

BOOK REVIEW

Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt 300 BC - AD 800. By ROGER S. BAGNALL and RAFAELLA CRIBIORE. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 440. Paper, \$45.00. ISBN 978-472-03622-6.

With its unique introduction to Egyptian feminine epistolography of the classical and late periods, this volume is a useful resource to fill out the otherwise predominantly androcentric classical sources. It is, therefore, a welcome and more affordable republishing, in paperback, of the 2006 hardcover edition. We learn, for example, that Herais is trying to regain land seized by Valerius Apolinarius, to whom she had lent money (313). Thermouthas and Valeria explain to their “brother” that they will travel once Herois, a woman in their household, has given birth (189). Eudaimonis complains to her daughter that she has had difficulty in finding women to work in the family weaving shop and that her workers are requesting higher wages (143–144). *Women's Letters* provides us with these and other snapshots of women’s concerns as they themselves voiced them.

Women's Letters is divided into two parts. The first part in ten chapters (1–93), gives readers unfamiliar with Ptolemaic and Roman Egyptian letters not only a clearer picture of some aspects of Egyptian women's lives, but also an introduction to the problems and concerns faced by scholarly study of these letters. For those readers unfamiliar with Egyptian society and epistolary conventions of this period, the authors provide practical help in reading the letters, including greeting formulas, customary phrases of adoration before deities (*proskynema*), money, and dating. The explanation of one convention, the use of kinship terms, is particularly important, for the women usually addressed men as “brother,” which had a variety of meanings ranging from sibling, husband, brother-in-law, distant relative or even friend or business partner, making it difficult for a reader to be clear about the relationship between writer and addressee.

Other topics raise questions about how we might ascertain what level of education the woman correspondent may have had or how at ease she was in writing the Greek letters herself; whether the letter was dictated and retains a close approximation of what she actually said or whether the scribe paraphrased

her words; what social level did the woman hold and how wealthy was she; how free was she to travel and why might she do so; and to what extent was she involved not only in household management but in business.

The authors discuss the chronological distribution of the letters and the archives in which some were found, as well as the discovery of the various letters but here, too, there are problems and uncertainties. Some letters fortunately come from an archive or collection that provide some context for the women's lives. For example, the Athenodoros Archive is a collection of letters taken from mummy cartonnage found at Abusir el-Melek (ancient Busiris); Athenodoros was an estate manager. But we have in many instances no context, for the women or their families do not appear in any source other than these letters. However, the authors discuss at some length late medieval letters as *comparanda* in order to alleviate this lack of context. While these medieval sources (the Paston, Stonor, Plumpton and Celys collections) themselves have some contextual gaps, Bagnall and Criore argue that they can use these medieval collections to raise questions and develop hypotheses about "social and economic standing, handwriting and literacy, and the degree to which the language of the letters is a direct representation of the author's thoughts" (27).¹ In chapters 8, 6, 7 respectively Bagnall and Criore test these questions and hypotheses against the Egyptian letters.

The second half of the book is divided into two parts: letters from twenty-one archives and dossiers (104 letters), and letters illustrating themes and topics (106 letters). Almost every archival or dossier section is introduced by a summary of what is known about the context of the collection. The section on themes and topics includes family matters and health; business matters; legal matters; getting and sending; work, including agriculture, weaving and clothes making, and miscellaneous (e.g. military; child's nurse); journeys; literacy and education; religion; epistolary types (e.g. "urgent!", "just greetings and good wishes"; "double letters on a sheet").

The format for each letter provides its standard papyrological abbreviation; identifies the letter's author and correspondent if possible; lists the location where it was written and the location of the addressee and its find spot; identifies

¹ The Pastons were a large landowning family of Norfolk; their collection of letters run from 1492 to 1509. The Stonors were wealthy landowners with holdings in Oxfordshire and other counties; their letters run from 1290-1483. The Plumptons were Yorkshire landowners; both the Stonors and Plumptons held the rank of knight since the thirteenth century. Of lower social class were the Celys, who were wool merchants of London and Calais. The Plumpton letters date from 1461 to the mid-sixteenth century; the Celys letters and documents run from 1472-1488.

the language (Greek or Coptic); translates the letter and comments, for example, on the analysis of the handwriting, style of language, level of grammar; summarizes the content; and provides a current location of the physical letter and its bibliography. For a number of the letters, the editors comment on the writer's skill in forming letters and slowness or rhythmic style of writing in order to judge to a certain extent the educational level of the writer. One of the strengths of this book are the photographs of thirty-two letters, which, ranging in size from half the page to almost full page enable the reader to see the orthographical details noted by the editors. Closing the volume are an index of topics and people, an index of letters, and the bibliographical update.

How Eudaimonis handled her labor unrest, we will never know; these letters tease and tantalize with their brief glances into the lives of ordinary women, their problems and their joys.

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