

Scribes Avoiding Imperfections in Their Writing Materials

Brice C. Jones*

Abstract: This article examines the phenomenon of preexisting imperfections in papyri. Rarely noted by modern commentators, many ancient scribes were forced to deal with different kinds of papyrus damage, such as holes, tears, abrasions, stains, cracks, cuts, etc. This study offers several examples of preexisting damage and demonstrates how some scribes attempted to avoid it. It also raises questions about how modern editors might take scribal avoidances into account in their transcriptions.

Keywords: papyrus damage, materials, scribes, abrasions

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Anyone who has ever edited or worked closely with papyri will know that most papyri come to us in a damaged form. Rarely is a papyrologist privileged to work with a papyrus that is perfectly preserved, with no damage whatsoever.¹ The editing process most often involves the difficulties of trying to restore letters and words that have gone missing due to lacunae (large and small), abrasions, cracks, tears, cuts, smudges, water damage, and other kinds of deterioration over time. We can even blame mice, worms, and other insects for eating some of the letters and words that we toil so diligently and painstakingly to restore. But there is another kind of damage that I wish to look at in this brief study, namely, *preexisting* damage to a writing material. More precisely, I am interested in the ways

* Corresponding author: Brice C. Jones, University of Louisiana at Monroe, 700 University Ave., Library 205A, Monroe, LA 71209, <bricejones@me.com>

¹ Herbert C. Youtie's words still ring true: "[A]s the exploitation of a collection progresses the perfect pieces are soon exhausted and there remains a great fund of damaged papyri" ("The Papyrologist: Artificer of Fact," *GRBS* 4 [1963]: 19–32, at 23 [= *Scriptunculae* I:13]). Cf. the statement in Eric G. Turner: "Pieces awaiting publication will tend to be the smaller, less complete, less straightforward ones. A fortunate combination may produce a worthwhile bulk of continuous text; but often such luck is denied the worker" (*Greek Papyri: An Introduction* [London, 1980²], 72).

in which ancient scribes negotiated faults in their writing medium, whether they were holes, relaxed fibers, creases, or the like. Surprisingly, this line of inquiry has never been systematically addressed. Yet such material features and scribal phenomena provide an opportunity for us to ask some basic questions about scribes and their writing materials. For example, how often did scribes use damaged papyri? Was the damage due to the manufacturing process or to some post-manufacture cause? In what ways did scribes avoid these damages? Are there any observable patterns? Are such phenomena limited to documentary papyri or do we also find the practice in literary manuscripts? These and similar questions thus drive the present study.

In what follows, I shall look at a series of case studies in order to understand better how scribes circumvented damaged writing materials. It should be noted that this is by no means an exhaustive list nor do I pretend to have one, as this would require an examination of every published papyrus. Nonetheless, this sampling of evidence will provide a sufficient basis for discussion and allow us to draw some observations and raise a few more questions. I have limited myself to Greek and Coptic texts written on papyrus and parchment, and the evidence will be divided into the following categories: 1) cracks, folds, and tears, 2) holes, 3) separated or shrunk fibers, 4) stains, and 5) *kolleseis*.

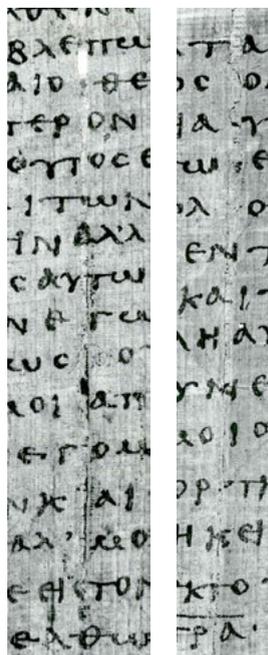
Cracks, Folds, and Tears

1. P.Bodmer II (LDAB 2777)

We find several examples in the famous codex of John, but the phenomenon is most clearly visible on pgs. 61 and 95.² On p. 61 (seen in first image below), there is a vertical crack near the right edge that runs from near the bottom edge to nearly three-fourths up the folio. Of the 14 lines where the crack is most prominent, the scribe writes *through* it only 5 times, and in each case, the papyrus does not take the ink very well. In every other case, the scribe skips the crack leaving significant spacing between letters.

