“Papyrus,” as scholar Roger Bagnall observes, “was the most important writing material of the ancient world and perhaps ancient Egypt’s most important legacy. On it was recorded everything from high literature to the myriad of documents and other communications of daily life.”1

The Mount Holyoke College Art Museum (MHCAM) possesses a valuable collection of thirteen Roman-era Egyptian papyrus fragments written in Greek, an acquisition dating to the early 1900s. Many of these fragments originate from Oxyrhynchus, an ancient Egyptian city that reflects a plethora of cultural and social influences. Greek language and rule came to this “City of the Sharp-nosed Fish” with Alexander the Great’s conquests, and the city eventually fell under the rule of the Roman empire.2 The first formal excavations of the site, led by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt from 1897-1907 and patronized by the Egypt Exploration Fund (later, Society), yielded an unusually-high quantity of papyrus scrolls, many written in Greek: as in many territories of Roman conquest, Greek as the local language and dialect persisted throughout Roman rule.

Several of these fragments came to the Museum via a donation by the Egypt Exploration Fund, while two others arrived courtesy of former Mount Holyoke professor Cornelia Coulter. The fragmentary pieces of writing composed on each piece of papyrus offer the chance to study both mundane and exceptional stories from antiquity: examples from the collection range from horoscopes to excerpts from Euclid, from petitions and letters to tax receipts and lease agreements.

In researching this collection, I sought:

1. To describe, interpret, and place the Mount Holyoke papyri within the larger corpus of the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus Project (an research effort based out of the University of Oxford that maintains a database of the finds);
2. To research Cornelia Coulter’s travels and acquisition of the papyri to determine how they arrived at Mount Holyoke from Egypt.

My presentation will discuss both the results of my research and how the research process itself has laid the groundwork for future investigations in the collection.

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