

Shared Histories: New Work in British Museum and British Library Collections*

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Abstract

Since their formal separation following the British Library Act of 1972, the British Museum and British Library have largely taken separate paths. Several recent collaborations have aimed to study papyrological material across both institutions, addressing one or more of three strands of enquiry, 1. knowledge gained through systematic documentation of collections, 2. archaeological findspot and provenance revealed through object study and archival research, and/or 3. the cultural context of production and use.

Keywords

Archaeology, Materiality of writing, Documentation

As a result of the British Library Act of 1972, Latin, Greek, Demotic, Coptic and Arabic papyri and *ostraka* from Egypt held in the British Museum (BM) were officially divided between two separate institutions.¹ Demotic papyri and *ostraka* and Coptic and Arabic *ostraka* remained in BM, mainly in what is now the Department of Egypt and Sudan. Greek and Latin papyri and *ostraka* are today held in the Western Heritage Collection of the British Library (BL), and Coptic and Arabic papyri are in what is today its Asia and Africa Collection. In practice these divisions are more porous and incomplete, but one of the major consequences of these artificial divides between language, script and writing support is that objects from the same archaeological site, and indeed often the same ancient and medieval communities, are distributed between three departments over two institutions.²

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¹ For histories of the BM and BL collections, see respectively, Wilson 2002 and Harris 1998.

² O’Connell 2019.

These textual objects are only part of the archaeological records for collections otherwise held in BM or indeed across international collections today (e.g., Abydos, Wadi Sarga, Elephantine, below). In addition to the physical objects, the documentation of BM and BL collections – archives, including acquisition records, correspondence and, sometimes, excavation documentation – is held separately. As institutional policies on access, copyright and publishing differ considerably, bringing such material together in meaningful ways presents significant challenges. A range of collaborative models have been employed in recent years in order to make collections more accessible and to advance institutional research objectives.

The aim of the 2019 congress panel was to survey recent documentation and research undertaken at both the BM and BL, highlighting models of successful collaboration and addressing one or more of three strands of enquiry, 1. knowledge gained through systematic documentation of collections, 2. archaeological findspot and provenance revealed through object study and archival research, and/or 3. the cultural context of production and use. Within these rubrics, the contributions highlighted the diversity of languages, contents and materials across the papyrological collections. Five of the seven contributions are published in this volume (O’Connell, Tóth, Tahan, Wilburn, Zellmann-Rohrer), and summaries of the others, published or to be published elsewhere, appear below (Hickey and Dijkstra).

Systematic documentation of collections: By material and by archaeological site.

The systematic recording of objects – with images – is a necessary foundation for research and publication. Both BM and BL host on-line databases that make records and photography freely available on-line. Today, this is the primary way in which all items are now «published». BM makes all records available regardless of their quality on the «Collections Online» database, viewing it as a dynamic resource with its catalogue records constantly refined.³ BL requires its records to meet a strict standard (see Tóth, this volume) before the data and existing images can be made available on its «Digital Manuscripts» site.⁴ Each model of publication has its advantages and disadvantages. For both institutions, the photography of manuscripts sometimes necessitates conservation treatment. Transportation within each institution – between storage (or rarely display), the conservation and photography studios and the study/reading room – requires at least one, but sometimes two members of staff. Conservation, documentation and study are iterative processes, with each ideally informing the other (see Zellmann-Rohrer, this volume). Each step is also resource-intensive and thus expensive.

³ The British Museum, “Collections Online”, [https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx] (last accessed 18 March 2020).

⁴ The British Library, “Digitised Manuscripts”, [<https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/>] (last accessed 18 March 2020).

While photography of individual items or groups can be requested commercially (with charges applying to both internal BM and BL and external researchers), systematic documentation of objects similar in size and material is the most efficient way to process large *corpora* (Tóth and Tahan, this volume). Additional institutional resources must be sought in order to achieve these aims, for example through funding applications, or carved from the existing allocation. Given the pressures on the public institutions, where attention to day-to-day tasks and, in the context of reduced government funding, commercial outputs prevail, creative solutions are required. At both BM and BL, several materials-based projects are in process or have recently been completed. These take place alongside projects that publish documents according to research priorities, foremost, site-based studies.

