



Information & Culture

Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East

By Roger S. Bagnall. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011. 179 and xiv pp. \$49.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-520-26702-2.

In studying collections of recorded knowledge in libraries, archives, and museums, written documents coming from ancient archaeological sites, whether directly through excavations or secondarily through what is known as the antiquities market, present scholars with special challenges. This is particularly true of texts written on papyri and on potsherds, technically known as *ostraca*, which are taken together because of similarities in their manner of writing, despite the different materials upon which the texts were written.

In *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East*, Roger S. Bagnall, the preeminent American papyrologist of the last forty years, considers selectively how writing was used in Greek, Coptic, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Syriac texts for everyday—i.e., non-literary and non-scholarly—purposes in Egypt and the Roman and post-Roman Near East from the fourth century BCE to the ninth century CE. *Everyday Writing* is based on the Sather Classical Lectures that Bagnall delivered at the University of California Berkeley in fall semester 2005. He writes for a specialist audience, but his style is clear and his arguments about how to evaluate the historical significance of collections constructed haphazardly and subject to the vagaries of archaeological deposition and discovery will certainly interest a wider audience of scholars concerned with the history of recorded information and information science.

Bagnall begins with an idiosyncratic test case: graffiti, both incised and painted with pen and ink, on the wall plaster of niches on the basement level of the basilica in the agora of Smyrna (modern Izmir in Turkey). The preserved graffiti predate the collapse of the Roman-style basilica in an earthquake of 178 CE. The walls were replastered over time, so the graffiti enjoy a reasonably long history, layer upon layer.

There are many fascinating questions: Who furnished the instruments for writing? How public was the space? How visible were the graffiti, especially those found in what would have been the poorly lighted areas of three inner naves? What did the writers of different categories of graffiti intend to convey and to whom? For example,

what are we to make of one graffito written three times that consists entirely of the letter sequence omicron-beta, presumably the number "72" in Greek alphanumeric sign usage?

Bagnall drives home in his first chapter the important point that we can do better than frustrated scholarly agnosticism about the level of literacy represented by such collections of graffiti. Letters laid out in squares so as to read the same way line-by-horizontal-line and column-by-vertical-column (16–18), the posing of clever riddles (18–19), and even writing alphanumerically—essentially in code—the names of human objects of desire (14–15) indicate that "some of the graffiti-writing public were educated" (25). Likewise, we can make judgments based on standards of orthography, quality and styles of handwriting, the borrowing of forms from formal texts, and the range of vocabulary employed. "Terms like illiterate and semiliterate," according to Bagnall, "are used too readily to refer to people who spelled phonetically and let the syntax of oral expression enter their writing" (26).

In his other five chapters, Bagnall addresses his main concern, "that we can never trust the patterns of documentation without subjecting them to various sorts of criticism" (141). He demonstrates how difficult it is to draw correct conclusions about social or economic practices through time or about topics like literacy and archives without taking into account how we have come to have the collections of inscribed *data* that we have for any given period. He is particularly skeptical of "chance" as an explanation.

Bagnall shows how human processes skew papyrological evidence from the excavation of habitation sites, from ancient troves dispersed on the antiquities market, from the remains of written texts recovered from the papyrus cartonnage used to wrap mummies, and from scholarly assemblages of *ostraca*. His selective survey focuses on Greek, Coptic, and Aramaic texts and documents.

In examining the evidence of clay sealings and their associated texts (40–52), Bagnall finds "a combination of public, semi-public and private repositories of contracts distributed across the eastern Mediterranean world" and traces "some degree of unification of habit" back to the Persian and Assyrian empires. He suggests here, as elsewhere, that scholars need to integrate the reasonably well preserved documentation from Ptolemaic Egypt (275 to 30 BCE) "into the broader picture of the Greek world of this era" (52–53).

Excavations yield primarily inscribed papyri that were thrown out in dumps in antiquity or were discarded on the spot as a kind of "habitation debris." Documents deemed important by their owners normally show up in neither. Such documents do show up in troves. Troves commonly contain important family papers (e.g., deeds of property, records of ownership and obligations, records of litigation concerning property rights) that families specially safeguarded in jars, boxes, or protective wrappings. Cartonnage, given that it was advantageous for paper-recycling dealers in antiquity to acquire used papyrus in bulk, often comes from large archives and contains inscribed documents that we would deem archival.

Throughout, Bagnall makes use of helpful tables that lay out trends in documentation through time. For Ptolemaic Greek and demotic papyrus records, he proves that "it is inherently unlikely that the extreme lumpiness of the data reflects reality," for example, "that letter-writing or contracts went in and out of fashion; that sometimes people got tax receipts and sometimes they did not" (35). Our documentary evidence for slaves through time is seriously distorted by the single archive of an individual named Zenon, "one of the financially successful Greeks of [Ptolemaic] Egypt." But we can use the Zenon archive as "a reasonable guide to the concerns, values, and activities of the Greek elite" (57).

The Zenon archive, then, is not “an entirely exceptional aberration” (61). But it is another good example of Bagnall’s essential lesson, a lesson that we can apply in studying everyday uses of writing from any time and place: “It is not only arguments from silence that are suspect, but arguments from scarcity or abundance” (141).

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