

City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish – Greek Lives in Roman Egypt  
by Peter Parsons.  
Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2007.

I first heard about the Oxyrhynchos Papyri when I was an undergraduate, but the mention was restricted to some of the biblical texts that were found there. With *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish* Professor Peter Parsons, head of the Oxyrhynchos Project, has brought to life not only the documents of Oxyrhynchos but also the city from which they emanated.

*City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish* tells the story of the discovery of the papyri by two young scholars, Arthur Hunt and Bernard Grenfell, in the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup>, as they excavated what turned out to be the rubbish tips of Oxyrhynchos. The volume of material they eventually unearthed in just the first three months filled 280 boxes and the project is continuing to decipher new documents in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century such is the size of the cache they brought to light!

The papyri themselves cover a wide range of subjects, from tax returns to shopping lists, from Gospels fragments to private letters.

Parsons tells the story of these momentous finds and then proceeds to detail the history of Oxyrhynchos itself during the period the texts were written, setting it in the wider context of events happening in the Roman Empire. Parsons' passion for his subject is event throughout and communicated with panache and humour. The detail is impressive yet never over-bearing and the reader's interest is sustained throughout.

There is one picture of a figurine from 500 BC of the sharp-nosed fish itself, being worshipped, but nowhere is the detail given as to specifically WHAT type of fish it was. I assume from its appearance that it was a catfish but this tiny extra might be worth adding to the next edition, or paperback version.

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