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Archaeology and papyrology

Roger S. Bagnall

ALAN K. BOWMAN, *EGYPT AFTER THE PHARAOHS* (British Museum Publications, London and University of California Press, Berkeley 1986). Pp.264, figs. 148. Price £16.95. ISBN 0-520-05930-1.

Alan Bowman's excellent synthesis of the history of Egypt in the Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine periods¹ offers as "the essence of the book" the attempt "to exploit both the written and the archaeological evidence in order to see the impact of the presence of the Greeks and Romans in Egypt against the backdrop of the Egyptian tradition"(p.7). Because the papyri from this millennium provide a remarkable wealth of information far beyond what we have for other parts of the ancient world, one might think that the task of correlating and integrating texts and physical remains should be both easier and more rewarding than elsewhere. Indeed, the wealth of illustration in Bowman's book may at first appearances make it appear that integrating the textual and visual has led to just such successful results. The text, after all, offers a readable and intelligent account based on a wide knowledge of sources and the most current scholarship, and the illustrations are well-chosen and attractively presented. There are, however, some disquieting signs that matters are not so straightforward. Not only does the preface give no hint of the role that the illustrations are intended to play; throughout the book the figures and the text proceed on parallel lines without ever really converging. There are no references in the text to particular plates, nor in the captions to the plates (which are generally quite informative) to the portion of the text which is to be illustrated. The reader's enjoyment of the book is not seriously affected by this lack of mutual reference, and the intelligent reader can make connections between text and plate without help. But one cannot help wondering if the procedure followed here is not somehow symptomatic. Have papyrology and archaeology been exploited separately rather than integrated, and if so, why?

If we turn to ask just where archaeology is the main source for the text, the answer is fairly brief. Chapter 1 ("The Gift of the Nile") draws on geography but hardly on archaeology. Chapter 2 ("The Ruling Power") comes entirely from written sources. Chapter 3 ("State and Subject") treats among other topics the army; army camps and forts are duly represented by pl. 52, a fort in the eastern desert, but only two chapters later is any description offered (p.145, on the 3rd-4th c. fort at Dionysias). Chapter 4 ("Poverty and Prosperity") cites the shops of Marea (p.107). In chapter 5 ("Greeks and Egyptians") we find a more extended section (pp.142-50) on the environment, both villages and cities, along with some remarks on burials (p.137) and objects of daily life (p.152). Chapter 6 ("Gods, Temples and Churches") describes temples, cemeteries, mummies and churches in the course of outlining the religious life of Egypt. And chapter 7 ("Alexandria") deals briefly with the state of excavation there (p.206).

In short, in only chapters 5 and 6 is archaeological material the source of a significant part of the text. Villages, towns, temples and cemeteries are not a trivial amount, but one is hardly left thinking that archaeological evidence contributed heavily to most of the larger picture. Rather, archaeological remains seem to tell us mainly about themselves. It seems to me worth asking why this is so. Does archaeology matter to history only *faute de mieux*, so that 50,000 written documents for Hellenistic and Roman Egypt make it ornamental rather than important? Three questions will organize the inquiry: 1. Is there substantial evidence which Bowman has not used? 2. Are there other questions which could be asked of the evidence which exists? and 3. Is it necessary that the archaeological record be so disappointing in its contribution to understanding this millennium of Egypt's history?

1. Missing evidence

A text of less than 250 pages, aiming at a balanced account for a general audience, with a limited (though well-chosen) bibliographic documentation, can hardly be held to any standard of completeness.

