

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt*. Edited by CHRISTINA RIGGS. Oxford Handbooks in Archaeology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xxi + 791. \$150.00. ISBN 978-01995-714-51.

Stretching to more than 800 pages in length, the *Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* seeks to provide a one-stop reference volume for a (mostly) scholarly audience. That it does so with distinction is to the very great credit of editor Christina Riggs and her many capable contributors.

In the Introduction (1–8), Riggs clarifies the purpose of the work: to ask the “right questions” (2) about various areas of current scholarly investigation into Roman Egypt (*ca* 30 BC–AD 300). This is important, as it makes abundantly clear that the *Handbook* will not just be a repository of knowledge, but also a map for future investigation. Riggs also notes that though the contributions to the *Handbook* are quite varied, a number of common themes recur: personal and communal identity, social mobility, religious development and continuity and change, among these (5). These themes definitely do shine through and help provide some cohesion for this huge volume.

Part I (“Land and State,” 9–100), easily the widest-ranging and least archaeological section of the book, is also a solid introduction to the chapters to come. In Chapter 1, “*Aegypto Capta*: Augustus and the Annexation of Egypt” (11–21), Friederike Herklotz highlights innovations in the administration and organization of Egypt as a Roman province under Augustus, who deliberately sought the approval of the Egyptian priestly caste to cement his position as pharaoh. Chapter 2, “Between Water and Sand: Agriculture and Husbandry” (22–37), centers on the Mendesian nome for its “agro-fiscal management policies, land use and food production, and religious landscapes” (23), and also because it is that rare Delta region for which abundant papyrological evidence survives. Katherine Blouin demonstrates that the region was primarily dedicated to the cultivation of wheat in Roman times. Matt Gibbs, in his contribution (Chapter 3, “Manufacture, Trade, and the Economy,” 38–55), provides a succinct overview. He initially underlines a pair of long-standing myths about economics and Roman Egypt—that Egypt was economically unique, that Egyptian agricultural practice was unchanging—and

concludes by noting that economic life in Egypt changed substantially, along with much of the Roman world, as part of a Mediterranean-wide trade network.

Chapter 4, “Government, Taxation, and Law” (56–67), by Andrea Jördens, is a brief survey of these three topics, but Jördens also stresses the importance of applying Egyptian evidence for these subjects to other regions of the Roman empire, in particular concerning the military. The bountiful evidence from Egypt for military life is described by Rudolf Haensch in Chapter 5 (“The Roman Army in Egypt,” 68–82). Haensch highlights the uniquely rich data we possess from Egypt—on papyri, ostraka and stone—for the personal lives of soldiers.

Part I concludes with Chapter 6, “The Imperial Cult in Egypt” (83–100). Here, Stefan Pfeiffer concludes that the imperial cult in Egypt “was a provincial imperial cult that was set up from above and locally organized, and which was subject to central supervision” (97). He also notes a particular anomaly of the imperial cult in Egypt—that there was no worship of Roma there—and sees behind this the fact that the Roman senate, with whom the worship of Roma was associated, had no control over the province.

Part II (“City, Town, and *Chora*,” 101–243) begins with an overview of the topography and history of Roman Alexandria in Chapter 7 (“Alexandria,” 103–121). Marjorie S. Venit also highlights a number of problems for the study of the great city during the Roman period, including the locations of a number of buildings and the date of the destruction of the Library. In his section (Chapter 8, “Settlement and Population,” 122–135), Laurens E. Tacoma addresses two central questions: “Who lived where, and how can we know?” (122). He also tackles the terminology of settlements in Roman Egypt (cities, towns, and villages), explores four theories for modeling settlement patterns and suggests that future research should examine urbanization in Roman Greece or the agency behind settlements in Roman Egypt.