At BM, all Greek and Coptic papyri were imaged and their documentation improved in 2017 by Adrienn Almásy-Martin. Whereas the c. 4000 Coptic and c. 340 Greek *ostraka* are far more numerous than papyri in the BM collection, the c. 290 numbered items of Coptic and c. 95 Greek papyri comprised a manageable corpus for a year's documentation project. Otherwise, BM site-based studies provide a more focussed opportunity to publish documents alongside other archaeological objects from excavations. Such studies situate texts within larger archaeological, historical and historiographic contexts as a part of larger research and fieldwork projects. Recent work on first millennium A.D. Abydos has drawn together studies by leaders of current international fieldwork projects at the site and by papyrologists and epigraphers.⁵ Among the BM's c. 115 *ostraka* from Abydos, a selection of 38 Demotic, Greek and Coptic *ostraka* (Pl. 1) and all six of the Arabic *ostraka* (Pl. 2) have now been published alongside Coptic inscriptions and *dipinti* from the region and a handful of excavated papyrus and parchment fragments and *ostraka*.⁶ The volume can thus help situate future work on first millennium A.D. Abydos material, either in international collections or recorded in the field. While short-term contracts to cover staff research leave can provide opportunities for discrete projects (Almásy-Martin, above), a series of BM fellowships providing grants to fund post-doctoral researchers have also contributed to papyrological expertise. The fellowship model facilitated the photography and systematic recording of *ostraka* contributing to the BM research project «Wadi Sarga at the British Museum», which seeks to document and study all 2800 objects from Campbell Thompson's 1913/14 excavation.⁷ During her three-month fellowship, Jennifer Cromwell improved the records for and photographed some 1400 *ostraka*.⁸ While Crum and Bell published the most complete or otherwise promising 365 papyri *ostraka* and stone inscriptions

⁵ O'Connell ed. 2020.

⁶ For BM demotic, Greek and Coptic *ostraka*, see Almásy-Martin 2020; see also Almásy-Martin and Duttonhöfer 2019; for Arabic, see Vorderstrasse 2020; for epigraphy and other excavated items, see Bélanger Sarrazin and Dijkstra in Adams 2020, 137-148; Effland 2020, 199-202; McCormack and Westerfeld 2020, 215-220.

⁷ O'Connell 2014, 2016; The British Museum, "Wadi Sarga at the British Museum", [https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/all_current_projects/wadi_sarga.aspx] (last accessed, March 2020).

⁸ O'Connell 2019, 70.

in O.Sarga in 1922, Cromwell is now in the process of preparing Coptic *ostraka* for publication.⁹ At the same time, external researcher Tasha Vorderstrasse is working with the BM project to study the small number of Arabic items from the site. The Wadi Sarga material crosses both BM and BL collections, with excavation documentation and most of the objects including *ostraka* in the BM, but paper and parchment in Greek, Coptic and Arabic in BL.

Since 2016, BL has made tremendous strides in imaging its Greek and Latin papyrus collections. In 2009, thanks to major grants from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the A. G. Leventis Foundation (among others), the BL was able to digitise more than 900 Greek manuscripts dating from the fourth to eighteenth centuries. After the manuscripts were imaged, new catalogue records were created for each item which, together with the high-resolution, zoomable images, were uploaded to the BL's online catalogue where they are freely available. As phase 4 of the same project, the BL was able to digitise its entire collection of Greek papyri beginning in 2017. As a result, all 3136 numbered papyrus items were imaged and more than 1000 have been published online so far. Now that papyri have been imaged, curators have turned to the Greek *ostraka* collection. Peter Tóth presents an overview of the Greek *ostraka* collection comprising some c. 4000 objects, little studied since their inaugural publication over 100 years ago (O.Wilcken; see also O.Sijp. 38 a-y). Most of these Greek *ostraka* were moved from what was then the BM Department of Egyptian Antiquities to the BL Department of Manuscripts in a series of transfers over the course of the twentieth century.¹⁰ But the documentation, both handwritten and digital, remained in the BM. Realising that BL had no digital records for their *ostraka*, BM staff were able to export the data for the over 4000 *ostraka* from the database and provide a skeletal electronic documentation as a basis upon which BL can build. Collaboration with external partners has also resulted in site-based results for both institutions, with the ERC-funded project on Elephantine, contributing data for c. 230 BL and c. 80 BM *ostraka*.¹¹

