Recycling Homer in Greco-Roman Egypt: The Appreciation and Consumption of Homeric Papyri

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Introduction

Perusing the Homeric papyri collection at the University of Michigan –Ann Arbor, I found two fragments that were reused: one as a personal letter and the other as a wine *annona*. This led to the question which I will attempt to answer in this paper: why would someone recycle a Homeric text? Homer’s works are considered classics. In most of the Western world, they are required reading for a cultured person. Though typically introduced in a classroom setting, the general public is quite familiar with Homer. The sacking of Troy and names like Achilles, Odysseus, and Helen are well known. Directors have made movies on the subject, authors have written historical fiction, academics have translated the text in many different styles, and even children’s book authors have made simple and engaging versions of his stories. Did people in the ancient world not value Homer as highly as we do nowadays?

Before beginning to answer that question, we must acknowledge the limitations of the evidence. Many esteemed literary figures proclaim Homer as the greatest poet; it would be interesting to complement the literary approval with what the physical texts can reveal about their value.

Of all papyrus fragments that have been found, Homeric texts are by far the most numerous. This fact comes with the assumption that majority equals popularity and value, but this should be taken with a grain of salt. For example, not every fragment has been found, so the papyri pool of texts may be heavily skewed. Also, weather and temperature limits confine most of the existing fragment pool
to North Africa. Papyri were used all over the Mediterranean; however, they need a hot and dry environment to survive through the ages. Typically other sites around the Mediterranean are too wet to effectively preserve papyrus and it is rare to find any fragments outside of North Africa.

I will attempt to first answer the question of Homer’s importance in the ancient world by examining his popularity and value at the time. Then, I will return to the original question of why someone in the ancient world would recycle his or her Homeric text.

Homer’s Popularity

By the time of Greco-Roman Egypt, Homer was part of the literary canon and integrated into various aspects of everyday life. Jean-Luc Fournet quotes Claire Préaux describing the reading of Homeric poetry as “courante et normale” (“common and normal”) in the ancient world.\(^2^4\) Despite Homer’s prominence, not everyone owned the entirety of his works. Letters exist in which the sender is asking to borrow a certain book from a friend. Clearly, there was a scholarly or educational demand for Homer; however, the scarcity of this sort of request can argue the opposite, that Homer was not popular. Fournet considers this and counters that the lack of quantity actually can reveal that people did not need to borrow Homer often because they already had their own copy, “plus un auteur est répandu, moins il y a de gens pour en réclamer le prêt” (“the more widespread an author is, the less likely people are going to ask to borrow him.”)\(^2^5\) In some cases, a person would write out his or her own Homeric text. The University of Michigan has a fragment (inv. 1318) in its collection that consists of two fragments from other scrolls pasted together and a Homeric

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\(^2^5\) Fournet, 132.
passage written on it. Apparently, he was popular enough that someone felt it was acceptable to scrap other works for a Homeric passage.

Off the page, his poems or specific scenes were performed on many occasions during religious festivities and perhaps even in honor of Homer himself. Ptolemy IV built a temple dedicated to him, so there may have even been a cult surrounding his figure. His poems were also a popular artistic subject. People would decorate their houses with scenes from the *Iliad*. For example, a man named Capiton wrote a letter to Terens (his friend and probable client), asking him if he would like to commission Homeric scenes for his home. The interesting nuance is that Capiton did not ask Terens what he would like or list several options. He directly suggested Homer as if his experience taught him that clients have a strong tendency to ask for Homeric scenes. In the ruins of Pompeii, the House of the Tragic Poet contains multiple examples of scenes from Homer painted on the walls of its atrium. Fournet conciseley summarizes, “*Homère se révèle omniprésent dans la vie privée et sociale des Grecs d’Égypte. Il marque leur vie intellectuelle autant que matérielle*” ("Homer is revealed to be omnipresent in the public and private lives of Greeks in Egypt. He influences their intellectual life as much as their material one”).