In Chapter 9 (“Archaeology in the Delta,” 136–151) Penelope Wilson reviews previous and current work on the Delta, both surveys and excavations, and highlights some challenges faced by scholars in this area. She underlines the fact that, overall, there was more continuity in material culture in the Delta between the late Ptolemaic and early Roman periods than between the Roman and late Roman periods. In Chapter 10, “The Archaeology of the Fayum” (152–170), Paola Davoli tackles a region with a long history of land reclamation projects. The information she provides on the layout of Greco-Roman settlements in the region is very welcome, given the somewhat checkered history of excavations in the Fayum. Adam Łajtar heads south in Chapter 11 (“The Theban Region under the

Roman Empire,” 171–188). An abundance of written and archaeological sources are available to scholars of this time and place. Lajtar notes that Roman Thebes still had religious importance and served as an Egyptian cultural stronghold.

In his chapter (12, “Classical Architecture,” 189–204), Donald M. Bailey goes hunting for traces of Greek and Roman elements in the monumental structures of Middle Egyptian administrative centers. Bailey surveys the architectural evidence for four different *metropoleis* and suggests that others will yield similar material. Next comes Chapter 13 (“City of the Dead: *Tuna el-Gebel*,” 205–222), in which Katja Lembke treats the largest Greco-Roman necropolis yet uncovered for Roman Egypt. Lembke suggests that some of the changes observable in construction at the time (among these an increase in mud-brick construction) can be tied to the changing identity of the Greco-Roman population. Finally, in Chapter 14 (“The University of Michigan Excavation of Karanis (1924–1935): Images from the Kelsey Museum Photographic Archives,” 223–243), T. G. Wilfong gives the reader a behind-the-scenes look at the excavation of one of the most famous towns of Roman Egypt. Among the photos Wilfong presents are a number in which the excavation can be seen in progress, which allows the viewer to get not only a sense of scale, but also an idea of what the site might have looked like inhabited.

Part III (“People,” 245–316) addresses the human element in five very different chapters. Andrea Jördens (Chapter 15, “Status and Citizenship,” 247–259) describes the tripartite citizenship structure of the province—Romans, Greeks in the *poleis*, and “Egyptians” at the bottom—through which a great number of Greeks became third-class citizens. Yet there were options for social advancement for those in this lowest (and largest) social group and some privileges granted to them. Katelijn Vandorpe also focuses on these same three groups (in Chapter 16, “Identity,” 260–276). Given the various cultural influences at play, the question of identity could be problematic. A major focus here is the intersection of identity and social advancement. The latter could be difficult, though personal wealth was often an asset.

Chapter 17 (“The Jews in Roman Egypt: Trials and Rebellions,” 277–287) examines the Jewish population in Roman Alexandria and the tensions between them and Greeks of this city, who were granted numerous privileges by Roman emperors. Andrew Harker suggests that the Jews of Alexandria belonged to a semi-autonomous *politeuma* and that they generally did not actively seek Alexandrian citizenship as a means of self-advancement. Myrto Malouta covers much ground

in Chapter 18 (“Families, Households, and Children,” 288–304): not only marriage—its legitimacy, between brothers and sisters, among soldiers—but also domestic architecture and the status of children in the province, who are underrepresented in the papyri. In Chapter 19 (“Age and Health,” 305–316), Malouta and Walter Scheidel examine the “hotbed of disease” (313) that was Roman Egypt. Abundant documentary evidence for the age composition of the general population survives from Roman Egypt. These texts reveal much about health and sickness across the population—e.g. seasonal and locational differences for various diseases—but the most common (i.e. gastro-intestinal) health problems are often very hard to trace in the documents.

The nine chapters in Part IV (“Religion,” 317–489) concern various aspects of the divine. David Frankfurter (Chapter 20, “Religious Practice and Piety,” 319–336) examines the fortunes of the Egyptian temples during the Roman period, domestic religious practice and magic. From the last, Frankfurter moves into a discussion of Christian religious practice in Roman Egypt, which he sees as something of an outgrowth of traditional magic. A fuller discussion of magic comes next (Chapter 21, “Coping with a Difficult Life: Magic, Healing, and Sacred Knowledge,” 337–361). Jacco Dieleman sees Egyptian magical practice in the Greco-Roman period as part of a long tradition, but one which transformed with Hellenization. One result of this transformation: in the Roman period, magical texts reveal more of a concern for social and spiritual (as opposed to physical) health.

