

## CA Prize-winner 2008: Peter Parsons

This year's Classical Association Prize has been awarded to Peter Parsons, to salute his justly acclaimed book *City of the Sharp-nosed Fish* and to recognise the lifetime's achievement in papyrology that lies behind it. The book is a vivid portrait of ancient Oxyrhynchus (modern el-Behnesa), where sand-covered rubbish dumps some twenty feet deep have yielded up a treasure-trove of discarded papyri, left there by Greek settlers and their descendants after Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332 BC.

Peter has spent his entire working life with papyri, mostly at Oxford, where he was lecturer in Papyrology and, from 1989 until his retirement in 2003, Regius Professor of Greek. For many years he was head of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri Project. The pleasures of being a papyrologist, he says, are many, not least the enjoyment of puzzle-solving, of putting together fragments of waste paper and decoding them into meaningful text. Order is made out of chaos. And of course there is also the thrill of the chase, in that you never know what treasure you may be uncovering until that deciphering is done. As Peter himself puts it (p. 27): 'Your new papyrus may offer you unknown Greek poetry; it may offer unique evidence for the inflation of donkey prices at the height of the Roman Empire.' But whatever it is, literature or document, it will be a jigsaw piece fitting within a larger picture and adding a scrap, large or small, of new knowledge.

It is perhaps natural for an outsider to feel that the greatest thrills must come from the big literary finds. So many masterpieces of ancient literature have gone into the dark, but sometimes what is lost may be found, and the sands of Egypt have restored to us fragments of the songs of Sappho, the comedies of Menander, the lyric epic of Stesichorus, and so much else. Peter himself remembers as a high point the heart-lifting moment when he realised, while working on broken papyri of Simonides' elegies, that a piece giving the ends of the lines fitted together with the larger papyrus giving the line-beginnings and new poetry of an almost-lost author appeared.

But literary fragments from Oxyrhynchus comprise only about ten per cent of the whole. The remainder are documents, public and private of every kind, a paper mountain offering an unparalleled insight into the life and society of the Greeks in Egypt, and it is from these that Peter has drawn his engrossing portrait of this 'Glorious and Most Glorious City of the Sharp-nosed Fish'. The city rises before us as we read: houses and gardens, shops, market stalls, temples and baths. And all human life is here: births, marriages, deaths, contracts, apprenticeships, accounts, letters official and personal. Sometimes the history of a family can be traced through surviving papyri over many years, like that of Tryphon the weaver, born in AD 8 or 9 into a family of weavers. Tryphon's first wife left him, unlawfully taking with her property worth 40 drachmas, then later returned and beat up Tryphon's pregnant second wife, Saraeus, causing her to miscarry. Luckily Saraeus went on to have three more children, two sons and a daughter. But more trouble was to come. When she was nursing her eldest son, Apion, she became the wet-nurse of a foundling belonging to a man named Pesouris. One of the babies died and she claimed that it was the foundling. Pesouris believed it was Apion and the case went before the local governor, who decided in favour of Tryphon because the living child looked more like Saraeus. Pesouris continued to harass Tryphon, who took his case to the Roman Prefect himself, and apparently won it, but even so Saraeus, who was pregnant again, was once more beaten up, this time by a group of women. High drama indeed!

And so the city still lives. Again to use Peter's own words (p. 216): 'Oxyrhynchus exists again today as a waste-paper city, a virtual landscape which we can repopulate with living and speaking people. The theatre has vanished, but we still have some of the prompt-copies that its actors used. The baths have vanished, but we can reconstruct their dynasty of cloakroom attendants. The market has vanished,

but we know its porridge-stall and its imported cow-pats and the harassed officials who collected the tax on brothels. Long-dead citizens, of whom we have no portrait and no tombstone, communicate from their documents ... Tryphon and countless others lived and died without ever knowing that they were destined to such accidental immortality.'

*Dr Jenny March*

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