“Homer is a God, Not a Man”

Having established that Homer had widespread popularity, now his reputation and value must be determined. Was he famous or infamous? Was he regarded as the modern perception of Shakespeare and his *Romeo and Juliet* or as Stephanie Meyer and her *Twilight*? One method of

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27 Fournet, 135.
28 Fournet, 136.
29 Fournet, 137.
30 Fournet, 138.
determining his value is by examining the educational system and curricula. According to Raffaella Cribiore, “some Homer, a bit of Euripides, and some gnomic quotations from Isocrates formed the cultural package of students at the primary level.”

Cribiore highlights the prominence of Homer at every stage of a student’s education. At the primary level, the teacher would write out a Homeric passage for his students to copy. Through repetition, these students practiced writing their letters and penmanship. At the intermediate level, students would advance to the next step and start reading Homer with a commentary typically made by the teacher. They would have a list of mythological names to assist them in keeping characters in order, and glossaries for the more difficult and archaic words. Finally, for those who reached the advanced stage of their education, Homer was read all the way through and also served as an aid for rhetoric.

Literary texts in particular are more likely to be written by a professional scribe, especially if they are going to be in a library or bought for someone’s personal use. The writing tends to be more stylized, more of a script or book hand, than handwriting or personal hand. The scribal letters are uniform and less individualized. However, because this was a Homer-laden curriculum, professional scribes were not the only ones writing out this text. Teachers or tutors would write out Homeric passages for their pupils, students would copy sections for their own use, or scholars would comment on certain verses; therefore, many fragments have partial Homeric verses written in a less elegant personal hand.

A second method to ascertain Homer’s value is by examining what other authors have written about him. One writer in particular gives him rather magnanimous attributes. Despite the fact that he intended to censor Homer completely

32 Cribiore, Gymnastics 37-59.
out of his ideal city-state, the philosopher Plato wrote in his Republic:

λέγουσιν ώς τήν Ἑλλάδα πεπαίδευκεν οὐτος ὁ ποιητής καὶ πρὸς διοίκησιν τε καὶ παιδείαν τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πραγμάτων ἄξιος ἀναλαβόντι μανθάνειν τε καὶ κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν ποιητήν πάντα τὸν αὐτοῦ βίον κατασκευασάμενον ζῆν, φιλεῖν μὲν χρή καὶ ἀσπάζεσθαι ώς ὄντας βελτίστους εἰς ὅσον δύνανται, καὶ συγχωρεῖν Ὄμηρον ποιητικώτατον εἶναι καὶ πρῶτον τῶν τραγῳδοποιῶν.

They say that this poet has educated Hellas, and that for the administration and education of human matters it is worthy to take him up for learning and for living by, by arranging our whole life according to this poet, it is necessary to love and salute them as doing the best they can, and to concede that Homer is the most poetic of poets and the first of tragedians. (10.606e-7a)

He wrote the Republic around 380 BCE—about 400 years before the time period of Greco-Roman Egypt; thus, Homer had already been established as one of the greatest poets to exist. In the 1st century CE and later, his veneration was retained in the school curriculum and, with temples and festivities in his name, had even extended beyond a purely literary and textual basis. Homeric reverence seemed to be engrained at a young age. Evidence of this is present in a couple school exercises on which the following statement “θεὸς οὐκ ἄνθρωπος Ὅμηρος” (“Homer is a god, not a man”) was found.33

Recycling Homer

Recycling paper nowadays involves blue bins, pulp, and an off-color product that can be used for an amalgam of tasks. In Egypt, papyrus sheets were produced very differently, involving flattening and layering the papyrus plant. Once the sheet was used, there was no ‘recycling’ method for it to be marketable again for writing. People would either sponge off as much ink as they could, write on the back of the sheet, or cut off blank sections of other documents and paste them together to make a new sheet. Typically, a ‘recycled’ sheet could not be resold because all the evidence of its prior use could not be completely removed, so it was often used as scrap or draft paper.