In Chapter 22 (“Egyptian Temples,” 362–382), Martina Minas-Nerpel focuses on the temple building program of the Ptolemies as continued by the Roman emperors into the second century AD and later. She argues that there were clear norms for temple layout and construction, as proven by the existence of temple texts (collected inscriptions and written decorations from temple walls) which reveal much not only about temple layout, but also religious thinking and cult. In Chapter 23 (“Funerary Religion: The Final Phase of an Egyptian Tradition,” 383–397), Martin Andreas Stadler surveys the end stages of a very ancient tradition. Thought about the afterlife in the (very) multicultural milieu of Roman Egypt took many forms. Consequently, changes are observable in Egyptian funerary texts produced in the period, which Stadler reasonably sees as “part of an organic development marked by reinterpreting, and perpetuating, a number of earlier features” (392).

Oracles form the subject of Chapter 24 (“Oracles,” 398–418). Gaëlle Tallet argues for greater contact between the inhabitants of Egypt and oracular gods in domestic contexts and outside of Egyptian temples in the Roman period. As priests were now at least partly dependent on private income, oracular encounters (which traditionally took place during religious festivals) became more privatized. In Chapter 25 (“Isis, Osiris, and Serapis,” 419–435), Martin Bommas examines three Egyptian gods who served as the most prominent face of Egyptian religion for 650 years. He traces the origins of and sources for the cult of Isis and Osiris and notes that outside of Egypt, Egyptian gods were (at least initially) worshipped at private expense and with private initiative.

By contrast, Gaëlle Tallet and Christiane Zivie-Coche examine external religious influence in Chapter 26 (“Imported Cults,” 436–456). Foreign gods had a long history of importation into Egypt. During the Roman period, new gods coexisted with traditional Egyptian ones, but did not infiltrate Egyptian temples or religious texts. Nevertheless, in private contexts both traditional and new gods were adapted for worship in different ways. Chapter 27 (“Egyptian Cult: Evidence from the Temple Scriptoria and Christian Hagiographies,” 457–473) returns to the temples. Martin Andreas Stadler describes how Egyptian priests controlled and performed Egyptian cult in the Roman period but also investigates cult in the private sphere, where a distinction with magic is difficult to draw. In fact, magical texts provide some of the best evidence for traditional cult, alongside Coptic hagiographies which prove the continued existence of Egyptian cult via references to its elimination.

In the last chapter of Part IV (Chapter 28, “Christianity,” 474–489), Malcolm Choat focuses on the expansion of Christianity. By the late second century AD, it was firmly rooted in Alexandria and under episcopal control. There were some Christians in the *chora* by the late second century AD, but not many until the beginning of the third century AD when they start to appear in the documents. The church begins to expand out of Alexandria now, as well, while, simultaneously, attacks on Christians in Alexandria occur. By the end of the century the earliest Coptic Christian texts appear.

Part V (“Texts and Language,” 491–593) has as its focus the archaeology of the spoken and written word. In the first of its seven chapters (Chapter 29, “Language Use, Literacy, and Bilingualism,” 493–506), Mark Depauw surveys language use in Roman Egypt. By the end of the first century AD, Greek had a virtual monopoly on the written word, helped by Roman policy favoring Greek over

Egyptian. Yet all three forms of Egyptian (Hieroglyphics, Hieratic and Demotic) were still in use, especially in Egyptian temples, though even here Greek had made significant inroads by the second and third centuries AD.

Arthur Verhoogt's contribution (Chapter 30, "Papyri in the Archaeological Record," 507–515) shifts gears. Verhoogt argues for a new approach to papyrological finds, one which values not only contents, but also locations and contexts of preservation. He outlines three phases in the life of a structure—habitation, abandonment and post-abandonment—and illustrates how phase of discovery can tell us much about the intentions of the owner of a papyrus, as well as the perceived value of the papyrus discovered.

