

**Hidden Words, Hidden Worlds:  
The Lexicon of the Documentary Papyri  
and the «Revitalization» of the Past towards the Future**

Isabella Bonati

North-West University (Potchefstroom, South Africa)

isabella.bonati82@gmail.com

**Abstract**

A thorough lexical study based on the evidence of documentary papyri can be crucial in the effort to throw new light on material and socio-cultural aspects of the ancient world, especially when combined with other sources such as the archaeological artefacts. This integrated and interdisciplinary approach can unlock fresh ways to re-construct the past and leads to reflect on new possible tasks of papyrology in future.

**Keywords**

Documentary papyri, Lexicography, Material culture

L'antichità non ci è data in consegna di per sé –  
non è lì a portata di mano; al contrario,  
tocca proprio a noi saperla evocare.  
Novalis<sup>1</sup>

The in-depth study of the lexicon found in documentary papyri, and in particular their «hidden words» – those words that are uniquely attested by them or very rare in other written sources – allows us to unveil the «hidden world» of the reality that they describe. This emphasizes once more the contribution of documentary papyri to a more sophisticated understanding of the ancient world. My paper will illustrate this through some remarkable examples taken from the vocabulary of ancient Greek mirrors:<sup>2</sup> the adjectives δίπτυχος, τρίπτυχος and νεωτερικός.

The idea for this paper was inspired by a remark by Peter van Minnen:<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Quotation taken from Settis 2004, 1.

<sup>2</sup> On mirrors in the Greek papyri, cf. Bonati 2019b, 59-71. For the examples mentioned here, see pp. 68-71.

<sup>3</sup> van Minnen 2009, 646 and 650.

«Papyrologists do or could do many other things besides editing and “disseminating” texts. [...] They edit and reedit texts from papyri and/or with their help study some aspects of the ancient world. [...] Most of them study papyri because they have a passionate interest in the past and because they are trained to construe that past from texts. Texts indeed provide a meaningful link with the past because they are bits of communication».

The study of the vocabulary of documentary papyri is one of these «aspects» and one of the most effective keys to unlock the meaning of those «bits of communication». I will start with a methodological reflection that also intends to consider some tasks our discipline can or should take up in the future.

A thorough lexical study based on papyri can be crucial to revitalize and reconstruct the past in an exceptionally vivid way. Even more so when their evidence is combined with the other ancient sources in a tight interdisciplinary dialogue.<sup>4</sup> In addition, an interdisciplinary approach applied to papyrology is particularly in line with the «tentacular», «all-pervasive» nature of our discipline.<sup>5</sup> To describe its interdisciplinary potential, one can compare papyrology to an octopus that reaches with its tentacles the various fields of study of the ancient world. Therefore, by being so intrinsically interdisciplinary, papyrology can provide special input to the «revitalization» of the past.

To edit unpublished texts and to make new, updated, more complete editions of already published ones are traditionally the «core business» of the papyrologist, to borrow, once more, van Minnen’s words (2009, 644). However, by strengthening their activity not only on and through, but also beyond the text, papyrologists can contribute even more to a deeper and more comprehensive reconstruction of the ancient world. The systematic study of the lexicon of documents on papyrus can be one of the most viable ways to achieve this.

The value of papyrology is such that it could be beneficial to improve the accessibility of papyrological knowledge for scholars outside of the field and even outside academia. It would be important to insist more on the need to disclose and disseminate the results of papyrological research to a broader audience. To increase the interest among non-specialists could also help them understand that the past – especially the past that can be reconstructed by means of primary and direct sources like papyri – can be less «dusty» and distant than is commonly believed. Too many people seem to

---

<sup>4</sup> On the topic of interdisciplinarity, lexicography and papyrology, see especially my contributions Bonati 2016, VII and 1-3 (with note 3 for further bibliography), 2018, 152-153 and 2019a, 261-263.