1 For a survey of the book's contents and character, see my review in *AJA* 91 (1987) 623-24.

What has been omitted? We do not find here the Italian excavations at Narmouthis (Bresciani 1968, Bresciani 1976), nor the brief reports of the earlier ones at Tebtunis (Anti 1930-31 and 1931, Bagnani 1934). The Chicago excavations at Quseir, on the Red Sea, are not mentioned (Whitcomb and Johnson 1979, 1982; the third season is not yet published). One may well consider that two more Fayum villages do not add a lot for present purposes that could not be learned from Philadelphia, Soknopaiou Nesos, and Karanis, all of which figure here. But Quseir (Leukos Limen), the only excavated Red Sea port, might have been worthwhile, especially given the good state of preservation of organic remains there. For the first time we have at least a partial view of how the Romans organized a key component of the eastern trade. The Delta, poorly though it is known, might have been represented by Bernard's massive work on its western part (Bernard 1970) and by the beginnings of the ARCE volumes on the recent excavations (Holz *et al.* 1980, Coulson and Leonard 1981, Holladay 1982). Carrié's long article on Dionysias in the context of military architecture (Carrié 1974) would have been worth citing, particularly for his understanding of the architecture, his redating, and his attempt to interpret the fort in the light of the archive of Abinnaeus. Maehler's illuminating discussion of houses in villages and towns, again combining archaeological and papyrological evidence, would have been worth listing (Maehler 1983). The publication of the late Roman camp at Luxor, which appeared in 1986, would also now be worth adding (Golvin *et al.* 1986). And much more might be added at the level of detail. But it would hardly be fair to reproach Bowman for lack of comprehensiveness in a work of this type, and one may well conclude that only if some of this missing evidence — or some of that included — would have permitted asking other questions does it matter if it was indeed included. Overall, in fact, Bowman's choices have been made very well.

The stated theme of the changes brought to Egypt by the Greeks and Romans raises another problem. Change can be observed only if one has some sense of what is being changed. It would, of course, be unreasonable to expect this book to repeat what already exists elsewhere in abundance, a description of Pharaonic Egypt. All the same, some backward comparative references might have been worthwhile. One that would have been particularly useful, from the point of view of questions that I raise later, is the character of Egyptian nome capitals before the arrival of the Greeks in them. The evidence is hardly extensive, but even some general considerations might have been valuable (cf. Kemp 1972, Smith 1972).

2. *Missing questions*

What can we ask of archaeology when we know so much from written sources? The problem is complicated by the many gaps in the archaeological record; the questions that might be asked of better evidence are discussed in section 3 below. Here only a few points which might be addressed from the existing record are taken up. The most salient is perhaps the position of temples in villages and cities. This subject is explored by Bowman (pp.171-72) on the basis of Karanis. The temples are consistently the major structures found in Egyptian villages, to the point where one wonders whether these villages had any other public buildings (other than granaries) at all. The destruction of the center of Karanis by sebbakh-diggers, and incomplete excavation or similar damage at other sites, makes this hard to answer.² But the question deserves pondering in connection with the papyri. Did Egyptian villages before the Greeks have any institutions at all, other than the temples and those administrative institutions imposed from above? Did they lose them at some later period or still have some under foreign rule? The answer is important for the general problem of the existence of community in rural settlements (cf. Bonneau 1983) and for a sense of how well the Egyptians were organized to preserve their culture in the face of foreign domination.

A second question about the village temples, and town temples too, is the relationship of their abandonment to the rise of Christianity. Excavation reports certainly give the impression that in the Fayum villages (which suffered economically in the second half of the 3rd c. more than most of Egypt) there was a large-scale failure to keep the Egyptian temples in use in the second and third quarters of the

² Cf. Nowicka 1969, 10-13, on the damage at various sites.

3rd c., and that even when some of the villages revived somewhat in the later part of that century the temples were built over with houses (cf. Boak 1933). This seems to have been true also in some other places which did not suffer the loss of irrigation which the fringe villages of the Fayum did. The great temple of Luxor could hardly have been recycled as a Roman military camp under Diocletian, as we know it was, had it still been in use as a temple (Golvin *et al.* 1986). How widespread is this phenomenon? Is the decline of the temples the decline of paganism, or does Egyptian religion find other homes? Certainly small shrines had always existed, for the papyri tell us of far more cults in some places than there can have been large temples. Are there implications for the decline of demotic writing in this apparent decay of its principal loci of use? Did the rapid Christianization of Egypt in the 4th c. benefit from a vacuum? What was left of Egyptian institutions with the temples shut? All of these are questions where archaeology and papyrology might well work together.