The next five chapters concern specific languages. In the first of these (Chapter 31, "Latin in Egypt," 516–525), T. V. Evans surveys the tongue of the new ruling class, suggesting that Latin had more impact in Egypt as a means of oral, rather than written, communication, though plenty of Latin occurs in the documentary record. In brief, Evans sees the use of Latin in Roman Egypt as an avenue for the "expression of power and identity" (518). Greek comes next (Chapter 32, "Greek Language, Education, and Literary Culture," 526–542). Amin Benaissa's contribution covers many bases: the form of spoken/written Greek in Roman Egypt (a type of *koine*), the priority of classical literature in formal education, the characteristics of this education, the beginning stages in the use of the codex, the existence of private libraries and Alexandria's position as the second city of learning and literature under the Romans.

In Chapter 33 ("Hieratic and Demotic Literature," 543–562), Friedhelm Hoffmann argues that in the Roman period, Hieratic was employed mainly for religious and magic texts, and Demotic for the same as well as other genres. He notes that Egyptian literature was the exclusive domain of the priests, and that this literature (mainly formulaic stories, but also scientific and other scholarly texts) survived longer than legal and administrative texts in Demotic, which disappeared around the time of Augustus. Chapter 34 considers the Egyptian of monuments ("Egyptian Hieroglyphs," 563–580). According to David Klotz, Roman period hieroglyphs appear mainly on temple walls in a variety of different genres. The style of these hieroglyphs is typically archaizing, but this likely has more to do with the breakdown of the hieroglyphic tradition than the poor quality of Roman period scribes. Klotz also touches briefly on the topics of cryptography and Roman "Egyptomania."

Finally, in Chapter 35 (“Coptic,” 581–593), Malcolm Choat treats the final written and spoken form of the ancient Egyptian language, the vernacular from the third century AD onwards. Choat traces the development of Coptic from its beginnings, notes the different dialects that arose and sees a semi-standardization of the language in the fourth century AD with the privileging of Sahidic by the church. The development of the language (from Greek and Egyptian) suggests that those who used it were often bilingual, as does the fact that proselytizing Christians would have had to navigate between different ethnic and cultural groups in the Egyptian countryside.

Part VI (“Images and Objects,” 595–697) features six chapters, most of which concern items produced in Roman Egypt. In Chapter 36 (“Funerary Artists: The Textual Evidence,” 597–612), Maria Cannata details the lives of Egyptian funerary artists during the Roman period via written records. Quite a bit of information survives: on wages and tax payments, apprenticeship contracts and guilds, locations of workshops and places of residence. Funerary artists do not seem to have been organized into professional classes in Roman Egypt: their work as funerary artists was simply an offshoot of their work in other fields.

Chapter 37 (“Portraits,” 613–629) concerns human representation. Barbara E. Borg describes a number of changes in portraiture after the Roman conquest, among these a sudden increase in naturalism and the near-abandonment of hard stone Egyptian statues. Behind these changes Borg sees an Egyptian adoption of the traditional Roman custom of self-promotion. Mummy portraits are also discussed here. These, Borg suggests, gradually lost their Egyptian elements over the course of the first few centuries AD. Chapter 38 (“Terracottas,” 630–647) takes the reader into the home. Sandra Sandri gives a snapshot of the wide variety of terracotta figurines uncovered from the period. The majority of these feature Greek and Egyptian gods, likely reflecting their intended use in domestic cult. Unfortunately, much of the material comes from poorly documented excavations, and for years has been denigrated by scholars as low-class (though Sandri argues that there is no good evidence for this characterization).

Chapter 39 (“Pottery,” 648–663) also deals with domestic ware. Jennifer Gates-Foster traces the history of pottery studies in Egypt, and presses for increased study of the social and economic contexts of Egyptian pottery under the Romans. Production of pottery took place in nearly every corner of the province, and foreign influence on domestic forms was strong, particularly during the early

Roman period, which saw an explosion in the different types of amphoras imported. From here, Chapter 40 (“Mummies and Mummification, 664–683) heads back into the tomb. Beatrix Gessler-Löhr addresses some of the biggest challenges involved in studying Roman period mummies: many were destroyed during and after excavations and few eventually reached museums. Scholars have also argued that embalming work in the Roman period was of low quality. Gessler-Löhr suggests that the decline in quality sometimes observably reflects the inability of Egyptians to pay for expensive work rather than a loss of embalming skill, and cites a number of elaborately decorated mummies from Roman Thebes to support this contention.

