

BOOK REVIEW

Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East. By ROGER S. BAGNALL. Sather Classical Lectures, Volume 69. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2011. Pp. xi + 179. Hardcover, \$49.95/£39.85. ISBN 978-0-520-26702-2.

This latest, small-sized but elegantly produced book by R. S. Bagnall is the revised form of the author's Sather lectures at the University of California, Berkeley in 2005.

The book consists of six main chapters plus a short "Introduction," brief "Conclusions" and lengthy "Endnotes." The book topic, as indicated by the title too, is "everyday writing in the Graeco-Roman East." But terms must be taken in a somewhat broader sense: "everyday writing" is defined as a subject larger than the "commonly denominated documentary texts" or the so-called "private" (vs. "public") texts given that document type boundaries are not always clear; as Bagnall argues, "physical form and social usages are more important than content" (3). On the other hand, "Graeco-Roman East" may at times refer to places like Dura-Europos in Mesopotamia or even take into account data from remote areas like Bactria in modern-day Afghanistan (cf. Ch. 5).

The six book chapters may be read individually, but can also be grouped into larger "sections" (e.g. Chs. 1, 2–3, 4–5, 6) with several common thematic threads running through many of them (e.g. document corpora analysis, language contact, etc.).

The first chapter ("Informal Writing in a Public Place") is the only chapter that focuses on a "medley" of epigraphic texts, i.e. graffiti from the basement of a Roman-era basilica in the agora of Smyrna. Of particular interest are two rare word/text types: Greek names (re-)written in numbers (*isopsephism*), e.g. ATH=1,308=ΤΥΧΗ (A=1000, T=300, H=8, Y=400, X=600); letter squares, i.e. palindromes read both horizontally and vertically, e.g. ΜΗΛΟΝ–ΗΔΟΝΗ–ΛΟΓΟΣ–ΟΝΟΜΑ–ΝΗΣΑΣ. But what matters most is the larger picture: ancient graffiti, be it in Smyrna, Pompeii or elsewhere, offer a completely different perspective on literacy in ancient societies from that provided by literature or

public inscriptions: here, it is the wider “literate” public writing for the readership of “literate” passers-by.

The next two chapters (“The Ubiquity of Documents in the Hellenistic East,” “Documenting Slavery in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt”) are devoted to an impressive, in depth and breadth, discussion of papyrus corpora. The overarching point is that fluctuation in document numbers, both in absolute terms and per document category, century or area, is a common phenomenon; but no safe statistical conclusions are possible without prior analysis of the archaeological context. For instance, the numbers of surviving document corpora often relate to whether they were (not) meant to be preserved in antiquity (cf. e.g. discarded documents in rubbish heaps vs. contracts kept in habitation sites), the conditions of their subsequent preservation (cf. *taphonomy*) and finally, the conditions of their discovery (organized excavations, pillaging, chance discovery of troves). Similarly, changes in the number of certain types of documents, e.g. documents pertaining to slavery (slave contracts, land leases etc.), do not necessarily reflect social changes since statistical “distortion” is a common phenomenon for a number of factors: provenance and nature of document finds, e.g. troves, archives, but also modern editors’ priorities, etc. People keen on statistical counts of papyrus documents will find Bagnall’s learned and methodological analysis a stark reminder of the statistical hazards—even though I am somewhat sceptical whether such a detailed analysis of mass data is always practically feasible, however desirable.

Chapters 4–5 (“Greek and Coptic in Late Antique Egypt,” “Greek and Syriac in the Roman Near East”) touch upon language contact between a metropolitan language like Greek and native languages like Coptic and Syriac. Bagnall navigates through an ocean of corpora from Roman and late antique Egypt, the Near East, but also Mesopotamia (cf. Dura-Europos) and Bactria in an attempt to point out similarities and dissimilarities in document language usage between these two language areas. Despite some obvious differences between Egypt and the Semitic-speaking areas—for instance, written Coptic emerged under clear Greek and Christian influence in the late 3rd century AD, but flourished much later; by contrast, the predecessor of Syriac, i.e. Aramaic, had been used in public and private documents even before the Hellenistic period—there are also some unmistakable similarities: the use of Greek was probably more widespread in cities and towns and less common in the countryside even though Greek was not completely absent from villages either, particularly in Egypt. Once again, statistical figures may be impressionistic since e.g. a large archive find can distort the

numbers for a particular document type, area and/or century. Nevertheless, unlike the unquestionable dominance of Greek in document types such as contracts, everyday documents like letters, however small their number, reveal the ever-increasing role of epichoric languages in writing alongside Greek and reflect their strong position in oral communication, even though with a certain degree of bilingualism in several places.

The last chapter (“Writing on Ostraca”) could be deemed a thorough overview of “Ostracology.” This ubiquitous type of texts from Graeco-Roman Egypt (and elsewhere) were meant to be ephemeral but turned out most durable. Bagnall rightfully underlines the importance of large ostraca corpora for the study of ancient society, economy, etc.; but ostraca can be of great importance in any numbers since their elliptic and often “ungrammatical” texts provide crucial evidence for everyday language use (cf. important linguistic data on ostraca from Bu Njem, Mons Claudianus, etc.).

In conclusion, this is an enjoyable, but also highly scholarly book, professionally produced (misprints are hard to spot), which will be of interest to both experts and non-specialists: the former will find an expert and up-to-date discussion of an inter-disciplinary subject, but above all will be prompted to (re-)think over various issues relating to chance and predilection in the discovery, publication and use of large document corpora, which may in turn affect statistical figures significantly; the latter will be initiated in an authoritative manner into the complicated and fascinating subject of everyday writing in the multilingual societies of the Graeco-Roman East.

PANAGIOTIS FILOS

University of Ioannina, Greece, panagiotis.filos@gmail.com