Bowman notes (p.145) that the camp at Dionysias "makes it easy to see how the presence of a military unit dominated the social and economic life of the village." The statement is not expanded upon. The excavations at Dionysias were not able to be carried on to the point where the physical relationship of the fort to the entirety of the village, with its temple, is evident (Schwartz *et al.* 1969). The fortress appears to sit on the edge of a village originally planned on rectilinear principles like Philadelphia.³ To move from the brute perception that several hundred soldiers in a fort adjacent to an Egyptian village would affect its life to a more nuanced description of just how village and army interacted is by no means easy. Here again, the remains and the papyri might be deployed to illuminate one another.

In general, it seems possible to ask what was the relationship of people to their physical environment, that is, how they experienced places. For example, the inadequate excavations (and 19th c. illustrations) of towns like Hermopolis and Antinoopolis suggest that by middle imperial times they had a considerable measure of the articulation of public space which characterizes practically all cities of the Roman empire (cf. MacDonald 1986). Villages of the same period, on the other hand, seem in general not to have through streets, but to become if anything increasingly characterized by narrow, dead-end streets (cf., for Karanis, Husselman 1979). If these generalizations have any validity, they might raise questions about how the village-dweller experienced the nome capitals when he had business there. Were these towns far more alien in character from villages of that period than their pharaonic predecessors had been? Ptolemaic village foundations in the Fayum seem to have had grid plans and houses which appear far more Hellenic (though such principles were, to be sure, known to the Egyptians) than the layout of the same villages in the Roman period. How is this change related to the cultural character of the villages in these periods?

This is not an exhaustive list of questions, of course, and I am under no illusion that answering them with present evidence is easy. But they all seem to allow progress to be made with existing evidence on problems of central importance to the understanding of how Greek and Roman rule shaped and reshaped the physical, political, and cultural environment of Egypt. Expecting them to be dealt with in any detail in a book of this sort, which operates inevitably at a considerable level of generalization, may be unrealistic. But they do show, to my mind, that more integration of the evidence is possible.

3. *Missing archaeology*

Far more impressive, however, are the questions which find no substantial response in the excavation record, and which nonetheless seem in principle of interest to archaeology. In this respect, Bowman has given us the ability to see more clearly how archaeology has failed the study of the history of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. For even had the book contained more cross-reference of text and illustrations, even had Bowman lengthened it by dealing with some of the questions raised in section 2, the fact would remain that these would only scratch the surface of the real problem, a difficulty no author could have solved.

3 At some villages, the temple was (unlike the situation at Karanis or Bacchias) a little outside the village proper, not in a central location; cf. *P.Fay.*, pp.43 (Euhemeria), 51 (Theadelphia).

Of the more than 40 nome capitals of Greek Egypt, not one has been fully excavated; Hermopolis is the closest (Roeder 1959, Spencer and Bailey 1982, Spencer, Bailey, Burnett 1983, Spencer, Bailey, Davies 1984, Spencer and Bailey 1985, 1986), and that is not close. (Whether any is now left in a state which would reward such an excavation, I do not know.) Of the villages, how many no one knows,⁴ once again not one has been fully excavated.⁵ Some of those which did not have modern habitation on top were partly ruined by sebbakh-diggers, like Karanis; others were damaged by papyrus-hunters.⁶ Probably the large majority of those still extant a century ago were destroyed in the first two decades of the 20th c.⁷ Other villages and towns alike offer tempting mounds covered with modern habitation. Even the apparently most promising, however, have never been properly excavated. Tehneh (Tenis-Akoris, an ancient nome capital become a large village of the Hermopolite) was barely scratched by excavators, although a Japanese team has resumed work there since 1981 and is publishing preliminary reports.⁸ When it failed to yield substantial numbers of papyri, it was abandoned (see Lesquier 1911). The history of archaeology in Egypt is all too much a matter of digging for papyri, excavating cemeteries, or of clearing temples. It would ill become a papyrologist to complain about the excavation of papyri; but papyri as the object of excavation have led to little that is of archaeological worth.⁹ Grenfell and Hunt found many papyri in the rubbish heaps of Oxyrhynchos, but the 1908 plan of the town printed in *POxy* 50, p.vii, contains hardly any information about its layout or character. And one major problem not of human making deserves mention: the Nile has — in some regions at least — continued to move its course over the past two millennia, in general towards the east, with the result that many villages must have been forced to move and the ancient sites wiped out, their debris now scattered and buried in the Delta or the Mediterranean under tons of silt.¹⁰ In general, villages in the black land have probably survived in disproportionately small numbers.¹¹