<sup>5</sup> The significance of interdisciplinary approaches in the new trends of papyrology has been stressed several times in recent years. It is sufficient to recall how often expressions like «broader view», «combination» of sources and «interdisciplinarity» occur in Bagnall 2009.

be stuck in the traditional view that Classics is a subject of and for the élite and this is maybe one of the reasons why Classics is on the decline globally. This perception could be mitigated by bringing papyrology and Classics generally closer to a non-specialist public: to create opportunities to revive the voice of the past also by popularising a bottom-up approach, through dissemination and outreach activities, as well as to communicate the significance of learning from the past to better understand the present.

Therefore, one of the most relevant missions – or challenges – of papyrological research in future could be to play a larger – and more acknowledged – part in the cross-disciplinary project we call the Humanities. Despite the significance of studying papyrology, the impression remains that the massive potential of our discipline is too often underestimated. We, as papyrologists, should strive to stress the importance of papyrology as a necessary support to the other fields of study of the ancient world.

The issue of the future of papyrology today falls into the more general debate on the future of Classics in modern society. Space here hardly permits a discussion of such a vast topic, but I am personally convinced that, also in this case, an interdisciplinary and transversal approach could greatly contribute to safeguarding the future of Classics in our institutional context. Thus, if interdisciplinarity is one of the keys for the future, papyrology – a discipline «in dialogue» by nature – should play a bigger role in this future. The interdisciplinary union resulting from a closer dialogue among disciplines might indeed set the course for a renewed, even more integrated concept of Humanities.

## Case studies

The first example to illustrate the significance of an interdisciplinary lexical study based on papyri is the adjective *δίπτυχος*. This adjective – literally «double-folded» or «folding»<sup>6</sup> – describes a particular feature of the mirrors used by women in Graeco-Roman Egypt. Its full meaning is still to be matched to the material object to which it refers. *Δίπτυχος* is the most common adjective qualifying mirrors in documentary papyri and appears in the following texts, all dating back to between the middle of the first and the first half of the third century A.D. The texts all are marriage contracts containing lists of dowry goods, with the only exception of P.Oxy. XII 1449, which is a return of temple properties.

- P.Mich.V 343. 1. 5 (A.D. 54-55, Arsinoites): *κά[τ]οπτρον δίπτυκον;*

---

<sup>6</sup> See LSJ<sup>9</sup> 436 s.v.

- P.Stras. IV 237 recto. l. 16 (A.D. 142, Ptolemais Euergetis): ρσιπτρον (l. ὄσπτρον) δίπτυχον.
- BGU III 717. l. 12 (A.D. 149, Arsinoites):<sup>7</sup> κάτοπτ[ρ]ον δίπτυχον;
- P.Oxy. XLIX 3491. l. 7 (A.D. 157-158): κάτοπτρον δίπτυχ(ον) κασιω[τικόν];<sup>8</sup>
- SPP XX 15. l. 10 (A.D. 189, Ptolemais Euergetis): ἔσοπτρον δίπτυχον;
- P.Oxy. XII 1449. l. 56 (A.D. 213-217): κάτοπ(τρον) νεωτερικ(όν) χα(λκοῦν) δίπ(τυχον) α;
- P.Hamb. III 220. l. 7 (A.D. 223-224, Ptolemais Euergetis?): ἔσοπτρον δίπτυχο[v];
- SPP XX 31. col. II. l. 20 (A.D. 230, Ptolemais Euergetis): [ἔσοπτρον] | [δί]πτ[υχ]ον.

The occurrence of this adjective in the papyrus documents is even more remarkable considering that, in literature, *δίπτυχος* is applied to a mirror only once, in Plutarch's *Moralia* (*Mor.* [De facie] 930 b, 3 διαβάλλεται δὲ τοῖς διπτύχοις κατόπτροις). Therefore, these papyrological attestations seem to suggest that the expression *κάτοπτρον* / *ἔσοπτρον* / *ὄσπτρον* *δίπτυκον* was a technical expression of the vocabulary of the material culture in documentary papyri. It is likewise noteworthy that the majority of the attestations of *δίπτυχος* in the papyri are applied to «mirrors», whereas the adjective is applied to other objects – a *codex* and an earring – in only two instances: BGU I 326r. col. II. l. 15 (A.D. 194, Karanis) κωδικίλλων διπτύχων and P.Cair.Masp. III 67340. l. 29 (6<sup>th</sup> A.D., Antinoopolis) ἐνώτιον δίπτυχον ἔν.<sup>9</sup> The former is perfectly in line with the use of the adjective to identify a common typology of writing support.<sup>10</sup>