Systematic documentation of the BL's Coptic papyrus collection is just beginning and promises to be equally productive. Today held in the BL's Asia and Africa Department in the «Christian Orient» collection alongside Syriac, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopic manuscripts, Coptic items number c. 1600. BL's collaborations with BM and external partners have already proven successful.¹² Ilana Tahan reports on the latter already-realised thematic projects and a new initiative to catalogue and image Coptic manuscripts as part of the BL's «Heritage Made Digital» initiative. The project will fund a position for a cataloguer and the digitisation and on-line presentation of much of the collection.

⁹ Cromwell forthcoming a; see also forthcoming b and c.

¹⁰ O'Connell 2019 and Tóth this volume.

¹¹ European Research Council, "Elephantine: Localizing 4000 Years of Cultural History: Texts and Scripts from Elephantine Island in Egypt", [<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/637692/fr>] (last accessed March 2020).

¹² For a BM-BL collaboration, see the section on the Esna-Edfu corpus below.

A much smaller collection of BM and BL tablets and writing boards are currently being studied as part of an initiative led by Todd M. Hickey. The project seeks to document 17 Greek and Latin items in the BL, and c. 20 Greek and Coptic items in the BM in order to enhance accessibility of both important collections and to edit a selection of the texts (BL Add. MS 33369; BM EA 29424 and EA 26669). In 2018, Hickey and Jean-Luc Fournet began a project with the support of the France-Berkeley Fund to study a remarkable fifth-century Greek codex consisting of 10 wooden panels (BL Add. MS 33369). Now the subject of a planned monograph with Yasmine Amory and Valérie Schram, the codex contains several model legal instruments among other texts, most of which are the work of a student.¹³ The wooden codex is a rare papyrological witness for a «professional» educational track (cf. P.Math.), and for Panopolis/Akhmim (cf. TM Geo 1589), which is otherwise extremely well-represented by the literature produced by its residents and passed down through the manuscript tradition. Archival records in the BM have helped elucidate their 1888 acquisition via E. A. W. Budge (BM Department of Assyrian and Egyptian Antiquities, Assistant Keeper 1883-1894; Keeper 1894-1924). A one-day conference at the BL was largely dedicated to analysing aspects of this wooden codex within the larger context of educational and administrative tablets. Entitled «Current research on Greek tablets in the British Library» (20 May 2019), and the event coincided with the BL exhibition *Writing: Making Your Mark*, which featured a set of wooden writing-tablets bearing school texts in Greek (BL Add. MS 34186).

New work on so-called magical texts.

Objects bearing «magical» texts have often fallen often between museum and library collections. They occur on the continuum of literary and documentary texts and are usually, if advisedly, termed «sub-» or «para-literary». They also appear on a wide range of materials. Long papyrus rolls and codices can contain handbooks (theoretical magic), whereas amulets and other finished products (applied magic) can be found on, inter alia, papyrus, pottery and limestone *ostraka*, parchment and leather sheets, wooden tablets, lead and other metallic sheets (*lamellae*), bone and semi-precious gemstones. Two of our contributors present projects which cross BM and BL collections and archives.

Building on his ground-breaking *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus and Spain* (2012), Andrew T. Wilburn models the specialist networks responsible for transferring ritual knowledge across the Roman empire and beyond. The foundation for the study is

¹³ University of California, Berkeley, France-Berkeley Fund, “Everyday Writing in a Literary Town: Some Rediscovered Tablets from Late Antique Panopolis”, [<https://fbf.berkeley.edu/project/everyday-writing-literary-town-some-rediscovered-tablets-late-antique-panopolis>] (last accessed 18 March 2020). See also, Bagnall / Jones 2019, 16.

the c. third-century corpus of c. 200 lead and c. 30 selenite tablets discovered in a shaft in ancient Amathus, Cyprus, and now in the BM Department of Greece and Rome (Pl. 4). The original find context can be schematically reconstructed on the basis of archival material housed in the same department. Consultation with and advice from BM Ancient Cyprus curator, Thomas Kiely, who has worked extensively with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century excavation documentation and other archival material, proved indispensable for modelling the find context.¹⁴ Based on the contents of the Amathus tablets Wilburn reconstructs a formulary comprised of at least three spells, which uses a combination of *charaktêres* and *voces magicae*. Among the parallels for the formularies are those found in the BL's PGM VII (= P.Lond. 121), a Hermonthite handbook, high resolution images of which are now available for consultation on-line. The appearance of a formula for «muzzling» appearing on Amathus tablets, PGM VII, and a handful of other objects found from Rome to Afghanistan, suggests the transmission of ritual knowledge across the empire, and beyond.

