

From the Nile to the Caucasus

Subject of the bilateral Austro-Russian research project is a collection of papyrus documents from Egypt, currently held in the Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts in Tbilisi. In what way and under what circumstances did these documents travel from the Nile to the Caucasus? Where and when were these papyri found and acquired? To whom do we owe the existence of this small collection and how was and is its significance for contemporary and modern research?

Those questions are at the heart of a historical investigation that will be addressed in a twofold way: first the papyri, so far only partly worked on, will be sorted, deciphered, edited and put in historical context, on the other hand the focus lies on the circumstances of their acquisition and early study, illuminated by archival records in Tbilisi and elsewhere which will allow insight into the scholarly history of the young discipline of papyrology in the early 20th century.

Founder and owner of the collection was the Russo-Georgian scholar Grigol Zereteli who has to be counted among the pioneers of papyrology. He lived an eventful life and witnessed the collapse of the Tsarist Empire, left for Georgia during the country's short-lived independence where he fell victim to Stalin's Great Purge after Georgia's integration into the Soviet Union.

The papyri are predominantly written in ancient Greek and come from a period in which Egypt was an integral part of the Graeco-Roman world, the millennium between its conquest by Alexander the Great and the Arabic-Islamic expansion (300 BCE-700 CE). They cover a broad thematic spectrum, from letters and contracts to administrative documents, accounts, amulets and literary and medical texts.

Papyrus documents were originally chance discoveries of Egyptian farmers (fellahin) searching for fertile soil (sebbakh) in the desert at the edge of the Nile Valley, particularly from the 1870s onwards, but were soon actively sought after and retrieved in large amounts. They were found in the huge garbage heaps remaining of ancient cities, in which those documents had been preserved for millennia thanks to the climatic conditions of the Egyptian desert. The possibilities for a direct contact with antiquity, finding lost works of literature and insights into early Christianity fascinated the scholars of that time and gave an incentive for further excavations.

Hundreds of thousands of documents were acquired and brought to Europe and North America. It is not uncommon for papyri that were found together or even fragments of one and the same papyrus to have been dispersed all over the world and end up in different collections. The project, thus, also touches upon a subject matter that is crucial in the current debate: the physical and intellectual appropriation of the historical heritage of the African continent by the great empires and colonial powers of the time.