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Review of Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History, by Roger S. Bagnall

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Roger S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. viii + 145, 8 plates. \$55.00. ISBN 0-415-09376-7 (hb). \$15.95. ISBN 0-415-09377-5 (pb).

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This recent addition to a series on sources and methods in ancient history deals with papyri. Few are as well qualified to write such a book as Roger Bagnall, who is well known both as a historian and as an editor of papyri. Bagnall aims his work at historians who are not themselves papyrologists, but who have occasion to use papyrological texts in their work. Although he presents a fair amount of background material along the way, this is not an introduction to papyrology as such. Those seeking such an introduction should turn rather to the works of Turner and Pestman.¹

A brief introduction makes the now obligatory bow to theory and rounds up familiar suspects (e.g., Weber, Bloch, Braudel, Le Roy Ladurie). Bagnall notes the lack of methodological discussion, aside from editorial technique, by papyrologists and the technical demands, philological and palaeographical, which historians must meet to use papyri effectively. It is a shame that he did not digress on the varying traditions in papyrological training (philological vs. historical) and how this has affected the field. One of the most important points in the introduction is the rejection of the still widely held notion that Egypt was always a special case and that evidence from the papyri therefore does not apply outside its boundaries. Bagnall returns to this topic throughout the work and cites a number of instances in which Egyptian circumstances do reflect those of the broader Greco-Roman world.

The first two chapters are largely devoted to background information. In them, readers unfamiliar with the papyri will find a useful, albeit brief, overview of the physical nature of the papyri, their geographical distribution, and the nature of their contents. Among other things, Bagnall outlines the complex linguistic situation in Egypt from Hellenistic times to the Arab conquest and shows how this is reflected in the papyri. His discussion of "who wrote what" provides a typology of documentary texts, as well as some indication of what kind of people wrote them and why. A section on the "survival of papyri" reviews the various ways papyri have come down to us and how this often results in an imbalanced picture. A final cautionary note describes the editorial practice of making conjectural restorations to the texts damaged or lacunose papyri; Bagnall rightly advised users not to place much reliance on these.

The heart of the work consists of four chapters which discuss methods and problems in using papyri as historical evidence. In each of these Bagnall summarizes and comments on interpretations of papyrological evidence by other scholars. In the first of these, "Particular and General," he discusses the interpretation both of individual documents and of groups of related documents. His first example, a study of *UPZ I 148* by Roger Rémondon,² illustrates how context and philological method can be used to extract historical insights from an isolated document. Many of Bagnall's other examples in this chapter are drawn from the more famous archives of documents, such as those of Nemesion, Dioscouros of Aphrodito, the Tebtunis grapheion, and Heroninos. Bagnall describes various studies which use these to draw broader conclusions about the social and economic circumstances in Greco-Roman Egypt. The final sections of this chapter deal with combining disparate papyri and integrating the evidence from papyri with that derived from archaeology and epigraphy.

In "Time and Place," the next chapter, Bagnall addresses some common problems in using papyri as historical evidence. One of these is the frequent failure to differentiate between papyri of different places and periods. He presents several cases where stratifying papyrological evidence helped to resolve difficulties with chronological systems and with the titles and functions of various officials. While this might seem obvious, past tendencies to use expressions such as "in the papyri" suggest that it is not. Bagnall here also draws upon the work of several scholars to show that Greco-Roman Egypt was not so different from the rest of the empire as is frequently supposed. One of his examples is a study by Marie Drew-Bear³ which demonstrates that civic institutions characteristic of Hellenistic cities elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean were also present in Hermopolis Magna in Egypt. Another is his review of Jean-Michel Carrié's work on the *vestis collatio* in the later fourth century⁴ which shows Egypt subject to the same taxation policies as the rest of the empire. Bagnall also describes in some detail a study by Bowman and Rathbone⁵ which argues that from the time of Augustus Roman policy was to make Egypt administratively more like the rest of the empire. While Bagnall is largely recounting the work of others here, he makes a useful contribution by assembling the results of these studies, which taken together seriously undermine traditional views on the inapplicability of papyrological evidence to the rest of the empire. The chapter's final section offers some common sense cautions against a now popular assumption that rural conditions in medieval or modern Egypt can be used to extrapolate those of antiquity.

The fifth chapter, "Quantification," examines statistical studies based on papyrological evidence. Bagnall discusses the inherent problems in this approach: incomplete data, lack of random samples, and faulty data (often, incorrectly read numbers). He describes some methods for addressing these problems, such as using and comparing several data sets when possible. Bagnall illustrates the application of these methods to the papyri by reviewing studies of land ownership, textile production, demography, and religious conversion. In the latter two of these, Bagnall describes his own work on census returns and on onomastics and religious conversion.⁶

The final chapters return to broader themes: the types of questions that can and should be asked of the papyri and the future prospects for papyrology. Bagnall correctly describes the traditional approaches as antiquarian. To illustrate other approaches he discusses various studies which use papyrological evidence to supplement literary texts or which employ methods drawn from anthropology. Later he returns to the continuing importance of philology as the indispensable basis of papyrological studies. This remains a central problem in promoting broader use of papyri by ancient historians who lack specialized training in papyrology. Bagnall suggests that papyrologists broaden their horizons to include more non-philological methods (as some have done) and that they collaborate more frequently with historians and other scholars to accomplish this.

Within the confines of this slender book, Bagnall does an excellent job of surveying the kinds of work currently being done on papyri and suggesting how to improve on these. His bibliography is by itself a valuable guide to some of the best recent work in the field. Paradoxically, his book is perhaps most useful to an unintended audience: working papyrologists with philological rather than historical training, who will find it a useful guide to historical and anthropological approaches. It should serve admirably as a supplementary text for papyrology courses. As for historians, Bagnall neatly lays out the possibilities inherent in the papyri, but does not provide the philological wherewithal to accomplish them.

NOTES

1. E. G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1980) and its companion volume, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* (2nd ed., London, 1987) remain the best general introduction to the study of papyrology. P.W. Pestman, *The New Papyrological Primer* (2nd ed., Leiden, 1994) offers practical guidance in actually reading papyri.
2. R. Rémondon, "Problèmes de bilinguisme dans l'Égypte lagide (*UPZ* I, 148)," *Chronique d'Égypte* 39 (1964): 126-146.
3. M. Drew-Bear, "Les athlètes d'Hermoupolis Magna et leur ville au 3e siècle," *Proceedings of the XVIII International Congress of Papyrology* (Athens, 1988): II 229-235.
4. J.-M. Carrié, "Observations sur la fiscalité du IVe siècle pour servir à l'histoire monétaire," *L'"inflazione" nel quarto secolo d.C. Atti dell'incontro di studio Roma 1988* (Istituto Italiano di Numismatica, Studi e Materiali 3, Rome, 1993): 115-154.
5. A.K. Bowman and D. Rathbone, "Cities and Administration in Roman Egypt," *JRS* 82 (1992): 107-127.
6. R.S. Bagnall and B.W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge, 1994) and R.S. Bagnall, "Religious Conversion and Onomastic Change in Early Byzantine Egypt," *BASP* 19 (1982): 105-124.