Seven sheets of leather including Coptic formularies and one finished amulet are among the c. 500 objects purchased from the estate of Robert Hay in 1868. The assemblage contains a famous handbook (the so-called Hay Cookbook) and other formularies for protection, healing, competition and cursing. While in Egypt, Hay travelled, drew and collected, employing draughtsmen and architects to record ancient and modern (i.e. Ottoman) monuments during two expeditions between 1824 and 1828 and, later, between 1829 and 1834.¹⁵ Often lauded by Egyptologists as rare surviving records of places since destroyed, the Hay volumes are now in the BL (Add. MSS 29812-29860), where Southampton PhD student Gemma Renshaw has been systematically recording the antiquities described therein. Although the leather manuscripts have not yet been identified with certainty,¹⁶ the documents evidence the variety of ways in which Hay came to acquire objects, including papyri and other texts. Michael Zellmann-Rohrer is currently working towards a full re-edition, textual commentary and translation of the texts as part of a BM Research project entitled «The Hay cookbook of Coptic spells and associated ritual handbooks on leather». Since 2016, the project has endeavoured to provide a model for the presentation of archaeological artefacts bearing texts by publishing their collection history; a full record of scientific analysis; conservation approach and treatment; a new complete edition and translation of the Coptic texts; and an extended discussion of the cultural context of production.¹⁷ The project was occasioned by the urgent conservation needs of this corpus. Having been glazed as if they were papyri, they suffered breakage and were slipping in their mounts prior to

¹⁴ Wilburn 2012, 177-84; and forthcoming.

¹⁵ Thompson 2015, 154-161, 185-189.

¹⁶ Unless Hay possibly interpreted the Coptic as Hebrew in a letter seeking advice concerning leather manuscripts from the Jewish community in Cairo (Add MS 29859 f. 40). I thank Michael Zellmann-Rohrer for bringing this letter to my attention.

¹⁷ The British Museum, “The Hay Cookbook and Associated Coptic Spells on Leather”, [https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/all_current_projects/the_hay_cookbook.aspx] (last accessed 8 July 2019).

intervention. Since BM conservators' time is partly allocated to maximize commercial activities (e.g., exhibitions, displays, loans), projects like these are rare and challenging to achieve without substantial external funding. It has required close collaboration between the BM curator (the present author), Organics Conservator Barbara Wills, Conservation Moulder David Giles, Scientist Rebecca Stacey, an AHRC-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award student jointly based at BM and Northampton University, Lucy Skinner, and our external collaborator, Zellmann-Rohrer. The latter is a member of the latest generation of excellent philologists equipped to overcome traditional disciplinary divides (Egyptology, Classics, History and Theology) to analyse and interpret texts in this notoriously difficult genre. He has made several important new readings partly as a result of conservation treatment, multi-spectral imaging and microscopic analysis of the leather itself.¹⁸ In turn, he was able to suggest the placement of some fragments on the basis of textual features, demonstrating nicely the advantages of such collaborative studies (Pl. 5).

New work on the Esna-Edfu corpus.

The Esna-Edfu corpus of manuscripts comprises up to two dozen parchment and paper codicological units, 22 primarily in Coptic, one in Greek and one in Old Nubian. They were acquired on the Egyptian antiquities market between 1907 and 1911, with most today in the British Library (P.Lond.Copt. II, xxvi-xxx).¹⁹ BM Keeper E. A. W. Budge, was principally responsible for their acquisition from various sources, and it was under him that the Coptic manuscripts were hastily edited so as to make them available as quickly as possible (Pl. 6).²⁰

Widely reported to have been discovered at a ruined monastery near Edfu, many of the manuscripts indeed bear colophons which state that they were written in Esna for a monastery (*monasterion*) and saints' shrines (*topoi*) in Edfu, some of which are explicitly stated to be in «the Mountain» of Edfu (*ptoou nTbô*).²¹ In 1985, Gawdat Gabra argued that this must be Hagr Edfu, a hill 2.5kms from the town with a pharaonic rock-cut necropolis in use for burial from as early as the end of the Middle Kingdom to the Roman period, and, from Late Antiquity, the location of a monastic community

¹⁸ See now also Zellmann-Rohrer 2020.

