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Kitap Eleştirisi / Book Review

Roger S. Bagnall, *Everyday Writing in the Græco-Roman East* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 179; ISBN 978-0-520-26702-2; £ 34.95.

In six chapters based on lectures held at the University of California, Bagnall (B.) looks into the use of writing in everyday contexts ranging in time from the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity. Against the backdrop of research approaches which, in response to Harris' 1989 monography *Ancient Literacy*[1], aim at a more nuanced understanding of writing and the materials used for it, B. has three central concerns recurrent throughout the book (4): The first is the «silences and their sources», ie the question why some types of writing failed to survive to our time. This relates to the «archaeology of papyrology and epigraphy». Another major item is the «ubiquity of everyday writing» and its implications for the meaning of said silences. The third focus is the «relationship of languages in writing to languages in oral use in society» and concerns, in particular, Greek and major indigenous languages in the Graeco-Roman east.

Chapter 1, *Informal Writing in a Public Place* (7–26), looks into the wealth of pictorial and verbal graffiti written with ink or incised over a prolonged period of time on plastered walls in the basement of the basilica in the agora of Smyrna. They all date, says B., from before 178 CE when, after reconstruction of the basilica following an earthquake, the basement was taken out of use, thus effectively preserving the graffiti therein. Mainly written by male writers, the graffiti, says B., present a jumble of subjects ranging from sex and sports to number-and-word riddles, civic rivalry and religion including even Christian graffiti from the first half of the second century. Against the backdrop of the mass of graffiti from Smyrna and other places, eg Rome, Pompeii or Dura-Europos, B. assumes that the writing of graffiti was universal. Taking up the questions of authorship and intention of this public but informal writing, he notes that the Smyrna texts show a fairly good standard of orthography and quality of handwriting, which in his view suggests that some of the writers were educated. He rejects Harris's view of spelling mistakes as a sign of semi-literacy and considers literate also those whose writing shows phonetic spelling or the syntax of oral expression. B. assumes that the lower classes were responsible for at least some of this scribbling, which he believed was meant to be read.

In Chapter 2, *The Ubiquity of Documents in the Hellenistic East* (27–53), B. argues that the distribution in space, time and subject matter of Greek documents from the Hellenistic period is heavily distorted by their archaeological preservation. A better understanding of the usage of everyday writing in this period therefore presupposes a closer look at the archaeological circumstances under which documents have survived. Consequently, he first presents the archaeological situation in Egypt before looking beyond this country to see whether the Egyptian findings can be paralleled in the broader context of the Hellenistic East.

According to B., there are three possibilities of recovery of papyrus: first, from habitation sites, which, says B., supply the largest and least homogeneous category of documents discarded by their owners in Antiquity; second, from ancient troves, which furnish groups of papyri intentionally collected over prolonged periods and kept together in protective containers in Antiquity. These documents are always related to one another and are mostly about matters (financial, legal) of lasting value to their owners. Third, from cemeteries containing mummies wrapped in papyrus cartonnage, a category peculiar to Egypt. Unlike the finds from habitation sites, this material, says B., tends to come from archives and

[1] W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass. 1989).

was probably acquired in bulk by the funerary industry.

B. then goes on to apply this typology to Ptolemaic Egypt and finds that 1) no habitation site with a significant number of non-archival Ptolemaic papyri has hitherto been excavated; 2) troves are well represented, although some of them are of unknown provenance including the biggest (the Zenon archive); 3) cartonnage too is well represented, which B. believes is probably due to changes in funerary practice; he stresses, however, that written-on papyri were only exceptionally used as wrapping material and that the examples hitherto found come mainly from the Arsinoite and Herakleopolite nomes, which he says calls for caution when thinking about the representativeness of papyri from cartonnage contexts.

