Riches of written documents in the Egyptian Museum of Turin

الوثائق المكتوبة في المتحف المصري في تورينو

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The first to read native documents shortly acquired by the Egyptian Museum of Turin was the Decipherer of the ancient Egyptian scripts, Jean François Champollion. Some distinguished pupils of his endeavoured thereafter to apply his theories and to explain the contents of small single monuments, namely stelae. But only about fifteen years later, the Prussian scholar Richard Lepsius was to print the first edition of a long papyrus, one which he believed to be the longest and most complete witness of its kind, and which he dated to the Saitic period. This was a first attempt (1842) to publish some comprehensive papyrus scroll, owing to the number of similar papyri found in the tombs, as it was written in hieroglyphs, a better known script in those times, although we cannot maintain Lepsius’ opinion, based on a wrong dating, about a Saitic recension of the Book of the Dead.

Actually papyrus is a fragile material, and should be preserved in dry and quiet places, as the Theban necropolis has proved to be. No wonder then that the collection owned by the Turin Museum, gathered mainly in that area, is especially rich in papyri. Their daring of course depends on the times ancient Thebes flourished, and on the quarters of the necropolis which were spoiled by the antiquities hunters. The rather homogeneous papyrus collections, now in Turin, extend from the Ramesside period until the Roman empire, and comprise particularly documents in the hieratic, abnormal hieratic, demotic and Greek scripts. In the following pages we shall limit our treatment to the hieratic papyri belonging to the New Kingdom. However, the research will push us eventually out of the narrow walls of the Turin Museum to find complements, either physical or related to the contents, in other places. That will help us know something more about the history of these documents, since nothing is recorded about their discovery and their early stages. On the contrary, their history, both ancient and modern, is being written by the studies in progress.
About the middle of the nineteenth century, new sensational discoveries were made, such as the existence of works of entertainment and education, and scholars became eager to know more about the collections and to make their contents available. Therefore, Wilkinson published the list of kings (Royal Canon) already seen by Champollion, again Lepsius turned himself to the plan of a tomb in the Valley of the Kings, while Chabas examined the Gold Mines papyrus, and Dèvèria devoted himself to the 'papyrus judiciaire'. Among the distinguished European scholars Willem Pleyte set himself in collaboration with Francesco Rossi, who became in 1870 Professor of Egyptology at the University of Turin, and they both produced a thick book of papyri in facsimile, which includes the best preserved pieces of papyri, (excluding the funerary ones) along with two ostraca. Scholars could begin a harvest of promising studies. Wilhelm Spiegelberg pointed out among the administrative papyri the Strike Papyrus, while among the literary papyri Max Müller recognised a garland of love songs, Herman Grapow the Hymn to the Nile (1914) and Georg Steindorff a Ramesside eulogy (1917); Gardiner recognised a copy of the Satirical Letter. More plates were to be the object of dedicated studies, most of which are still underway. Meanwhile Naville selected two Books of the Dead dated to the New Kingdom for his synoptic edition of the Theban recension of the Book of the Dead.

In 1899, Ernesto Schiaparelli, who five years earlier had been appointed director of the Egyptian Museum, presented briefly at the twelfth Congress of Orientalists in Rome, in front of an audience dominated by Adolf Erman and Eugène Revillout, some new results of his personal research in that field. The publication of some of these was later entrusted to two younger scholars, Giuseppe Botti and Thomas Eric Peet, pupils respectively of Schiaparelli and Gardiner, which one edited a first volume of hieroglyphic transcriptions, partly related to some sheets already facsimiled by Rossi. More scrolls found their way in the edition of homogeneous volumes, in hieroglyphic transcription, by Gardiner and Cerny. Therein remarkable documents were collected, already renowned as the (Turin) Strike papyrus, the Turin Indictment papyrus, the Letters of the scribe Butehamon, among many others.

A step forward in the research had been taken: documents were no longer considered according to their state of conservation, but rather in the light of their contents and meaning, and were treated together with similar evidence. Turin papyri entered the publications of Piankoff, Edwards, Janssen, Bakir.

Some monographs resumed under a new perspective older publications, like the Royal Canon, the Tomb plan, the Gold mines, or added new evidence. Also the ostraca, mainly coming from Schiaparelli’s excavations were reproduced and checked, the final edition being that of Lopez.

At this point a new problem came up: more fragments pertaining to the Turin papyri and ostraca were noticed in other collections like Geneva, which was provided by the activity of the same Bernardino Drovetti who sold his collection to Turin, or, rather mysteriously, in Budapest. A ritual scroll found by Schiaparelli in his excavations at Deir el-Medina is actually shared with the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, which owns its upper part. That shows that the remains housed in Turin are by no means complete, and a hope to find more complements somewhere is still likely.

There are other collections in Europe which may have pieces completing those in Turin, or at least showing a similar content or having the same provenance. A series of papyri looted during the French excavations at Deir el-Medina in 1928, and belonging to the Amennakht archives, are now the pride of the British Museum, being the outcome of the Chester Beatty gift. These papyri, mainly of