¹⁹ Half of one of the BL Coptic codices was sold separately in 1908 and is now in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington DC; and another Coptic codex was purchased in 1911 by what is now the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. As Bentley Layton discussed in his 1987 catalogue of the Coptic manuscripts now in the British Library, the unity of the group of codices is artificial at best. Nevertheless, as Layton argued, 1. the shared physical characteristics of the manuscripts, 2. their tenth and eleventh century dates and 3. the fact that they all came on to the antiquities market at about the same time suggest that at least a majority came from a single source (Layton 1987, xxvii). Further analysis by Jacques van der Vliet has further supported this hypothesis (2015) and Dijkstra / van der Vliet 2020, 12-15.

²⁰ Budge 1912, 1913, 1914, 1915.

²¹ For the meanings of Coptic *toou*, see Cadell / Rémondon 1967; O'Connell 2007, 242-244.

(Gabra 1985). This is where the British Museum Expedition to Hagr Edfu worked since 2001, and from 2007-2013 also documented Christian occupation.²² In 1975, under Bishop Hâdra of Aswan, a monastery dedicated to Saint Pachomius was established around the nineteenth-century church at the base of the hill and, in 1980, this monastery was named the Tenth Official Coptic Orthodox Monastery. Today, Hagr Edfu is a popular Coptic pilgrimage destination, hosting dozens of families in its guesthouses during the school holidays.

As part of the BM fieldwork project, BM and BL collaborated on a successful joint application to the International Challenge Fund in 2010 to image all of the Coptic manuscripts in order to make them available to the monks of the modern monastery, and for further academic study with a view to a future re-edition of the texts.²³ To date three of the manuscripts from the Esna-Edu corpus have been made available via the BL's on-line reader «Digitised Manuscripts». The Greek manuscript (Add. MS 37534) containing the *Life and Miracles of Saints Cosmas and Damian* was imaged as part of the BL Greek manuscripts digitisation project. Records for two Coptic manuscripts were made available to coincide with their display in the 2015-2016 exhibition *Egypt: Faith after the Pharaohs*, one containing *The Martyrdom of St Mercurius, Miracles of St Mercurius and the Emperor Julian* and *Lessons of the Feast of St Mercurius* (Or. 6801 = P.Lond. Copt. 130) and another containing what is now known as the *Life of Aaron* (Or. 7029 = P.Lond. Copt. 163) (Pls. 7-8).

The last has now been meticulously studied, edited and translated as part of a now decades-long project undertaken by Jitse H. F. Dijkstra and Jacques van der Vliet, using in part the images made available through the BM-BL collaboration.²⁴ On the occasion of the Congress, Dijkstra presented his work on the manuscript's colophon, which shows a family of deacons and scribes attached to the Cathedral of Esna, dedicated to St John the Baptist, and the strong ties between Esna and Edfu (Pl. 9). Their Greek names and occasional use of Greek demonstrate the role of the language in this particular cultural milieu of tenth-century Upper Egypt.²⁵

Conclusion.

As national institutions, the BM and BL hold public collections in trust and are tasked with making them accessible. The nature of the audiences has changed considerably, now encompassing the monks of the Monastery of Pachomius in Edfu, our study room users, online visitors and those who come to our temporary exhibitions in London. Very occasionally, the latter provide the opportunity for the

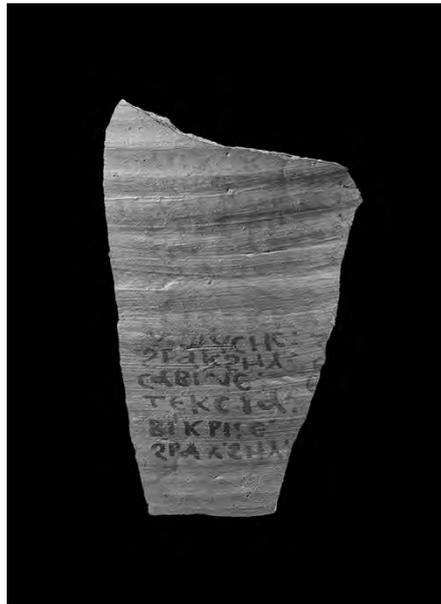
²² Davies / O'Connell 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2015; O'Connell 2013.