The comparison with the archaeological artefacts proves to be crucial to the understanding of the specific material feature expressed by the word *δίπτυκος* and to pinpoint its corresponding type of mirror. Ancient Greek mirrors are divided into three main types:<sup>11</sup> the «hand mirror» consisting of a convex polished disk with a handle, which is the oldest type;<sup>12</sup> the «caryatid» or «stand mirror»,<sup>13</sup> so-called because supported by a human figure standing on a base; the «clamshell» or «case» or «box

---

<sup>7</sup> See Russo 2006, 191-193.

<sup>8</sup> The adjective *κασιωτικός* is problematic. The term is translated as «inlaid» in the *ed.pr.* (p. 195), but the author remarks that «Casiotic joinery is surprising in an object so small as a mirror» (p. 196). It is not excluded that the letters before the lacuna may represent the beginning of a new word rather than an adjective referring to *κάτοπτρον*. In such a case, a comma should be inserted in the transcription: *κάτοπτρον δίπτυχ(ον), κασιω[τικόν]*. According to the editor, an alternative reading is *κασιω[*, perhaps hiding a new attestation of *κάδιον*, a type of container that has several occurrences in marriage contracts. See Bonati 2016, 59-85 (esp. pp. 69-70), and Russo 2005, 215 and 218-219. However, the presence of *δ* or *σ* cannot be decided with certainty. In case of *σ*, see the proposal *κασιωτικὰ ἱμάτια* («Casiotic garments») by Mitthof 2005, 260.

<sup>9</sup> On this attestation, cf. Russo 1999, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. Hdt. VII 239, 13-15 δελτίον δίπτυχον λαβὼν τὸν κηρὸν αὐτοῦ ἐξέκνησε καὶ ἔπειτα ἐν τῷ ξύλῳ τοῦ δελτίου ἔγραψε τὴν βασιλέος γνώμην. See – just to mention an example – Blanck 2008, 71-72.

<sup>11</sup> On the history of Greek mirrors and their typologies, see Wunderlich 1951, 4; Cooney 1973, 215; Congdon 1985, 19-24; Schwarzmeier 1993, 355; Carpino 2010, 444; Lee 2015, 166. See also A. Netoliczka in RE X.1 [1921], 29-45 s.v. *κάτοπτρον*.

<sup>12</sup> Already found in excavations of Mycenaean sites (about B.C. 1400), this typology disappears from the archaeological record from about B.C. 1000 to B.C. 700, then reappears again until about B.C. 400.

<sup>13</sup> This type was especially popular between B.C. 550-450.

mirror», which is comparable to the modern «compact».<sup>14</sup> The last one was small in size (from about 10 to 20 cm), without a handle, and very portable: a decorated lid was attached directly to the polished metal disk of the mirror with a hinge, in order to protect its surface when not in use. The distinguishing feature of this mirror typology is that it was a «folding» kind of mirror.

The comparison with the archaeological evidence, therefore, suggests that the adjective δίπτυκος may refer specifically to this typology of a mirror. We know that it was the most popular mirror typology in Hellenistic and Roman time, and documentary papyri confirm this fact. What is even more relevant is that the documents on papyrus integrate the archaeological evidence by adding to the artefacts a valuable textual counterpart. Only thanks to the vocabulary of documentary papyri we can finally give back to this specific object the name that it had in ancient everyday life. In such a way, we have the opportunity to fill the gap between *verba* and *realia*.