The Michigan collection has two interesting Homeric pieces, which have been reused as scrap paper. Knowing how popular and venerated Homer was as an author, the motivations behind why anyone would recycle him should be scrutinized. Homer was a popular and revered poet at a level unmatched by any other author; it seems unnatural and almost blasphemous for someone to actively erase or cut into pieces of his work and use it as scrap paper, and yet there is evidence that this was done. I will first discuss different possible reasons why people would reuse their scrolls more generally, and then examine in more detail the specific cases in the Michigan collection.

One option why someone would reuse their scrolls is perhaps the result of inheritance. Cribiore mentions that scrolls could be inherited and specifically uses the example of Aurelia Ptolemais, a woman who inherited scrolls from her father. It is possible that the children and/or grandchildren who were inheriting their parent’s collection did not have the

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35 Skeat, 81.
36 These 2 fragments will be discussed in detail in the next section.
37 Cribiore, *Gymnastics* 88.
same level of literacy and could not read the scrolls; thus, did not know what they were reusing. Women in particular did not often make it past the intermediate level of education, making authors such as Homer or Plato difficult to read without the assistance of glossaries or a tutor. They also could have viewed their inheritance as simply grandpa’s old scrolls and not seen any real value in them. It would be wasteful to throw out the papyri instead of using the blank backs for their own purposes.

A second option as to why could be because of the state of the scroll itself. Literary texts are more likely to be written by a professional scribe, especially if they are going to be in a library or bought for someone’s personal use. The writing tends to be more stylized, more of a script than handwriting. It is possible that certain bookhands (or scripts) would go in and out of fashion, and thus some people would update their scrolls to keep up with the styles. Perhaps the less wealthy would have a cheaper version by a less-skilled scribe and replace it later with a more professional version. In Homer’s specific case, scribes were not the only ones writing his poetry. Because of his prominence in education, many teachers would write out passages for their students to copy; thus, many fragments are in a personal hand. After the passage is not used anymore, the teacher could use the back of the sheet for a shopping list if he wished. The same would apply to the students reusing the backs of their school exercises. However, the most straightforward reason why someone would reuse his or her Homeric text would be because of a scroll’s physical damage. If the scroll was ripped in half or had holes perforating multiple layers and rendering the text unreadable, it would be common sense to replace the scroll. Richer estates could have scribes of their own who would recopy damaged scrolls as part of their employment and later reuse the old scrolls for non-literary purposes.

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38 Cribiore, *Gymnastics* 56.
39 Fournet, 142.
A third and last option could simply be that need and/or convenience overruled the literary value. The owner needed a piece of papyri for whatever important reason at the moment and grabbed whatever was lying on his or her desk. Papyrus sheets were not particularly expensive; in some personal letters, the sender could afford to include some blank sheets to encourage the addressee to reply. However it would be inaccurate to label them as cheap. Papyrus was not a commodity readily available to the poor, so it did involve a significant expense. Even so, people must have encountered a moment in their lives that required them to overlook the literary value of a text for the free paper. Perhaps a receipt for a Roman tax collector knocking on their door was reason enough.

Two Fragments of the Michigan Collection

The Michigan collection has two interesting Homeric pieces, which have been reused as scrap paper. Knowing how popular and venerated Homer was as an author, it is surprising to find such fragments reused as scrap.

The first papyrus fragment (P. Mich. 2931) had lines from Book 2 of the *Iliad*, which were later sponged off and replaced with a receipt for an *annona* of wine (Fig. 1). Someone erased Homer for a tax receipt. The writer took the erased page, turned it upside down, and wrote the receipt at the bottom (or at the top if it is rotated back around as it is in Fig. 1). All that is left of the Homeric text are the remnants of a title and some poorly erased script on the right hand side. The writing on the right is the beginning of the second book of the *Iliad*. The remains of the original script on the right hand margin appear to be written by a scribe. The letters are small, practiced, and neatly close together. The writing is regular and even—more characteristic of a professional scribe.