²³ Davies / O'Connell 2015, 7-8.

²⁴ Dijkstra / van der Vliet 2020, xi-xii.

²⁵ Dijkstra / van der Vliet 2020, 12-23.

display of manuscripts from Egypt, such as papyri and tablets in *Writing: Making Your Mark* (2019) with c. 40,000 on-site visitors or *Egypt: Faith after the Pharaohs* (2015-2016) with c. 65,000, and in their associated publications.²⁶ Here we are well-placed to disseminate research beyond our own walls, with the latter display, for example, showing the *Life of Aaron* alongside a c. 1802 sketch of and architecture elements from the Philae temple complex, the setting for the story of the island's conversation after Aaron killed the Horus falcon (Pl. 10). BM and BL also receive millions online visitors a year, a figure which has already doubled in the first months of the 2020 global health crisis.



Pl. 1. Coptic *ostrakon* bearing a list of Christian names, Abydos, seventh-eighth century (?) (BM EA 58928 [O.BM Abydos Copt. 2], Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

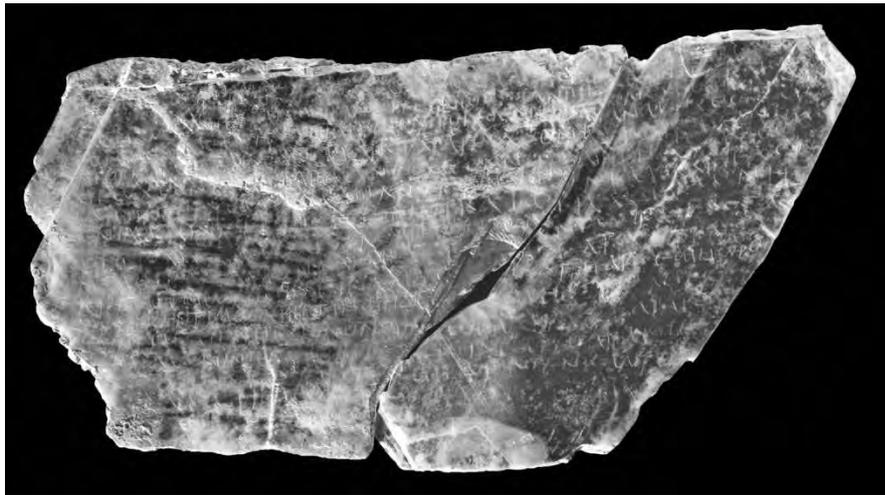


Pl. 2. Arabic *ostrakon* bearing a list of names including Muḥammad, Abydos, tenth century (BM EA 55406 [O.BM Abydos Arab. 1], Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

²⁶ Clayton 2019; Fluck / Helmecke / O'Connell 2015.



Pl. 3. Greek wooden wax tablet bearing an epigram school text, second-third century (BM EA 29527 [P.Lond.Lit. 63; Crihiore 1996, no 202], Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).



Pl. 4. Fragment of Greek selenite tablet bearing a curse to «muzzle», Amathus, Cyprus, third century (BM 1891,0418.50 [NGD 115], Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).



