

The village of Karanis, in the Fayyum, provides scholars with the tantalizing opportunity to examine papyri within their archaeological context. This paper explores the retention and discard of texts by the inhabitants of late Roman Karanis. The analysis of texts excavated in probable “dump” contexts can inform our understanding of local literacy and of the importance of texts as objects to be possessed.

Karanis was excavated in the late 1920s and 30s when rigorous archaeological methods were only just developing. The scholarly analysis of the archaeology of the site has been minimal, largely because of the daunting state of the archaeological record keeping. Publication of Karanis’ papyri, however, has been extensive throughout the 20th century; in recent years, the first steps at reuniting the papyri with their archaeological contexts have been made. Yet the attempt to associate excavated texts with their writers and readers places us in a mire of archaeological depositional quandaries. The archaeological formation processes at work in this desertic environment and the settlement history of the site result in an extremely complex stratigraphy of documents and artefacts. Fortunately, the papyri themselves can provide some illumination of the archaeology. This project employs a cross-disciplinary approach: texts aid in the determination of the formation processes at work in the settlement and then these formation processes are employed to try to understand the value of these texts as objects.

This study examines structures in the northeastern-most region of the village in the neighborhood surrounding the largest granary. In the interests of time, I present only two of the least-problematic structures in the area. First, we examine what types of texts were discarded together by reconstructing the papyrological assemblages, that is, groups of literary and documentary ostraka and papyri which were excavated from the same layer. We study the individual texts to assess if they are contemporaneous (based on palaeographical indicators), or associated (based on prosopography). This textual treatment is combined with an investigation of Karanis’ Record of Objects, the list of excavated small finds. We can then hypothesize the nature of the deposition in each structure and in the neighborhood as a whole. Most relevant in this study are the concepts of “secondary deposition,” when texts are spatially removed from their original use context, and “curation,” when texts are removed from their original temporal contexts because of some special quality (e.g. their rarity, expense, or cultural importance). We must also consider what happens to refuse after the abandonment of a particular area of a settlement.

These initial classifications are followed by a hypothesis of the context from which the discarded texts originally derived. This is the archival context, rather than the architectural context from which the text was excavated. What emerge from this examination are the concept of the archive, both personal and public, and the importance of texts beyond simply their written contents. This paper explores which texts were retained over several centuries, which were collected together, and which were discarded and seeks to explain why these actions were taken.