He next looks at the actual survival of Ptolemaic Greek documents by type and date and doubts, in conclusion, that «the extreme lumpiness of the data reflects reality», that, for example, the writing of letters, contracts or complaints to authorities «went in and out of fashion» (35); instead, he ascribes these variations to the archaeological preservation of documents, criticising Harris for taking the actual survival data at face value, as it were, and consequently drawing wrong conclusions about the usage of writing.

B. then proceeds to look beyond Egypt and goes back in time to adduce evidence for widespread usage of everyday writing outside Egypt and before the Hellenistic period, referring to Mesopotamia with its 2500 years of experience with written documents prior to the arrival of Alexander, to Persepolis where some 30.000 tablets in Elamite were discovered and to various Greek archives around the Mediterranean (eg in Seleucia on the Tigris, Carthage, Paphos in Cyprus, Delos) where many thousands of seals originally attached to public and private documents were found. On the basis of this evidence B. rejects the idea that the Greek habits of using writing in Ptolemaic Egypt are a phenomenon peculiar to this country and its culture and were adopted by the earliest Greek settlers; instead, he convincingly pleads in favour of viewing these habits as being imported to Egypt and no less common in the wider Hellenistic world throughout the eastern Mediterranean. He believes that these habits «varied little from place to place» (53) and does not even rule out the possibility of long-term continuities from the previous periods (Persia, Assyria).

In Chapter 3, *Documenting Slavery in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (54–74), B. takes up his line of argument developed in Chapter 2 and pursues it further to show «the very uneven survival of evidence for particular historical institutions and topics» (54), exemplifying his view in a statistic-laden examination of slavery in Egypt over a time span from the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity. Suggesting that the supposed decline in slavery is «an artifact of the evidence» (55), B. cautions against any rash interpretation of the drop in slavery-related documentation (from the third quarter of the third century BCE for the Ptolemaic period and from the fourth century CE for the Roman period) as a reliable indicator of long-term social change. Instead, he pleads for generally taking an analytical approach to the documentation by inquiring into, first, the nature of the sites where papyri have been found; second, the types of find spots and the specific nature of the respective find (eg archival documents); third, the interaction of government, law and custom with regard to the recording and preserving of various types of transactions and, fourth, the preferential choices made by editors in the editing of particular types of documents. Whereas the first three factors cannot be changed, the fourth can, which is why B. calls for making papyrus collections publicly available.

Chapter 4, *Greek and Coptic in Late Antique Egypt*, (75–94) focuses on documentary Coptic texts and, in particular, on letters, which, unlike legal documents, feature prominently in the Coptic corpus in the period prior to the Arab conquest, for which the number of Coptic texts is roughly half that in Greek. B. believes that the dearth of public or legal documents in Coptic in the cities of the Nile valley and in the villages of the Fayyum is due to non-use of Coptic for such purposes in said period. As regards epistolary Coptic in the fourth and probably also in the fifth centuries, he finds that although used in a number of cities, villages and monasteries, it played a very modest role in cities. B. also looks

into various 4th-century corpora of mainly monastic correspondence in which both Greek and Coptic are used in order to explore the «nature and quality of the bilingualism» (87) of such texts. From the numerous examples adduced, B. concludes that many writers who chose to use Coptic wrote good Greek hands, were well-versed in Greek formulaic epistolary elements and could easily switch between these languages.

In Chapter 5, *Greek and Syriac in the Roman Near East* (95–116), B. discusses the relationship in writing of Greek as the dominant metropolitan language and Syriac as one of the dialects of Aramaic, whose peculiarities he highlights by contrasting it with Coptic. A small number of 3rd-century Syriac legal documents from Dura-Europos and the Middle Euphrates respectively are, says B., a case in point for the importance of the archaeology of the discovery of documents, as they show that indigenous languages remained more widely used than a too simplistic look at the surviving written texts might suggest. In these 3rd-century CE documents Syriac is found alongside Greek in written transactions conforming to Roman legal practices, which shows that languages other than Latin and Greek were suitable for drawing up legal documents. The choice of language, says B., may have been influenced by several factors: the languages known to the people involved, the document's potential use in court and the availability of writers trained to draw up the text in one language or the other. The fact that the 6th-century papyri from Petra and Nessana, the documents nearest in time to said 3rd-century texts from the Semitic-speaking world, are all written in Greek, is, according to B., reflective of the interaction of political power and cultural change by which Greek came to supersede other languages, a process which began at different times in different regions.

