



Publié sur *La Vie des Classiques* (<https://96.ip-213-32-20.eu>)

[Accueil](#) > How papyrus rolls lost their tops and bottoms - from Oxyrhynchus

HOW PAPYRUS ROLLS LOST THEIR TOPS AND BOTTOMS - FROM OXYRHYNCHUS

A [truly fascinating post at Papyrus Stories](#) tells us what happened when an archive of papyrus rolls was neglected in the early 2nd century.

“The documents shown to me by the clerk Leonides (...) were in some cases deprived of their beginning, or damaged, or moth-eaten (...). Since the books have been hastily moved from one place to another repeatedly, lying on top of each other and unattached (...). Some were eaten away at the top because of the dry heat (...) and since they are being handled daily, and their material is brittle, it happened that some were destroyed in parts, others were without beginnings, and some had even fallen apart.”

This was only part of the story. There was a position, Keeper of the Fayum archives, but by 107 AD Leonides was the man responsible for day to day care. The rolls were already in a mess. Over the next 50 years all those concerned were involved in endless bureaucratic argument and appeals to the prefect over whose fault this was and what should be done, and who should pay for it.

I recommend reading the whole article. It is an interesting insight into the disfunction of the administration at that period, from the Prefect down. But more, it explains how it is that we get so many texts which are missing the beginning.

For the last year I have myself been trying to obtain access to a document in an archive near me, where petty bureaucrats simply won't solve the problems they themselves create. I've had to give up, in fact. So I have quite a bit of fellow-feeling for the poor souls caught up in this mess!