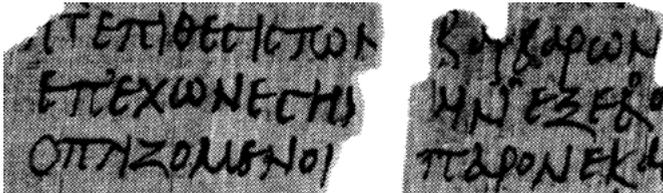
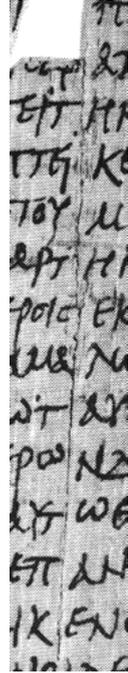
² The best facsimile of this codex remains that of Victor Martin and J.W.B. Barns (eds.), *Papyrus Bodmer II, Supplement. Évangile de Jean chap. 14–21. Nouvelle édition augmentée et corrigée avec reproduction photographique complète du manuscrit* (Cologny/Geneva, 1962).

On p. 95, there are two vertical cracks: one in the very center running from the very bottom to about three-fourths up the sheet, and one near the right edge, which runs the entire height of the sheet (seen in second image at right). The cracks have actually resulted in even more damage to the papyrus, and in some places the papyrus is more or less tearing apart. At the end of the first five lines, the scribe avoids the second crack by leaving considerable spacing in between letters. Of the 15 lines on the page, the scribe writes through the second crack only 5 times, and skips it altogether in every other instance. As in the first example pictured at right, every time the scribe wrote through the crack, the ink did not take well. Writing through the crack even produced some deformity to the shapes of letters, since the friction of the crack caused the stylus to go off its path (see the tail of α in l. 7, ν in l. 9, κ in l. 12).



2. P.Bodmer XXVI (LDAB 2743)

There are two different examples of preexisting damage in this codex containing Menander's *Aspis*.³ On p. 42, there is a significant lacuna beginning at the top edge and running down through l. 6. This larger lacuna is likely the result of a crack in the papyrus that can still be seen (image at right); this crack runs from the point of the lacuna down to the interlinear space between ll. 17–18. As for the larger lacuna at the top (image below), the scribe left considerable spacing between the words τῶν βαρβάρων (l. 3; l. 1 in image) and between the word ἐχήμ[]αν' (l. 4; l. 2 in image). Kasser draws attention to this phenomenon in a note to ll. 3–4: “le papyrus qui a disparu dans la lacune actuelle était vraisemblablement impropre à l'écriture; il n'est pas nécessaire de restituer aucune lettre entre les crochets.”⁴ One wonders why the editors placed brackets in their text in the first place (τῶν [?] βαρβάρων and ἐχήμ[?]αν'), since they acknowledge that nothing is there to restore. Nonetheless, the crack on the papyrus is skipped in every line it interrupts (i.e., ll. 6–17), and this is all the more clear since the scribe otherwise keeps his letters extremely close together.

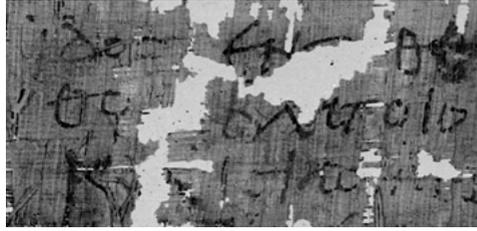


³ The leaves of P.Bodmer XXVI are part of a larger codex containing, in addition to *Aspis*, Menander's *Samia* (P.Bodmer XXV) and *Dyskolos* (P.Bodmer IV).

⁴ Rodolphe Kasser with Colin Austin, *Papyrus Bodmer XXVI: Ménandre: Le Bouclier. En appendice: compléments au Papyrus Bodmer IV. Ménandre: Le Dyscolos* (Cologny/Genève, 1969), 27.

