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# The carbonized archive from Petra

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*This is a shortened version of the University of Michigan Henry Russel lecture 1996 (Michigan Quarterly Review 35 [1996] 513-31) with the author's corrections and annotations.*

## Introduction

Late in 1993 Zbigniew T. Fiema of the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) and his team found about 50 rolls of carbonized papyri in a storage room at the NE corner of an opulently decorated Byzantine church at Petra, which at the time was being excavated under the directorship of Pierre Bikai. The entire church had been destroyed by fire in antiquity.<sup>1</sup> The papyri were quickly brought to the premises of ACOR in Amman. At that point they were deep black, fragile, and embedded in burnt debris; some were single, some baked together into flat cakes. Since the papyri were rolled with the writing on the inside, very few pieces with ink were visible. Several of the burnt flakes curved in a way which indicated *rotuli* written *transversa charta*, that is, papyrus rolls which the scribes had turned at an angle of 90° so that the fibers would run vertically and the lines of writing horizontally. Such rolls, which opened from the top to the bottom, were fashionable in the Byzantine period and were used for long and official documents. Later, in the 9th-10th c., this format was also used for some liturgical church texts, but it was much more likely (and later confirmed) that the new papyri were documentary texts of importance for their owner.<sup>2</sup> They proved to be original 6th-c. sources for an area and time little known from other documentary sources.

With strong support from the Finnish Academy, Jaakko Frösén and a group of young scholars completed the conservation of the papyri in Amman by May, 1995. Altogether we now count 152 rolls, of which 23 rolls will yield partially continuous text segments and another 19 or so will provide fragments of substantial information. Hence about 42 rolls, or about 28%, are well enough preserved for eventual publication of their full extant texts. The rest may still provide pieces of significant information, although we may not be able to read more than series of single words or isolated letters.<sup>3</sup>

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1 For a preliminary report on the excavations of the church, see Zbigniew T. Fiema, Robert Schick and Khairieh 'Amr, "The Petra Church Project: interim report, 1992-1994," in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East* (JRA Suppl. 14, 1995) 293-303 with colour plates; for a summary and additional information about the initial work on the papyri see P. Bikai's report in *AJA* 100 (1996) 533-35.

2 E. G. Turner, *The terms recto and verso* (Pap. Brux. 16, Brussels 1978) 26-53.

3 The decipherment is divided between a Finnish team under J. Frösén and an American group under my direction and with T. Gagos as principal investigator. Since May 1996, R. Daniel is a full time consultant. We have had the collaboration of C. A. Kuehn and, for short periods, of J. G. Keenan, Ch. L. Barnes, R. C. Caldwell, and M. A. Kraus. The two teams exchange all information. Both are advised by Z. T. Fiema on archaeological and historical matters. The textual and interpretative information presented here comes from both teams, and we received additional advice from P. Bikai, G. Bohak, Z. T. Fiema, D. F. Graf, and O. Al-Ghul. G. W. Bowersock initiated my contact with ACOR immediately after the papyri had been found. Financial support of the project, which in Michigan is organized as a joint effort by the Department of Classical Studies and the Graduate Library, came from ACOR, NEH, and offices of the University of Michigan: the Office of the Vice-President for Research, the Dean of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, The Rackham School of Graduate Studies, and the International Institute. ACOR has received extraordinary help: donors "adopt" one or more of the better preserved rolls and they are then named after the donor or a person whom the donor wishes to honor. — For obvious reasons this is only a preliminary survey of work in progress. The project must be completed within 5 years. At the end of the project the papyri will be handed over to the Antiquities Department of Jordan and, we hope, housed in a new museum with a climate-controlled room.