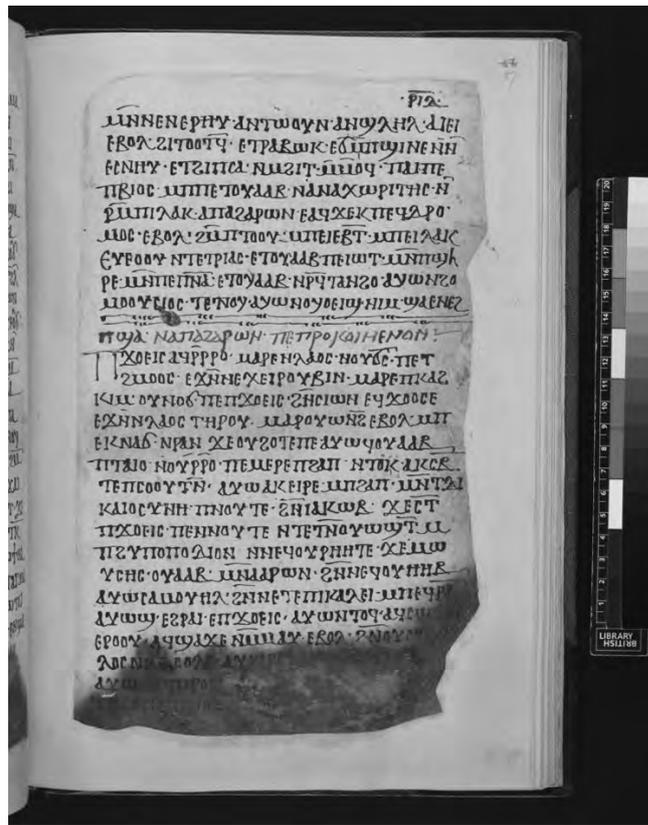
Pl. 5. Post-conservation infrared image (2019) of leather sheet bearing a Coptic «erotic magic» formulary, c. eighth-ninth century (EA 10376 [ACM 78], Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).



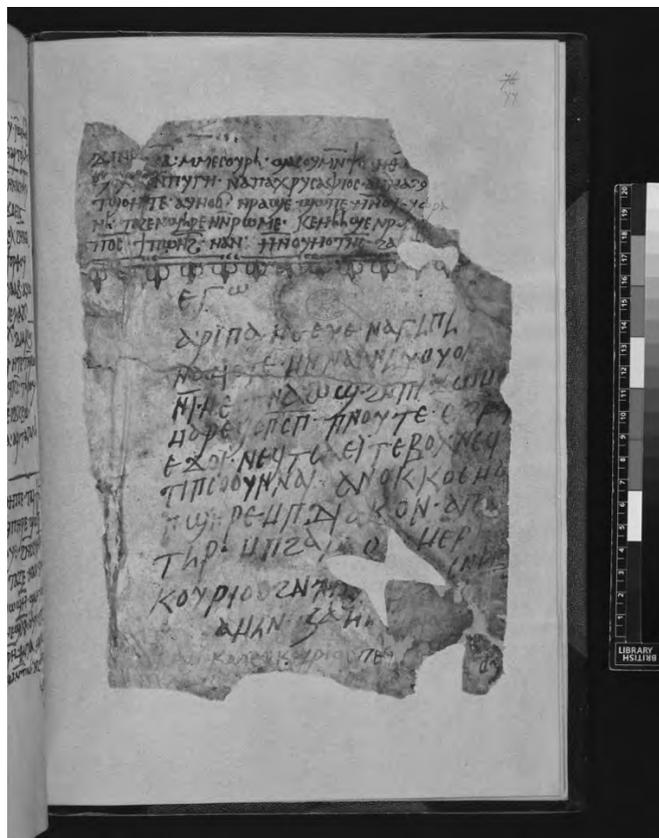
Pl. 6. E. A. W. Budge shown at his desk editing Esna-Edfu manuscripts
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).



Pl. 7. Frontispiece of Coptic manuscript containing *The Martyrdom of St Mercurius, Miracles of St Mercurius and the emperor Julian* and *Lessons of the Feast of St Mercurius*, Esna-Edfu corpus, 996-1004
(Or. 6801 fol. 1v [P.Lond. Copt. 130], Courtesy of the British Library Board).



Pl. 8. The title of the *Life of Aaron*, Esna-Edfu corpus, 992 (Or. 7029, fol. 57r [P.Lond. Copt. 163], Courtesy of the British Library Board).



Pl. 9. End of the colophon and beginning of readers' notes at the end of the *Life of Aaron*, Esna-Edfu corpus, after 992 (Or. 7029, fol. 77r [P.Lond. Copt. 163], Courtesy of the British Library Board).



Pl. 10. View of case displaying the *Life of Aaron* with architectural elements from Philae in *Egypt: Faith after the Pharaohs*, The British Museum, London, 29 October 2015 - 7 February 2016
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

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