B. also outlines the political dimension of Bactrian, which came into being as a written language by virtue of a royal edict and was subsequently adapted to a cursive script based on Greek. Among the more than 150 texts published in this script and dating to the first six centuries CE, the legal documents show a striking similarity in form and contents with legal texts from the Hellenistic and Roman Near East, a phenomenon B. attributes to a legal tradition in which said Bactrian and Syriac texts may at some deep level have been connected with that of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East.

In his sixth and last chapter, *Writing on Ostraca: A Culture of Potsherds?* (117–37), B. highlights the centrality in the Graeco-Roman East of ostraca as a convenient everyday writing material for brief, ephemeral texts. He sets out with the results of excavations conducted by H. Cuvigny[2] in Egypt's Eastern Desert, which brought to light a large number of ostraca but very few papyri. Part of the answer to this phenomenon, says B., may lie in the fact that, unlike in the Nile valley, in the Eastern Desert papyri tended not to have been thrown away when no longer needed but to have been saved and carried away by their possessors when they themselves left the desert or to have been used as fuel. Ostraca, by contrast, were thrown away. Juxtaposing the high numbers of papyri found in the most important cities and villages in Egypt over the last century or so with the mostly very few ostraca discovered at these sites, B. argues that a dismissive attitude has hitherto prevailed in respect of ostraca. Adducing recent observations from archaeological fieldwork at Amheida and Soknopaiou Nesos, where numerous ostraca have been found through the sifting of dirt and debris from previous excavations, B. concludes that the paucity of ostraca is due to the fact that archaeologists in the 19th and 20th centuries lacked the care and/or interest as well as the methods of their modern counterparts and thus missed many things that are today recovered and recorded. Therefore, if excavated according to modern standards, says B., all sites that produce writing material will also yield ostraca. He argues that ostraca were widely used in Egypt and beyond, mentioning examples from places as far afield as Dura-Europos on the Euphrates and Jerba in Tunisia. The rarity of ostraca from outside Egypt is, says B., less due to rarity of use than to historical and climatic conditions less favourable to their preservation. He believes that ostraca will

[2] Hélène Cuvigny et al., *La route de Myos Hormos. L'armée romaine dans le désert Oriental d'Égypte* (Fouilles de l'IFAO 48) Cairo 2003.

feature prominently in future excavations but will also pose new challenges to scholars, as the brief messages they contain will necessitate taking their archaeological context duly into consideration.

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This is an important book that should be read by anyone interested in ancient literacy, as it makes out a convincing case for the widespread use of everyday writing in Antiquity throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. But beware, this densely-written book is no easy read. Bagnall adduces a lot of material known only to specialists, expounding his point in statistic-laden comparative elaborations. But the insights are worth the effort. The greatest merit of Bagnall's book is that it sensitises us to the importance of the archaeological context of the discovery of texts. Giving it due consideration is a *conditio sine qua non* for a better understanding of the usages of writing in a variety of everyday contexts and of the interplay and reach of the languages involved. Another benefit of this book is that it looks beyond the Graeco-Roman world proper, thus shedding light on scribal traditions outside the conventional realm of ancient-history scholars, suggesting deep-level connections between these traditions in the Graeco-Roman world and those beyond. This opens up a wide field of further research into ancient literacy. In its present form this book is likely to be read by specialists only. It remains to be hoped that Bagnall will also write a more readily accessible version of it, one that puts more practical flesh on the theoretical bones of his arguments and thus allows his ideas about ancient everyday writing to be disseminated as widely as possible.

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