3. P.Aphrod. Lit. IV 46 (LDAB 808)

In this papyrus of Dioscorus, we find a clear case of pre-existing damage on the verso of a protocol. A large space separates two blocks of text. In the block of text on the right-hand side, it is clear that the papyrus was already damaged



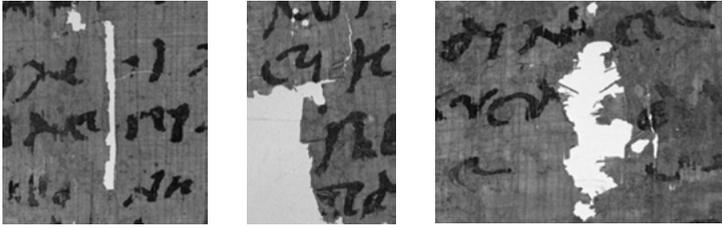
when Dioscorus wrote his poem. Jean-Luc Fournet describes the situation as follows: “Quand il fut réutilisé, le papyrus était déjà endommagé comme l’indiquent les deux lacunes aux v. 2 et 3 que Dioscore a dû sauter lors de l’écriture du poème.” Lines 1–3 are affected but the scribal “jump” is most apparent at the beginning of ll. 2–3: $\theta\omicron[\]\beta\lambda\eta\tau\omicron\iota\omicron$ and $\kappa[\]\lambda\iota\text{-}\text{c}\eta\text{c}$. The right half of the verso is, as a whole, in bad condition and so it is difficult to discern the cause of this damage. However, the sizeable gap in l. 2 suggests something more than a crack. We may be dealing here with a larger tear or hole, although other possibilities exist.

4. P.Fay. 344v

In this letter from Ptolemais to her brother Papirianus, there are several cases of preexisting tears that the scribe avoided.⁵ The latest editor of the papyrus draws attention to these ancient damages as follows: “The tear between the *mu* and *omicron* of $\mu\omicron\iota$ in l. 14 (see first image below) is avoided in this and the next two lines and was therefore present at the time of writing. Lines 22–23 are slightly indented because of a tear in the papyrus (see second image below). The hole after $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\chi\upsilon\text{c}\alpha$ is also ancient, breaking $\acute{\epsilon}\mu\acute{\epsilon}$ into two in the next line as well (third image below). In l. 11, the raised *omega* suggests that there was perhaps a (smaller) hole here originally.”⁶

⁵ Image online at: <http://www.misha.fr/papyrus_bipab/>.

⁶ W. Graham Claytor, “A Schedule of Contracts and a Private Letter: P.Fay. 344,” *BASP* 50 (2013): 77–121, at 111 n.100.

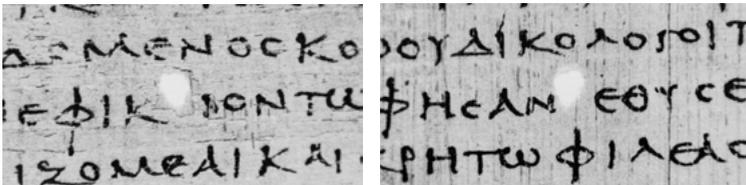


Since the recto (list of abstracts of contracts) is missing letters at these places, it is clear that the damage took place sometime after the composition of the first writing. Eric G. Turner's classic study of the reuse of official documents demonstrated that the time interval between writing of the recto and that of the verso usually lay between 1 and 100 years.⁷ This estimation finds support in the present papyrus, since its recto is dated to late first or second century and its verso to the second.⁸

Holes

5. P.Bodmer XX (LDAB 220465)

On the recto of p. 15 of the famous *Apology of Phileas* papyrus, there is a small hole left of center of the page between ll. 2–3. The scribe jumps up it, as can be seen by the considerable amount of space in the word βενεφίκτων (first image below). On the verso of the same folio, the scribe also leaves space between the words ἔφησαν ἔθυσεν in l. 3 (second image below). The editor makes no mention of the circumvention on the part of the scribe.⁹



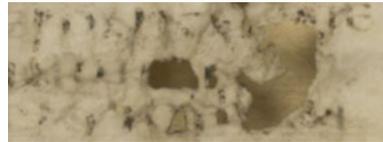
⁷ Eric G. Turner, "Recto and Verso," *JEA* 40 (1954): 102–106.

⁸ See P.Fay. 344 descr. and Claytor, "Schedule of Contracts," 111.

⁹ Victor Martin (ed.), *Papyrus Bodmer XX: Apologie de Philéas, évêque de Thmouis* (Cologne/Genève, 1964).

