



Oxyrhynchus Papyri

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Entry Type Lemma

Entry Language English

During the Roman (ca. 30 BCE–284 CE) and Byzantine (ca. 284–642 CE) periods Oxyrhynchus was a thriving metropolis with a population, at its height, approaching 30,000 inhabitants. Today, however, little of the ancient city remains apart from the base of a single column (the “Phocas Pillar”) and the fragmentary traces of parts of the city’s outer wall. Consequently, were it not for the papyri Oxyrhynchus has yielded, little would have been known about this ancient city. The bulk of the discovery of the Oxyrhynchus papyri at the end of the 19th century was made by two Oxford dons, Bernard P. Grenfell (1870–1926) and Arthur S. Hunt (1871–1934). After determining in the summer of 1896 to excavate at Oxyrhynchus (modern el-Behnesa), the two arrived on December 20, 1896 and began to work in the Greco-Roman cemetery but met with very little success. Like many 19th- and early-20th-century “excavations” in Egypt their primary aim was finding papyri, and if the site did not produce immediately the plan was to abandon it in favor of a more fruitful location. After nearly three weeks working in the cemetery they redirected their efforts to the city’s ancient trash heaps. On the morning of January 11, 1897 they began by digging into one of the lower mounds and immediately unearthed papyri; among the first few papyri retrieved was a fragment that was initially identified as containing some unknown *Logia* of Jesus, which was much later identified as belonging to the *Gospel of Thomas* (POxy I, 1; see fig. 25), shortly followed by the discovery of a fragment from the Gospel of Matthew (POxy I, 2). A torrent of papyri soon began to flow and after only three months they had filled over two hundred crates. In total Grenfell and Hunt spent six seasons at Oxyrhynchus (1896/97, 1903, 1903/04, 1904/05, 1905/06, 1906/07) during which it is estimated that almost 500,000 scraps of papyri were uncovered: some were no larger than a postage stamp while others measured many feet in length. The overwhelming majority of the papyri date between the 1st century BCE and 7th century CE and preserve Greek text, although Coptic, Demotic, Hebrew, Latin, and Arabic are also attested. At present, just over 6,000 texts from Oxyrhynchus have been published. Among these texts are a number that relate directly to Christianity and Judaism. In addition to documents that mention a church or a synagogue in the city or that make passing reference to the clergy or to a monk/nun, there are a growing number of biblical

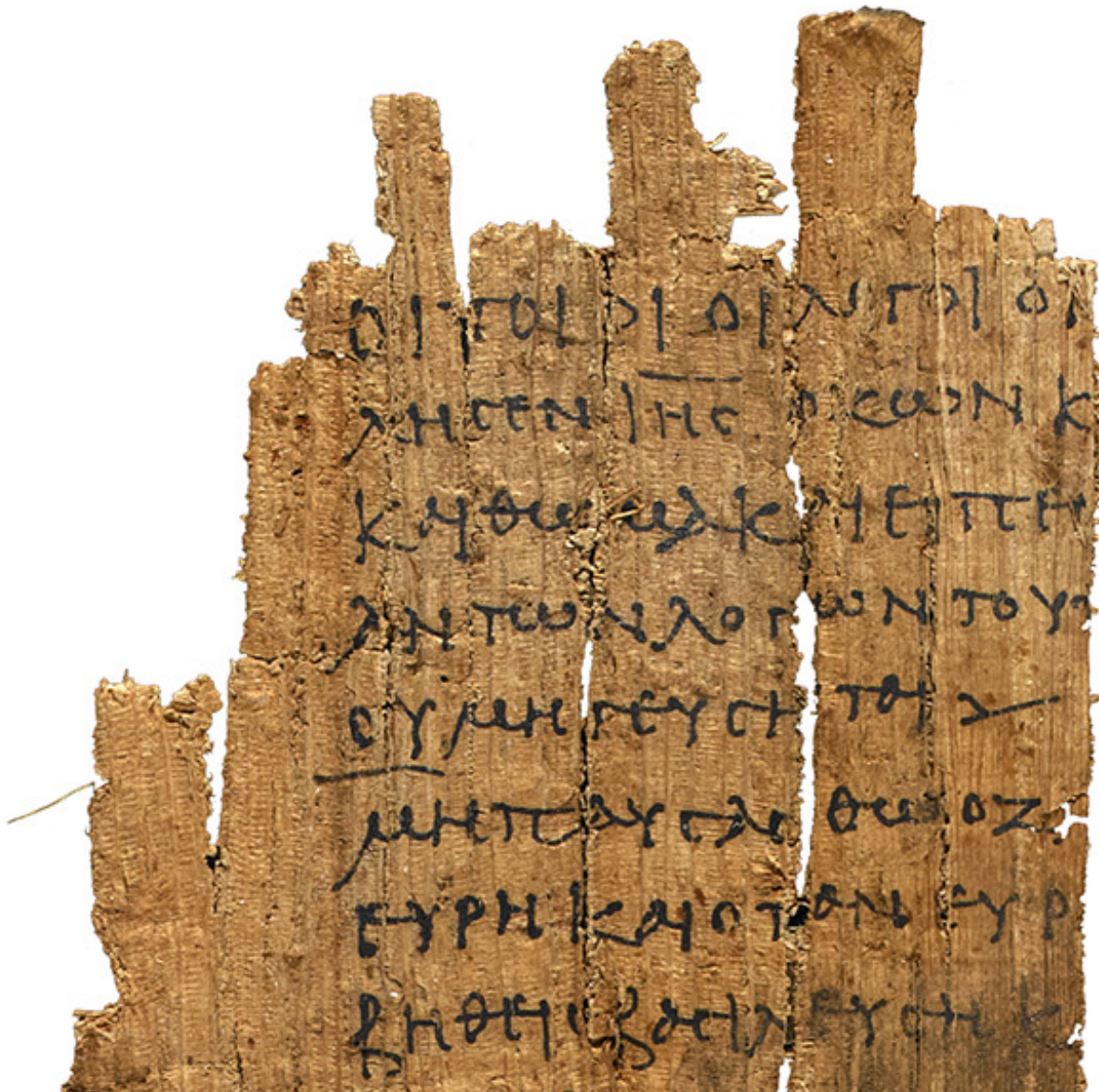
fragments. The earliest of these are from the Septuagint and date from the 1st century BCE; the earliest NT fragments date to the 2nd century CE. Nearly half of the 140 known papyrus fragments of the NT come from Oxyrhynchus.