Another interesting example is provided by the adjective τρίπτυχος. In P.Merton II 71. l. 4, containing a list of articles (A.D. 163), a bronze mirror is not defined as δίπτυκος as usual, but as τρίπτυχος (ἔσοπ<τ>ρον τρίπτυχο(ν) χαλκ(οῦν)): «threefold» or «consisting of three layers».<sup>15</sup> This seems to point to a characteristic not mentioned in any other source. We might presume that τρίπτυχος did not define a new, different shape of a mirror, which has no parallel in the archaeological evidence. Rather, the adjective might simply indicate that the mirror consisted of three parts assembled together. This aspect is documented to be quite common for the hand mirror typology.<sup>16</sup> If this interpretation is correct, the adjective τρίπτυχος would not describe a (so far unknown) typology of Greek mirror, as δίπτυκος does. It would rather refer to a particular feature of this ἔσοπτρον expressed by a term having the same etymological pattern as the adjective that is most frequently associated with the mirror in the lexicon of documentary papyri: τρι- + -πτυχός, from πτύσσω («to fold»). Therefore, «threefold» not in the sense of «foldable three times» (as δίπτυκος is, literally, «foldable twice»), but «consisting of three parts». Thus, the same etymological pattern seems to be applied to two different shapes: not to a folding mirror (like δίπτυκος), but a hand-held mirror. Also in this case, the integration between *lexicalia* and archaeological data helps to shed light on the material aspect of an object mentioned in a documentary papyrus.

The third example, still taken from the vocabulary of ancient Greek mirrors, relates to the sphere of religious practise. The adjective νεωτερικός defines mirrors in the already mentioned return of temple properties preserved by P.Oxy. XII 1449. This adjective might be interpreted in a fresh way in light of the context. In l. 56 (but maybe also in ll. 21-22)<sup>17</sup> a κάτοπτρον is referred to as νεωτερικόν:

<sup>14</sup> For some exemplars, see e.g. Cooney 1973, 215-221; Congdon 1985, 22-23; Schwarzmeier 1993, 354-363.

<sup>15</sup> See LSJ<sup>9</sup> 1822 s.v.

<sup>16</sup> See Merker 2003, 129: «the hand mirrors were sometimes made entirely of bronze, the handle either cast separately in one piece with the mirror disc or cast separately in one or more part and assembled».

<sup>17</sup> Here the term κάτοπτρον is a plausible editorial restoration: [κάτοπτρον] | [χ]αλκ(οῦν) νεωτερ[ικ(όν)].

κάτοπ(τρον) νεωτερικ(όν) χα(λκοῦν) δίπ(τυχον) α. The *editores principes*, B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, translate νεωτερικός as «in new style» (p. 141) and comment that «νεώτερα (is) contrasted with ἀρχαία in similar lists» (p. 144 ad l.). However, no element in the text points to a potential contrast between a «new» and an «old-fashioned» style. Moreover, there is no actual semantic equivalence between the comparative νεώτερος<sup>18</sup> and νεωτερικός,<sup>19</sup> an adjective suffixed in -ικός (see *infra*). The editors also suggest the possibility that νεωτερικός «may be parallel to παιδικός». This adjective meaning «of or for a child» accompanies other objects in the same inventory,<sup>20</sup> and is also restored in l. 19 to qualify a silver mirror: ὄσπυτρον ἀργ(υροῦν) π[αιδικ(όν)]. The hypothesis to consider νεωτερικός as a possible synonym of παιδικός does not seem convincing: there would be no real need for a synonym to express a concept that could be easily expressed by using παιδικός also in l. 56 instead of an adjective, νεωτερικός, which has no other attestation in the vocabulary of Greek documentary papyri.<sup>21</sup>

