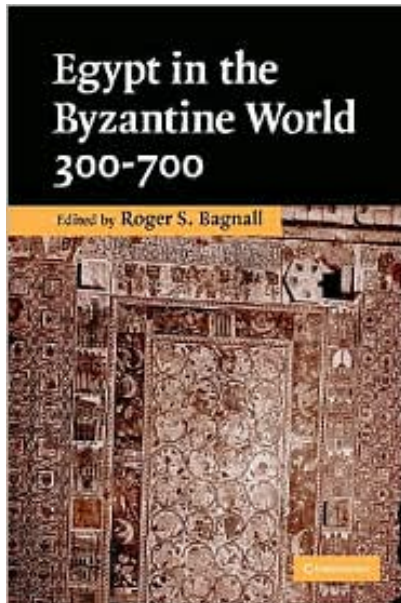


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**Bagnall, Roger S., ed.**

*Egypt in the Byzantine World 300–700*

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Roger Bagnall has done an enormous service to the study of late antique and Byzantine cultures with this volume, based on papers delivered at a Dumbarton Oaks symposium of 2004. It covers an exceptional range of topics, with sections on the “culture of Byzantine Egypt” (literature, architecture, textiles), “Government, Environments, Society, and Economy,” “Christianity: The Church and Monasticism,” and an “Epilogue” on the Islamization of Egypt. Each chapter provides a useful overview of a field, a corpus of documents or sites, or the latest conclusions about some topic, such as monasticism or urban elite, each with its own bibliography. The authors are not only among the best on their subjects but also quite international, including major Polish, German, French, and Italian scholars. Indeed, several of them, such as Françoise Dunand and Ewa Wipszycka, have published only rarely in English, making this volume a special treat for readers unfamiliar with their work.

Bagnall’s own provocative introduction (1–17) frames the larger question motivating the collection: How integrated was Egypt into the economy, culture, and religion of the broader Roman/Byzantine Empires, and how should its distinctive aspects be understood? These are important points (and, in fact, might have merited some concluding observations), but most of the chapters cleave quite closely to their individual

topics and avoid synthetic statements about Egyptian culture, religion, or society in this period.

For the historian of religions, the volume is quite instructive. By the Byzantine period, of course, Christianity had penetrated most aspects of culture. As Rafaele Criboire shows (“Higher Education in Early Byzantine Egypt: Rhetoric, Latin, and the Law,” 47–66), Christian texts had begun to be used in classroom instruction alongside Homer, and classroom exercises had acquired a catechetical style. Likewise, Leslie MacCoull (“Philosophy in Its Social Context,” 67–82) shows the development of a Christian philosophical tradition *between* the late Hellenic philosophical schools and the church with its doctrinal concerns. The Coptic literary tradition, on the other hand, grew not out of some synthesis of traditions but, as Stephen Emmel shows (“Coptic Literature in the Byzantine and Early Islamic world,” 83–102), from an explicitly Christian(/Manichaean) literary culture revolving around the Coptic Bible and culminating in the voluminous sermons (and idiosyncratic style) of the fifth-century abbot Shenoute of Atripe. This is one chapter that admits its prematurity in conclusions, since Shenoute’s huge corpus is still being edited, studied, and interpreted. Yet one might have hoped for some discussion of the similarly voluminous Coptic pseudepigrapha and martyrological writings, many of which (e.g., T. Abraham and T. Job) are still claimed for the study of early Judaism despite their Byzantine-era manuscripts.

Ewa Wipszycka (“The Institutional Church,” 331–49) reviews papyrological evidence for the character of the church in society, from the cultural status of bishops and clergy to the development of parallel Chalcedonian and monophysite church networks in many areas. The great number of churches in some towns reflect local forms of patronage, while bishop appointments often come from the élite. Arietta Papaconstantinou (“The Cult of Saints: A Haven of Continuity in a Changing World?” 350–67) provides a digest of her extraordinary 2001 study *Le culte des saints en Égypte des byzantins aux abbasides* (Paris: CNRS; reviewed by this author in *BASP* 39 [2002]: 205–13), which opened windows on popular saint veneration inaccessible from their hagiographies. Saint cults, Papaconstantinou shows, rise over the fifth century as an expression of regional identity, and they are celebrated in festivals, processions, and even oracle cults, their multiplicity (even in a single city) integrated ceremonially through stational processions. In the sixth century, however, the activities of the saint cults shift to the grounds of monasteries. Peter Grossmann’s broad-ranging (and wonderfully illustrated) survey of “Early Christian Architecture in Egypt and Its Relationship to the Architecture of the Byzantine World” (103–36) extends well beyond church and monastic buildings (which were quite distinctive to Egypt or even particular regions of Egypt) to cover fortresses, baths, and domestic dwellings.