6. Codex Sinaiticus (LDAB 3478)

Most of the major biblical parchment codices of the 4th and 5th centuries contain many examples of preexisting damage. In col. 2, ll. 2–3 of Q18–f.6r of Codex Sinaiticus, the scribe circumvents a hole in the parchment (which has apparently been exacerbated over time) by indenting the line. *ἰ* | [jump] *μάτιον*.¹⁰ On the back side of the sheet (6v), the scribe negotiates the same hole by slightly elevating the end of l. 2 (*ἄπε*-) and compressing l. 3.



7. Codex Bezae (LDAB 2929)

On both the Greek and Latin pages of folio 205 in Codex Bezae, there is a hole on the lower half of the sheet.¹¹ The scribe avoided it by writing around it. Notice that in each case the scribe slightly elevates the line directly above the hole. Such circular holes are the result of the manufacturing process, common in many parchment manuscripts (see #8 below). In Codex Sinaiticus, these circular wholes are often patched up with thin vellum shavings (e.g., Q411–f.3v), but this is rare in Codex Bezae.¹²



¹⁰ Image online at: <<http://codexsinaiticus.org/en/manuscript.aspx>>.

¹¹ Image online at: <<http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-NN-00002-00041/1/>>.

¹² Herbert J.M. Milne and Theodore C. Skeat, *Scribes and Correctors of the Codex Sinaiticus* (London, 1938), 71.

8. P.Palau Rib. inv. 183 (LDAB 107905)

In this important Sahidic codex of John's Gospel, we find numerous examples of circular holes in the parchment.¹³ Only two examples will suffice. On p. 21, there is a hole three-fourths of the way down col. 1. It occurs near the end of the lines and affects three lines of text at those points. The scribe shortens ll. 15–16 and manipulates the bilinearity of l. 17 by dipping the last few letters. On the backside (p. 22), the hole occurs at the beginning of ll. 15–17 so the scribe indents all three lines.



A larger, oval shaped hole occurs at the bottom of p. 25 in col. 1 and at the bottom of p. 26 in col. 2. The elongated hole is jumped by the scribe in both instances.



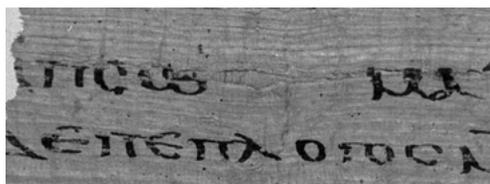
Separated or Shrunken Fibers

9. Nag Hammadi Codex IX 46.1 (LDAB 107749)

In Codex IX of the Nag Hammadi codices, we find several places where the scribe has avoided damages already present on the papyrus. The best example comes from the so-called *Testimony of Truth* (this tractate lacks a title) in the first line of p. 41. Here, the horizontal fibers have separated such that one can see straight through to the back layer of vertical fibers.

¹³ Image online at: <<http://dvctvs.upf.edu/catalogo/ductus.php?operacion=introduce&ver=1&nume=340>>.

The scribe was writing the word $\pi\omega\mu\alpha$, and when he got to the point of the fiber separation the omega tripped up the stylus. So, he then skipped the entire fault and picked back up at $\mu\alpha$: $\pi\omega$ [jump] $\mu\alpha$:



In his introduction to the codex, Birger A. Pearson noted this phenomenon: “At 41,1 the papyrus was so thick and uneven that the scribe, possibly in order to spare his stylus, skipped enough spaces for 3 letters — a good 2 cm. — and separated ω from $\mu\alpha$ in the word $\sigma\hat{\omega}\mu\alpha$.”¹⁴ It is likely that such separation took place during the manufacturing process, when the papyrus was still wet. The “ribbons” could have been separated from one another as a result of the force applied upon the layers in order to coalesce them together. Alternatively, the ribbons may not have been placed close enough together. “The art of the papyrus-maker,” Turner noted, “lay in placing his ribbons side by side so that they did not actually overlap (overlapping would raise a ridge) and did not shrink apart when the material dried out.”¹⁵ This same phenomenon (i.e., separated ribbons or fibers) is also visible in multiple places at the bottom of the very next page of the codex (p. 42).

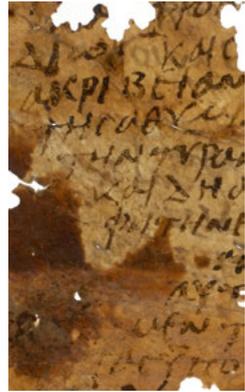
¹⁴ Birger A. Pearson (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X* (NHS XV; Leiden, 1981), 8.