The last chapter in Part VI (41, “Nilotica and the Image of Egypt,” 684–697) moves out into the Mediterranean. Molly Swetnam-Burland discusses works of art with Egyptian themes mostly produced in Italy for Roman audiences. She focuses on two famous examples—the Nile Mosaic (*ca* 120–80 BC) and the Vatican Nile (early second century AD)—chosen for their representations of Egypt pre- and post-conquest, and concludes that pre-conquest works tend to reflect ethnographic preoccupations, whereas those created afterwards tend to have more propagandistic/imperialistic aims.

Finally, the four chapters in Part VII (“Borders, Trade, and Tourism,” 699–762) take the reader to the edges of imperial Egypt. In the first of these (Chapter 42, “Travel and Pilgrimage,” 701–716) the focus is the journey itself: why people traveled to and through Egypt, who traveled, where they went and what they left behind. Ian C. Rutherford notes that travel to Egypt increased after 31 BC, but that most visitors were Greeks, not Romans. Tourists tended to hit the biggest attractions, and many of them commemorated their visits with graffiti. Chapter 43 (“The Western Oases,” 717–735) heads west. In his contribution, Olaf E. Kaper offers a new synthesis of the evidence for the Western Oases, where good evidence for agricultural development/expansion and population increases can be detected between the first and fourth centuries AD. Kaper also underlines some of the idiosyncrasies of this region: divergences in religious observances, a heavily Greek literary culture and some unusual mortuary practices.

Chapter 44 (“The Eastern Desert and the Red Sea Ports,” 736–748) heads in the opposite direction. Jennifer Gates-Foster promises an overview of current scholarship on the region, one which was exploited by both the Ptolemies and Romans for mining and trade, and heavily fortified by the Romans. Gates-Foster



presses for greater cooperation between papyrologists and archaeologists in synthesizing the data from this area, and also suggests that there is still much to learn about the nomadic peoples of the region.

In the last chapter (45, “Between Egypt and Meroitic Nubia: The Southern Frontier Region,” 749–762), László Török heads south, covering Egypt’s southern border between the conquest of Lower Nubia in 29 BC and the retraction of the southern Egyptian frontier to Philae in AD 298: its shifting geography, its military apparatus and its unique administrative system. Török repeatedly highlights the multicultural makeup of this environment, in particular as concerns religion. There appears to have been something of a regional religious identity on this frontier, a result of the blending of Egyptian and Nubian elements.

A few words here about the overall quality of the book. Many of the chapters include tables and/or images, all of which are cleanly and clearly presented. Every chapter includes a brief conclusion, a bibliography and a list of works (mainly in English) for further reading. The book is remarkably error-free for a work of its size. Some of the contributions which have been translated into English betray residues of their languages of composition, and there are typos here and there, but none—at least among those which I found—that seriously impedes comprehension. Though there may well be more, I only encountered one obvious factual error in the book: the statement on page 705 that Marcus Aurelius visited Alexandria in AD 207/8 (the visit actually occurred in AD 175).

As suggested in the introduction to this review, I was quite satisfied with the *Handbook*. I occasionally found myself asking, “Why isn’t there a chapter on X?” but then inevitably found a discussion of X nestled in a corner somewhere further on, or ultimately realized that a volume in the Oxford Handbooks in Archaeology series did not really need a chapter on (e.g.) law and order. (But that would have been excellent!) I could also complain that the book has a very early chronological endpoint (AD 300), but given the appearance of a handbook on Byzantine Egypt only a few years ago—R. S. Bagnall’s *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700* (Cambridge, 2010)—I should probably keep this gripe to myself. In the end, the harshest criticism I can level against the *Handbook* is that, after reading it, I can honestly say that I am left with more questions than answers. But this turns out to be high praise, as well: it suggests that much more remains to be written about Roman Egypt. Until this happens, those who want a comprehensive introduction to the subject could do much worse than Riggs’ excellent *Handbook*.

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