

# Fragment of the 'Odyssey' From the 3d Century BC

NEW YORK (NYT).—A graduate student at Columbia University has rediscovered one of the oldest written fragments of Homer's "Odyssey," dating back to the third century BC.

The scrap of papyrus, which measures 2 by 3 inches, had lain for 50 years wrapped in old brown tissue paper in a musty room on the sixth floor of the university's Butler Library.

"It is an outstanding find," said Dr. William H. Willis, professor of Greek at Duke University and one of the leading papyrologists in the country.

"It may be from an edition of the 'Odyssey' used in schools at that time. Every young man who went to high school in the third century BC had to learn the 'Odyssey.'" The epic poem was originally composed as a song in approximately 850 BC.

The tiny light-brown scrap of cellulose is important not only because of its age, said Dr. Willis, but because it is one of the few pieces in existence which offer new readings of the epic.

"There is a slight change in the meaning," said Lawrence Feinberg, the graduate student. Thus instead of reading, "(I Zeus), have struck, will lay their ship low in the wine-dark sea," the meaning changes to "(I, Zeus), will smash to pieces their ship in the wine-dark sea." Homeric scholars still must de-

cide which is the more authentic reading.

Gabriel C. Austin, head of the book department of Parke-Bernet galleries, when asked to estimate the value of such a fragment said: "It is impossible to put a price on the piece. It is like finding a page of the manuscript of 'Hamlet.'"

Mr. Feinberg, who has a master's degree in Greek and Latin and is one of only 40 working papyrologists in the world, was hired by Columbia in 1968 to assort and preserve more than 1,000 papyrus and vellum fragments that the university had acquired from Egyptian dealers since the turn of the century.

Mr. Feinberg said he was "extremely elated" when he realized last April what the papyrus was.

The fragment, which is now on exhibition in an obscure corner of the Low Library, contains lines 382-390 of Book 12, in which the sun god complains to Zeus that Odysseus and his men slaughtered some of his cattle which they sailed from Troy back to Ithaca.

Mr. Feinberg said the papyrus contains several Greek words used in different ways than in present manuscripts. Modern editions of the "Odyssey" are derived from the work of Aristarchus, the librarian of Alex-

andria, who worked in the second century BC to standardize variants of the poem that were circulating at that time.

Mr. Feinberg explained that he came across the "Odyssey" fragment during several days of hunting for a literary script among the thousands of pieces he had to work with.

"Then I saw a script that was unmistakably from the third century BC," he said, "and at the same time I noticed words 'mortal men,' which is a poetic phrase found mostly in Homer and his contemporary, Hesiod."

"But you would go out of your mind looking up every case of the phrase 'mortal men,'" he said. "In Homer alone it seems to occur hundreds of times. But I also had a word meaning 'I will smash.' This is a Homeric word which only occurs nine times in the poet's works. Yet I couldn't cross-reference any of these cases with the cases for the phrase 'mortal men.' That threw me for a while."

Mr. Feinberg explained he then saw the rarely used word "Hermes" at the bottom of the fragment. He checked on the references to "Hermes" in Homer, and found the exact line he was looking for.

"Then everything clicked into place," he said.

Mr. Feinberg began his work

in a windowless room on the sixth floor of Butler Library in the summer of 1968. "I was sweating heavily, working without a shirt, and I nearly passed out from the heat on two occasions," he recalled. "When it got too hot I would run downstairs and get a cup of cold water and a handful of salt."

"Many of Columbia's manuscripts are kept in poor conditions," he said. "Roaches and silverfish could have eaten the papyri."

Many of the papyri that Columbia owns were obtained in the early 1920s when a group of institutions, including Columbia, the University of Michigan, Yale, Princeton, and the British Museum, sent representatives to Cairo to purchase bundles of the brown fragments.

At that time it was legal to take papyri out of Egypt, and they were sold openly by hawkers in the streets. "Today," Mr. Feinberg said, "it is legal to sell papyri, but you cannot take them out of the country. There are about six real dealers in papyri in Cairo today."

The cost of a piece of papyrus ranges from \$2 or \$3 up to \$100, depending on one's bargaining ability. "It is conceivable," Mr. Feinberg said, "that the 'Odyssey' fragment was bought for about \$2."

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