The word-formation of νεωτερικός and a particular element in the context might rather suggest a different interpretation and a special meaning of the word in this text. The inventory contained in the papyrus, submitted to local government authorities by priests of various temples at Oxyrhynchus and in the Oxyrhynchite and Cynopolite nomes, mentions a number of deities worshipped at those shrines. One of them is Neotera, who had one of her temples «in the south-east part of the city» (l. 4 [ἐν τοῖς ἀπ]ὸ νότου τῆς π[ό]λεως ἐπ' ἀ[πη]λ(ιώτην)). Her name occurs several times in the inventory, which lists numerous votive offerings to her attesting to longstanding worship. It is explicitly said that some of these offerings «have been in the temple from antiquity» (l. 10 διὰ τὸ τὰ ἀναθήματ(α) ἀπὸ ἀρχαί]ων χρόνων ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ εἶναι) and others are «dedicated in accordance with ancient custom for vows and reverence» (l. 12 ἄνωθ(εν) συνηθ(είας) κατ' εὐχ(ῆν) καὶ εὐσέβ(ειαν) ἀνιερωθέντ(ων)).

The identity of the goddess Neotera is still a subject of debate and the Greek epithet Νεωτέρα seems to have been linked to many female deities, like the syncretic deity Hathor-Aphrodite, as well as Kore, Persephone, Nephthys, and Isis.<sup>22</sup>

The particular context of this document might suggest the hypothesis of an etymological connection between the adjective νεωτερικός and the theonym Νεωτέρα. This interpretation seems to be linguistically supported by the word-formation in -ικός. This suffix, very productive along the entire history of the ancient Greek language, expresses relationship and pertinence (i.e. «having to do

<sup>18</sup> See LSJ<sup>9</sup> 1172-1173 s.v.: «younger», «more recent».

<sup>19</sup> See LSJ<sup>9</sup> 1172 s.v.: «youthful».

<sup>20</sup> See ll. 16 πε[ριδέξι]α παιδικ(ὰ) ι καὶ παιδικ(ός) δακτύλ(ιος) α («10 armlets for a child and 1 ring for a child») and 18 ψέλιο(ν) ἀργ(υροῦν) παιδι[κ(όν)] («a silver bracelet for a child»).

<sup>21</sup> An even less convincing interpretation is found in Grassi 1926, 31-32.

<sup>22</sup> For theories and a bibliography on the topic, see Bonner/Darby Nock 1948, 213-215; Darby Nock 1953, 283-296; Bookidis/Stroud 1997, 365-366 and 436-437; Lee 2000, 31-32; Økland 2004, 82-83; Mastrocinque 2012, 105-118; Concannon 2017, 168 and notes 44-45.

with», «related to», «pertaining to»<sup>23</sup> The adjective νεωτερικός in P.Oxy. XII 1449 might therefore be modelled on and paralleled by the adjectives formed by a theonym plus the suffix -ικός, such as Ἴσιακός from Ἴσις and Ἀσκληπιακός from Ἀσκληπιός.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the expression κάτοπτρον νεωτερικόν would turn out to mean «mirror for (i.e. dedicated / related / belonging to) Neotera».

## Conclusion

These lexical examples provide a concrete demonstration of how the contribution of an interdisciplinary study of the «hidden words» found in documentary papyri can shed new light on the «hidden world» of the past. A thorough lexical study based on papyri allows us to reach a more accurate interpretation of many aspects of daily life in the ancient world. Documentary papyri are the best sources to observe and know these aspects directly. Therefore, it is essential to study their testimony on a lexical level. Papyri are eyewitnesses, their interpreter – the papyrologist – is the detective who «interviews» their words to solve the mystery of their meaning.

The lexical analysis of texts from papyri increases our chances to overcome the objective difficulty of connecting the *verba* that they attest and the *realia* that they represent. An interdisciplinary dialogue between papyri and other ancient sources can bring us closer to achieving this aim. Thanks to this dialogue, the past can be «revitalized», better understood in the present and handed over to the future.

## Bibliography

- Bagnall, R. 2009 (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, Oxford.
- Blanck, H. 2008, *Il libro nel mondo antico* (a c. di Otranto, R.), Bari.
- Bonati, I. 2016, *Il lessico dei vasi e dei contenitori greci nei papiri. Specimina per un repertorio lessicale degli angionimi greci*, Berlin / Boston.
- 2018, “Digital Papyrological Editions and the Experience of a Lexicographical Database: Medicalia Online”, in Reggiani, N. (ed.), *Digital Papyrology II: Case Studies on the Digital Edition of Ancient Greek Papyri*, Berlin / Boston, 149-173.
- 2019a, “Medicalia Online: tecnicismi medici tra passato e presente”, in Reggiani, N. (ed.), *Greek Medical Papyri - Text, Context, Hypertext*, Berlin / Boston, 257-276.