¹⁵ Eric G. Turner and Peter J. Parsons, *GMAW*² (London, 1987), 30 (and pl. 1).

Stains

10. P.Monts. Roca IV 56 (LDAB 144444)

In some cases, a stain is the culprit. We find an example in a recently published parchment fragment of John Chrysostom's *De Virginitate*, housed in the Montserrat Abbey.¹⁶ A large, dark stain in the left-hand margin of the hair side obtrudes into the column of writing. The scribe avoids it by indenting his lines (see image at right). Torallas Tovar and Worp note this preexisting stain in their introduction, and they also reproduce the irregularity of the layout in their transcript. The question about how to reflect scribal avoidance of damages in an edition is discussed more fully below.



κολλήσεις

Mention should also be made of κολλήσεις (joins) in both bookrolls and codices.¹⁷ Many scribes and/or manufacturers of papyrus rolls took special care in joining the κόλλημα such that the modern editor often has difficulty in locating it on the papyrus.¹⁸ As Turner noted, “In a really well-made roll it [the κόλλησις] may be very difficult to detect.”¹⁹ The general rule seems to be that the left κόλλημα was placed over the left edge of the right κόλλημα. According to Turner, “If two sheets are pasted together,

¹⁶ Sofia Torallas Tovar and Klaas A. Worp, ed., with the collaboration of Alberto Nodar and María Victoria Spottorno, *Greek Papyri from Montserrat (P.Monts. Roca IV)* (Barcelona, 2014), no. 56.

¹⁷ See Pliny, *NH* 13.74–82.

¹⁸ For a study on how sheets were glued together in antiquity, see Myriam Krutzsch, *Blattklebungen erkennen und dokumentieren*, in Jörg Graf and M. Krutzsch (eds.), *Ägypten lesbar machen – die klassische Konservierung/Restaurierung von Papyri und neuere Verfahren* (Beiträge des 1. Internationalen Workshops der Papyrusrestauratoren; Leipzig, 7.–9. September 2006 [APF Beih. 24], Berlin/New York 2008), 93–98.

¹⁹ Eric G. Turner, *The Terms Recto and Verso: The Anatomy of the Papyrus Roll*, *Papyrologica Bruxellensia* 16.1 (Brussels, 1978), 15.

one must inevitably be slightly higher than the other. The ancient manufacturer contrived his joins on the inside of the roll to make a series of easy steps down; the scribe's pen, travelling from left to right, would, as it were, travel downhill."²⁰

According to William A. Johnson's study of bookrolls from Oxyrhynchus, there is "no statistical tendency for the column of writing to avoid the join: the column of writing obtrudes upon the *kollêsis* in 32 of 47 instances noted in the Oxyrhynchus sample (68%)."²¹ In a recent doctoral dissertation, Egdar B. Ebojo shows that the normal pasting direction is reversed in P.Beatty II, that is, the right κόλλημα is on top of the left.²² And the scribe seems not to have minded the obtrusive κολλήσεις.²³ According to Ebojo, "pasting direction *per se* is not strictly the concern of the κολλήτης/manufacturer, but is the right domain of the user (i.e., the scribe)." James M. Robinson has noted such reversal in several of the Nag Hammadi codices, and he has attributed it to the 180° rotation of sheets freshly cut from a pre-manufactured roll.²⁴ In other words, when the scribe went to make sheets for his codex, he cut them from a roll (from right to left) that had been unrolled in the usual writing position (left κόλλημα over right), but stacked his sheets upside down (by accident?), thus producing a right-over-left pattern.

Whatever the cause or motivation of this irregular pattern (right κόλλημα over left), it is clear that many scribes tended to avoid the κολλήσεις, especially when they were imperfect and thus negatively affected the flow of writing. One could point to many such examples, such as P.Oxy. XLIX

²⁰ Eric G. Turner, *Greek Papyri*, 5.

²¹ William A. Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 88.

²² Edgar B. Ebojo, *A Scribe and His Manuscript: An Investigation into the Scribal Habits of Papyrus 46 (P.Chester Beatty II – P.Mich. Inv. 6238)*, (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 2014), ch. 1, section 2. Ebojo points to the same practice in the Hamburg *Acta Pauli*.