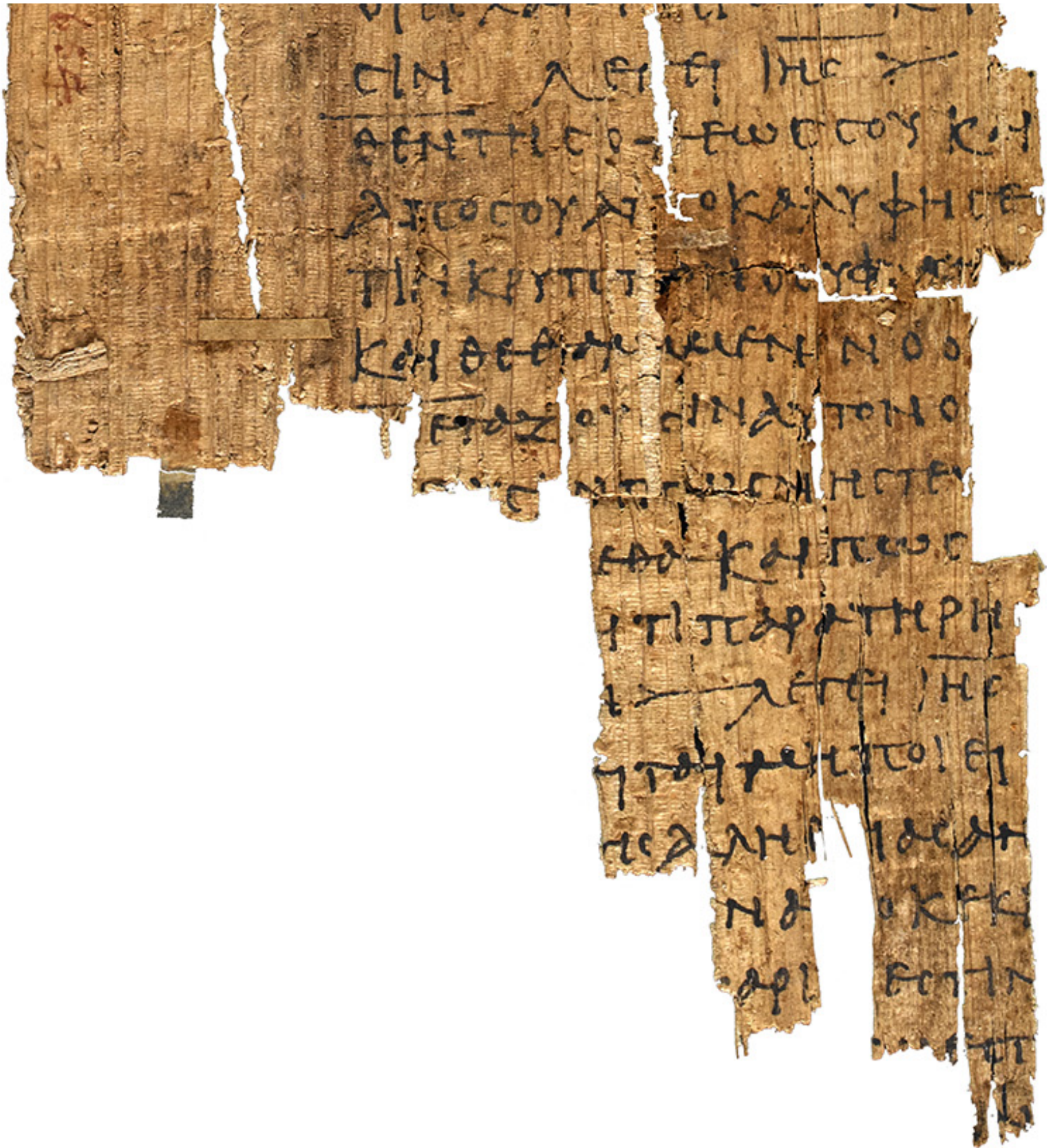
Bibliography

Blumell, L. H./T. A. Wayment, *Christian Oxyrhynchus: Texts, Documents, and Sources (Second through Fourth Centuries)* (Waco, TX 2015).

Bowman, A. K. et al. (eds.), *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* (London 2007).

Figures





Gospel of Thomas (POxy I, 1; latter part of 3rd cent.)

See also

- [Nag Hammadi](#)
- [Papyrus, Papyri](#)

Source

Title	Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception
	Og (King of Bashan) – Papyrus, Papyri
Volume	22
Edited by	Constance M. Furey; Peter Gemeinhardt; Joel LeMon; Thomas Römer; Jens Schröter; Barry Dov Walfish; Eric J. Ziolkowski
Publisher	De Gruyter 2010