<sup>23</sup> See Budenz 1858, 4-32; Debrunner 1917, 197-200; Chantraine 1933, 385-393.

<sup>24</sup> See LSJ<sup>9</sup> 837 s.v. Ἴσιακός and 258 s.v. Ἀσκληπιός respectively.

- 2019b, “Mirrors of Women, Mirrors of Words. The Mirror in the Greek Papyri”, in Gerolemou, M. / Diamantopoulou, L. (eds.), *Mirrors and Mirroring from Antiquity to Early Modern Period*, London, 59-65 and 67-71 (pp. 65-7 are authored by N. Reggiani).
- Bonner, C. / Darby Nock, A. 1948, “Neotera”, *The Harvard Theological Review* 41/3, 213-215.
- Bookidis, N. / Stroud, R.S. 1997, *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: Topography and Architecture*, Princeton.
- Budenz, J. 1858, *Das Suffix kos (ikos, akos, ykos) im Griechischen: ein Beitrag zur Wortbildungslehre*, Göttingen.
- Carpino, A. 2010, “Mirrors”, in Gagarin, M. / Fantham, E. (eds.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, Vol. 4, Oxford, 444-446.
- Chantraine, P. 1933, *La formation des noms en grec ancien*, Paris.
- Concannon, C. W. 2017, *Assembling Early Christianity: Trade, Networks, and the Letters of Dionysios of Corinth*, Cambridge.
- Congdon, L. O. K. 1985, “Greek Mirrors”, *Notes in the History of Art* 4/2.3, 19-25.
- Cooney, J. D. 1973, “Deluxe Toilet Objects”, *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 60.7, 215-221.
- Darby Nock, A. 1953, “Neotera, Queen or Goddess?”, *Aegyptus* 33/2, 283-296.
- Debrunner, A. 1917, *Griechische Wortbildungslehre*, Heidelberg.
- Grassi, T. 1926, *Le liste templari nell’Egitto greco-romano secondo i papiri*, Milano.
- Lee, A. D. 2000, *Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, London / New York.
- Lee, M. M. 2015, *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge.
- Mastrocinque, A. 2012, “Neotera and her Iconography”, in Mastrocinque, A. / Giuffrè Scibona, C. (eds.), *Demeter, Isis, Vesta, and Cybele. Studies in Greek and Roman Religion in Honour of Giulia Sfameni Gasparro*, Stuttgart, 105-118.
- Merker, G. S. 2003, “An Ivory Mirror Handle from Corinth”, in *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies. Hayim and Miriam Tadmor Volume*, Jerusalem, 129-135.
- Mitthof, F. 2005, “Bemerkungen zu Papyri XVIII <Korr. Tyche>”, *Tyche* 20, 259-261.
- Økland, J. 2004, *Women in Their Place: Paul and the Corinthian Discourse of Gender and Sanctuary Space*, London / New York.
- Russo, S. 1999, *I gioielli nei papiri di età greco-romana*, Firenze.
- 2005, “Gli oggetti metallici nei παράφερνα”, *MBAH* 24, 213-241.
- 2006, “Note e correzioni a papiri documentari”, *ZPE* 155, 191-199.
- Schwarzmeier, A. 1993, “A Greek Box Mirror in the Cleveland Museum of Art”, *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 80/9, 354-367.
- Settis, S. 2004, *Futuro del classico*, Torino.
- van Minnen, P. 2009, “The Future of Papyrology”, in Bagnall, R. S. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, Oxford, 644-660.
- Wunderlich, S. A. 1951, “A Greek Bronze Mirror”, *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 38/1, 4-6.