

Preface

Old manuscripts, and papyri in particular, offer unique insight into past human activities. This insight is unique not only due to the clarity of the sometimes surprisingly well-preserved hand-writing; it is also exceptional inasmuch as the aura of the words drawn by human hands merges past and present and creates an intimacy that exerts an almost magical effect on the reader. Just as our hands move our pencils, those of the distant past directed their writing tools. It is the hands of human beings living in the mists of time, which open for us the door to the past.

To be sure, these people never thought of us when they filled the papyri sheets. Perhaps their messages were quite mundane, for example, how many donkeys were sold or sacks of cereals bought. But precisely these details reinforce the intimacy. As modern readers we become involved in the daily life of the past, although we do not belong to it. While we are reading the papyri, the past begins to speak in our mind, in a different and new context. The thoughts and concerns of our ancestors take on a fresh life they themselves were unable to imagine.

In the meantime, we are at a point of human history where the future absorbs us so strongly that we easily forget the past; or rather, we are at a point where we actually regard the past as past, a time that is no longer with us. Climate change, environmental pollution and population explosion are the foci of attention. We no longer accept our natural environment as it is imposed on us. We want to transform it in order to survive. Devoting human creativity to disclose the past is considered an escape from the big challenges which mankind has to master. The retrospective view is justified only when it helps to face the challenges of today –this is a common view within and without the universities.

However, is there really a past that lies behind us when we study the writings from ancient times? Yes, of course, as far as the words and idioms are concerned, there is. Languages continually evolve, and the objects to which these languages refer are subject to the flow of time as well. But does this also apply to the contents of the language, to what human beings express through their languages? Here the matter becomes more complicated. Human beings are the only living beings equipped with a so-called ‘cognitive’ language. Human language is distinguished by the fact that it is not only a vehicle to communicate impressions and feelings as birds do by chirping and dogs by barking. It is moreover a carrier of abstract concepts like numbers and relations. Homo sapiens is

the only living creature known to-date that is capable of manipulating such concepts systematically. Human beings are able to apply abstract ideas to concrete objects, for example, when they count donkeys and cereal bags and ponder that the exchange of two donkeys for forty sacks of cereals is a good deal. This consideration itself has nothing to do with specific words or a special idiom. It can be carried out in any language. However, if a merchant who made a good bargain wants to put his thoughts on record for future use or desires to show his superiors or descendants that he is able to run a successful business, he must write his reflections down and thus entrust them to a particular language.

The assessment whether or not a certain deal is good was made by a particular merchant and expressed in his language –this is a fact pertaining to the past. However, whether the content of his judgment is likewise a matter of pure history, is not equally clear. For even nowadays we can engage in the same considerations and arrive at the same conclusions as the merchant– or we can disagree with them, for example, if we know from other sources that the prices were quite different at the time and that the poor merchant was shamefully deceived. Unfortunately, he did not notice that instead of forty he might have earned eighty sacks of cereals for his two donkeys. Having access to these other sources, we know more than he did, even though we were not at the market place together.

Obviously, contemporary human beings can take up the thoughts of their ancient predecessors and think them over. In this respect there is no past or future but a perpetual present. This sounds like poetry, especially for modern ears that are used to distinguishing past from future. To be sure, the deception of our merchant cannot be undone within this perpetual present. It remains an element of the past. But the questions, whether or not it was a fraud or whether or not the merchant acted wisely, can be asked now as then. The assessment of his bargain can be resumed at any time *post eventum*, provoking new and unexpected insights.

If the reference to poetry sounds somewhat dislocated in a university context where the eternal laws of science should be applied, we must realize that such laws exist in an equally timeless universe, even if the objects to which they relate are nothing but historical. The Pythagorean theorem is not correct because it was formulated by Pythagoras in a certain place at a certain time in the past, but because each of us, wherever and whenever, can understand its meaning and judge its argumentation to be sound. Plato's theory of Ideas, Descartes's notion of the *res cogitans*, or Popper's concept of an objective World III: they all emphasize the particular nature of the products of human concepts and thoughts. They effectively show that the category of time functions differently in the world of meaning and judgment than in that of sense perception.

In everyday life, perception and judgment are closely interrelated – we constantly have to decide about issues affecting us from the outside world, for

example, when upon the waiter's call in the restaurant we must decide whether we want sparkling or plain water. Thus we easily forget that making a decision or assessing an issue is not simply a natural follow-up of our perceiving the state of affairs, even though in most cases it seems so. Judging has its own reasons which are beyond the space and time that belong to the issue at hand. Since we easily lose sight of this, we have difficulties in appreciating the relevance of those disciplines that deal with timeless considerations and judgments –which are, above all, the humanities– when confronted with the great challenges of the present day. Here we need a keen eye to distinguish the different categories of time, better still, we need a trigger or bait, something which impels and draws us into the dialectics of past, present and future, opening our minds for the peculiar world of human reasoning and judgment which is beyond time.

By their fragile nature, papyri provide such a bait. Their appearance provokes astonishment, being more delicate and subtle than the rugged animal skins of the parchments or the robust paper of many other manuscripts. How could they possibly carry human thoughts from the past into the present? In this regard, the papyri from the Basel collection are no exception. However, as of now their content can be conveniently studied owing to a carefully prepared edition and translation. As such, the present volume exemplifies one of the most important tasks of the humanities today: to help us judge how we shape the world in the mirror of the past, a judgment which transcends space and time. On behalf the University of Basel, therefore, my most sincere thanks go to Professor Huebner and her devoted team as well as to the university library and its enthusiastic staff for their commitment to making our papyri available to an extensive readership within and without the University. May this remarkable volume receive a wide reception and merge our minds with thoughts that transcend time!

Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen
Vice-President of the University of Basel (2013 – 2017)