²³ "[D]espite the codex's *right-over-left* direction of the joins the scribe had *actually written across* the joins, just as any other experienced scribe would, without leaving any evidence of trying to avoid them, except in a few inevitable cases" (ibid., 136, emphasis original).

²⁴ Douglas M. Parrott (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI, with Papyrus Berolinsensis 8502, 1 and 4* (NHS XI; Leiden, 1979), 16–18.

3450, where a κόλλησις, having caused previous damage and flaking, was skipped over by the scribe in fr. A recto, col. 2, ll. 47–50.²⁵

Conclusions

The foregoing examples are by no means representative of the entire gamut of preexisting damages that we encounter in ancient writing materials.²⁶ Nonetheless, the small sample illustrates that scribes did deliberately avoid faults in their writing media. Both literary and documentary papyri are among the examples, and so while no statistical data set has been made available, it would seem that scribal avoidance of faults is not restricted to the *type* of material use.

This being said, we would expect some types of damage in one material where they are less likely to occur in another. For example, holes of the type seen in nos. 7 and 8 above are found predominantly in parchment manuscripts and are the result of the manufacturing process. Likewise, the type of document may also preclude particular types of damage. In private letters, for example, we often encounter folds that subsequently tore due to the wear placed along the fold. But literary papyri were rarely folded and so we do not expect to see damages resulting from folds in these papyri.

Damage comes in many different forms and we are rarely able to determine the precise circumstances that led to it. But this should not deter us from imagining how such damage might have taken place. For example, newly purchased rolls or sheets of papyrus had to be transported from the shop where they were bought to the place of writing. It is altogether possible that some papyri were damaged in some way or another in route to their destination. This is especially true of letters, which often had to withstand various travel conditions. And moisture was always a problem since “papyrus, tough material that it is, decays almost as quickly as paper if it

²⁵ See further comments in Adam Bülow-Jacobsen, “A Third-Century Codex of Thucydides,” *BICS* 22 (1975): 65–83. Other examples include P.Dubl. 3.2–3, P.Vindob. G 29946, col. IV 3,

²⁶ Another example not investigated here is erasure; e.g., P.Sorb. inv. 2272b in Turner and Parsons, *GMAW*², pl. 40. On erasure in antiquity, see Adam Bülow-Jacobsen/Hélène Cuvigny/Klaas Worp, “*Litura*: ἀλειφάς, Not ἄλειφαρ, and Other Words for ‘Erasure,’” *ZPE* 130 (2000): 175–182.

is allowed to grow damp.”²⁷ Perhaps papyrus retailers introduced damage by accidentally dropping a roll or by handling it roughly. And this raises all sorts of questions about the purchase of papyri: Would buyers inspect for damages before purchasing a pre-manufactured roll? Did damages prompt buyers to negotiate the price?²⁸ Quality and cost are of course factors here. In the case of reused documents (including palimpsests), damage was probably made during the “first life” of these papyri, and the second user just dealt with what he or she had. Official documents may have been damaged in official depositories before being discarded and ultimately used again for writing.

Admittedly, these are all very simple questions, but papyrologists and palaeographers have rarely asked them. Editors of papyri need to become more accustomed to describing damages such as the ones illustrated above because they are, after all, interesting material features and scribal phenomena.

But perhaps one of the more pressing questions is whether or not editors should signify scribal avoidance of damages in their transcripts. In my mind, if “*vacat*” is a useful terminology in our tool bag, then some other term or sign might be equally helpful in highlighting when a scribe negotiates an obstacle on the writing material. We saw above how the editors of P.Monts. Roca IV 56 reproduced the irregular layout of the text, which was a result of avoiding a large stain. Gregg Schwendner has informed me that, in his forthcoming diplomatic transcript of the BYU Didymus papyrus, he has used the symbol “!” — called a “broken bar” in typography — to indicate where the scribe has left spaces on account of faults on the material. I cannot, however, answer the question as to whether or not a new sign or term should be adopted by editors; this is to be decided by others. My goal here has been simply to bring attention to these phenomena and to encourage editors to think about how they might note them, whether in their commentary or transcript.

²⁷ Eric G. Turner, *The Papyrologist at Work* (Durham, 1973), 2. The editor of BKT VI 7.1 (Christian amulet) suggested that the dampened spots were caused by the sweat of the owner.

²⁸ On the negotiation of the price of papyrus rolls, see P.Kell. Copt. 78 and 79.