Still, survey work could even now have value. For example, we would like to know how similar the metropoleis of the nomes were in size. Were only a few substantial Roman cities, and many just small towns of an Egyptian character? Or was there a relatively uniform spread of Greco-Roman urbanism? How was the countryside organized? Were there many small villages, or fewer large ones? At what distances from one another?

More excavations, carried out not for a few trenches but for a considerable extent, might help us to see how much craft production was centralized in the towns or carried on in the villages; might give us a

4 An unpublished 4th c. A.D. papyrus codex in the Columbia collection shows 70 villages in 10 pagi of the Hermopolite Nome, or perhaps 100 for the full nome. Even allowing for the large extent of this nome in late antiquity, it is hard to suppose that the valley had fewer than 1000 villages, and the Delta may have had more.

5 Cf. Butzer 1976, 71: "Quite apart from selective destruction of sites by the Nile, practically none of the occupied town mounds of the Nile valley has ever been investigated and only a minority of abandoned *koms* has ever been visited."

6 Nowicka 1969, 10-13, describes both the poor record of excavation and also the dismal fate of even those which have been partly excavated with archaeological investigation in mind.

7 See the despairing remarks of F. W. Kelsey in *Cd'E* 3 (1927-28) 78-79 about the more than 99% reduction of the mounds of Arsinoe between 1914 and 1920.

8 *Preliminary report First season of the excavations at the site of Akoris, Egypt 1981* (The Paleological Association of Japan, Inc., Kyoto 1982), *Second season... 1982* (1983), *Third season ... 1983* (1984), *Fourth season ... 1984* (1986), *Fifth season ... 1985* (1986), *Sixth season ... 1986* (1988).

9 Lest anyone think that papyrus-hunting as the purpose and method of an excavation is a matter of the dim past, Bresciani describes the excavations at Medinet Madi as "principalmente ed esplicitamente papirologico" (Bresciani 1968, 25).

10 Butzer 1976, 36: "The economic base for east-bank towns along this sector has changed dramatically and the actual settlement sites corresponding to many cemeteries now preserved on the eastern desert edge must have been destroyed by the river."

11 Cf. Smith 1972, 705, who points out that most excavated sites are in the desert, not on the alluvial plain, even though most of the population lived on the alluvium. A further distorting factor: desert-edge settlements were mostly laid out from scratch and were thus not necessarily typical. In sites on alluvium, most excavation has been of large complexes built of stone, which survives better.

better sense of how much the 4th c. church developed a physical presence in the towns and in the villages as compared to the monastic establishments on the edge of the desert; might help provide a better basis for that thorny problem, the dating of Coptic art; might help us to see more clearly the relationship between the organization of space and the cultural forces at work; and might clarify the relative expenditure of local resources on public and private construction. Every one of these questions also has something to gain from the written documentary sources. And many of the questions raised in section 2 could have better answers if we had the right kind of archaeological information.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly this discussion has loaded onto an innocent remark in a preface far more freight than it was intended to bear. A book intended for a general audience cannot generally be expected to push the frontiers of knowledge in most of the areas it surveys. It is a tribute to the qualities of this work that it goes beyond a remarkable success in synthesizing scholarly work in many areas and covering a millennium, by proceeding to cast a sharp light on the inadequacy both of our evidence and of our use of it. Calls for an archaeology directed to increasing knowledge and answering questions have been around for quite some time now; it is discouraging to see how limited the results for Egypt have been up to the present. Much of what might have been studied three quarters of a century ago is now lost forever; but even now more is being lost each year. It is a bitter irony that the only land of the ancient Mediterranean where enough documents have survived to offer a real chance for the meeting of philology and archaeology should be that for which archaeology has the least to bring to that meeting.

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