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40 Skeat, 86.
41 Skeat, 75.
than a teacher or student. Also, because of the title (the hovering shadow of a beta) and what appears to be a ruled column of text, we can hypothesize that this Homeric text was more likely a high-quality personal copy of the book rather than a passage from a school exercise. It is possible that this text was reused because the scroll became defective in some way. Perhaps that scribal script was not in style anymore, or the scroll was damaged. Or, possibly, it was the only papyrus available at the time and need overpowered its Homeric value.

The second fragment (P. Mich. 1576)\textsuperscript{43} contains some lines from Book 1 of the \textit{Iliad} (Fig. 2). The writing is not as neat as the first one, especially along the bottom, and there is even a blatant correction along the bottom. The letters are large and not close together, and even the lines are not as equally spaced as the previous fragment. It is possible that this could be a passage that a teacher copied out for his students, the exercise itself, or a practicing scribe. Based on the handwriting alone, it is difficult to speculate its purpose with some certainty. The interesting part about this fragment is that the back was reused for a private letter (Fig. 3). The letter was written a while after the original text on the front.\textsuperscript{44} The owner or whoever found the sheet turned it over and took advantage of the blank space. Unfortunately, the writer and addressee’s names are lost, and the letter contains mostly staple greetings and regards to certain friends and family. Why this person reused this sheet is difficult to tell; however, upon closer examination of the hole in the middle of the fragment, one can see the writer of the private letter avoided it. The word [Ἄ]λεξανδρίᾳ stops at the iota, skips the hole, and continues with the alpha. Perhaps the original document was damaged and ruined; thus, this piece was reused as scrap for a private letter. If it originally was a part of a school

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\textsuperscript{43} Published. Priest NE, \textit{ZPE} 46, 53-4, 1982.
\textsuperscript{44} According to the APIS (Advanced Papyrological Information System) description, P.Mich.inv. 1576 (recto+verso).
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exercise, it is also possible that the owner could have reused it because he or she did not need it anymore. If the owner had thrown it away, someone else could have easily found it and decided to make use of the back.

**Conclusion**

Homer was a renowned poet. The Greeks in Greco-Roman Egypt were taught to venerate him at a young age and his works were present at all levels of education. Even outside of the classroom, the poet’s work stood out. Homes had frescoes lining their walls with Homeric scenes, and towns had live performances of the rage of Achilles. Homer in some shape or form permeated an ancient Greek’s everyday life. Knowing the prominence of his character, it was surprising to find that people had erased and reused their Homeric texts for mundane tasks.

Literary texts in general are not often reused in this fashion. According to T. C. Skeat, about 91% of literary papyri are not reused.\(^45\) There are many possible reasons for the reuse of a papyrus. Sometimes a child inherits scrolls from his or her father and uses the scrolls as free paper, ignorant of their contents or simply uninterested in them. Sometimes the writing is below par or out of style and the owner wishes to replace it with a better copy. Sometimes the scroll is physically damaged, or after studying the Homeric passages, a student discards them.\(^46\) Sometimes unsuccessful books are printed and their pages are used as scrap.\(^47\)

Although there is no concrete answer as to why Greeks in Egypt would reuse Homeric papyri, there are several options to explore. Specifically, the possibility that people could have chosen convenience over literary value can be

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\(^{45}\) Skeat, 82.

\(^{46}\) Cribiore, *Gymnastics* 148. Cribiore mentions how school exercises were often times left in dumps.

\(^{47}\) Skeat, 83.
revealing in regards to the relationship between an ancient owner and his or her physical text.

Figure 1: P. Mich. Inv. 2931.
Figure 2: P. Mich. Inv. 1576, recto, Homer side.

Figure 3: P. Mich. inv. 1576, verso, Personal letter.
References


Plato. *The Republic*.


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