each type of income for the whole period are given, no break-down by time period) (col. XII).
4. Deduction from the above of sums which are missing for a legitimate reason (for instance, suspension has been granted by the authorities) (cols. XII-XIV). These sums are individually listed and briefly explained. The remaining sums that are still missing and that need to be collected by the next *strategus* are then calculated and presented as totals for each income type. This is, so to speak, the culmination of the document up to this point.
5. The remainder of the document (in fact, its largest part, cols. XIV-LIV) consists of several long and detailed lists grouped by type of income, listing all individual payments, always indicating whether they have been received or have been suspended or are in arrears. In part, these lists include interim sums, for instance, by village. For some of the income types mentioned in the previous sections of the document, the lists are missing, which clearly indicates that, despite its length, the document breaks off and its end is not preserved.

Especially in the first three sections, there are many repetitions, which make it possible to fill in most of the gaps. It is often even possible to calculate sums that are not preserved anywhere, deducing

them with certainty from what is preserved. In this way, more than a dozen columns at the beginning of the scroll can be restored almost completely, something which is rare for carbonized documents. The latter parts of the scroll, on the other hand, have much less repetition and are thus clearly harder to restore, even though they contain many well-preserved passages.

What, then, is the overall significance of this document in relation to what we already know about Roman Egypt? At this point, I cannot really go into the details and will confine myself to referring to the forthcoming edition. Nonetheless, I believe I can say already now that this papyrus, once fully analyzed and published, will be a noteworthy addition to our evidence concerning the taxation system and the finances of the state in Roman Egypt, if not for other reasons, then due to its sheer size alone and the fact that it comes from a region for which there is little other papyrological evidence.

Before I conclude, I would like to add that, in my opinion, the biggest challenge relating to the unpublished material from Bubastos is the fact that most of it is so fragmentary. Literally thousands of fragments need to find their original order – a giant jigsaw puzzle in which many (if not most) of the pieces are missing. But, as I hope I have made clear, there are cases in which it actually looks quite promising, and I think it will be worth the trouble.

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