

Papyrology on the Road (and Stichometry too)



unless it conveys something important?

It has to be admitted that a freshly mown CL Site and the lovely garden of Paradise, after which our delightful campervan is aptly named, have this in common: they both require drains.

Welcome to Poo Corner at a CL site near Leicester, willing receptacle of our washing up water. So practical.

But what's this? A laminated notice that has been badly affected by the weather (see below left). I sense the need to decipher it, as why go to the trouble of putting up a notice

The science of papyrology - or is it more an art - is one of interpreting damaged papyri from the Ancient Near East, such as the tiny written fragment 7Q5 the size of a postage stamp found in Cave five at QumRan whose ten letters might just be an excerpt from Mark's Gospel. It's the hottest issue in Biblical studies today, in my opinion. Fun! We can apply the principles of papyrology here.

Our source starts off in a helpfully complete manner. 'Please despise of your grey water...' (correction - that must be dispose not despise) but then deteriorates - 'in the tw.....k aways'.

Now I am stumped. I can't think of any word beginning 'tw' and ending in 'k'. Also why is there an 's' on 'aways'?

Enter stichometry, which simply means noting how many letters there are on a normal line, and drawing conclusions about missing letters and words on a damaged line from that. From the central justification used in printing the notice, we observe that line three containing 'tw.....k' is a similar length to the opening line, which had twenty-two letters including spaces, so our word or words 'tw....k' must have around six letters and/or spaces in the gap, probably making it a ten letter word.

Tricky! The plot thickens.

No matter. Let's try the rest of it. 'providedder the TAP herender the Trees andI in the Chemical (?).... Disposal Unit'.

Oh dear.

Never mind. We have a rich store of data. Let's persevere.

I think I am getting it. How about 'provided under the TAP here', then something about



'under the Trees'. But why all these capitals? And why the underlined 'T'?

Well, with all the information, this now feels like a Sudoku puzzle that is three quarters done, where the rest of the numbers should be easy to fill in. Here is my guess at the complete text.

"Please dispose of your grey water in the two soak aways provided under the tap here or under the trees and not in the chemical disposal unit."

Note that 'tw.....k' has become 'two soak' and that the 's' on 'aways' is now explained.

I could not find a second soak away, but nevertheless I acted on the advice and poured the washing up water into the little drain below the tap. It was a job to discover it at first, as it was covered with pine needles. I hope I did well.

Note the contrast with the minute papyrus 7Q5 from Qumran. The four letters in a row 'nnes' in it could well be from the Lake of Gennesaret in Mark 6:53, as Carsten Peter Thiede proposed, with all the exciting implications for the early date of composition of the new testament books that implies, but because we are working with a dead language of which we don't know all the vocabulary, certainty is hard to come by. The truth may possibly never be known. But here is the point. Even when doing something so mundane as emptying our slops bucket, life on the road in the campervan can be rich and fruitful, yielding unexpected dividends to the enquiring mind. What more could one ask from a holiday? And what thrills and spills of imagination and conjecture will there be at our next pitch? Nice.

-oOo-

Footnote. The fascinating story of 7Q5 and another tiny papyrus from Matthew chapter 18 is told in *The Jesus Papyrus* by Carsten Peter Thiede and Matthew D' Ancona, W & N, 1996 or Phoenix, 1997. Very well written, requiring no specialist knowledge. Cheap second hand copies available from www.abebooks.co.uk.