The world of monasticism itself is covered by Darlene Brooks Hedstrom (“Divine Architects: Designing the Monastic Dwelling Place,” 368–89), James Goehring (“Monasticism in Byzantine Egypt: Continuity and Memory,” 390–407), Elizabeth Bolman (“Depicting the Kingdom of Heaven: Paintings and Monastic Practice in Early Byzantine Egypt,” 408–33), and even Terry Wilfong (“Gender and Society in Byzantine Egypt,” 309–27), all of whom convey the very diversity of monastic motivations, ideologies, and practices against past romantic images of austere hermits and regimented desert monasteries. Goehring contrasts the “myth of the desert” in monastic writings with the cultural engagement (and urban settings) evinced in so many monks’ lives. Brooks Hedstrom’s amply illustrated chapter presents the variety of monastic dwellings and their layouts (often to accommodate acolytes and supplicants), as well as monks’ own tendencies to relocate. Bolman looks at the decoration in monks’ dwellings—supposedly spare to avoid distractions. But crosses and saints’ images found in many dwellings, she shows, actually complemented monastic discipline in focusing prayer or visualizing holiness. Wilfong, whose chapter is placed mysteriously at the end of the “Economy” section of the book, asks us to attend more closely to the gender relations, gendered language, and even sexuality emergent in—especially—monastic materials such as letters, sermons, and archaeology. In these environments both gender and sexuality are maintained in some ways, dismantled and reconstructed in others. Wilfong’s essay is the most lucid explanation of “gender studies” to be found anywhere.

Of course, the religious culture of late Roman Egypt was more complex than would appear through monasticism and ecclesiastical letters, as Françoise Dunand’s chapter on the archaeology of mortuary practice makes clear (“Between Tradition and Innovation: Egyptian Funerary Practices in Late Antiquity,” 163–84). Religious affiliation did not, in fact, always dictate how this final and most critical of social passages was addressed: mummification, for example, was employed broadly for Christians as well as traditional folk. Dunand gives us an area of culture in which pre-Christian ritual continuities are indisputable even while our models for *understanding* those continuities lack nuance. Efforts to make sense of such religiously fluid zones by juxtaposing “Christian” and “pagan,” like Alan Cameron’s “Poets and Pagans in Byzantine Egypt” (21–46) and Zsolt Kiss’s “Alexandria in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries” (187–206), get predictably hung up on the meaning of “pagan”: a religion? a type of practice? a religious affiliation? a cultural tradition? a form of nostalgia? What makes a “serious pagan” different from a “secular pagan” or a “genuine pagan” or a “crypto-pagan”? A term that allows perpetual oscillation among all these various meanings is not a term that produces good history, and Cameron’s rambling essay on “pagan resistance,” from Nonnos of Panopolis to the Isis shrine in fifth-century Menouthis, ends up a poor postscript to his landmark 1965 essay “Wandering Poets: A Literary Movement in Byzantine Egypt” (*Historia* 14:470–

509). Kiss offers a simple chronology of Alexandria that likewise is challenged to integrate, with a rigid “pagan/Christian” dichotomy, the many examples of classical Hellenic culture—statuary, ivory—that he shows were preserved in Byzantine-era dwellings. In contrast, the diverse Byzantine textiles found in Egypt, often with classical Hellenic themes, lead Thelma Thomas (“Coptic and Byzantine Textiles Found in Egypt: Corpora, Collections, and Scholarly Perspectives,” 137–62) to a discussion of workshops and Mediterranean influences, thus avoiding simplistic dichotomies with a focus on creative worlds (the same is now achieved for stonework and other media in László Kákosy’s monumental *Transfigurations of Hellenism: Aspects of Late Antique Art in Egypt* [Leiden: Brill, 2005]).

The other chapters address features of administrative, legal, and economic life in Byzantine Egypt: Peter Van Minnen, “The Other Cities in Later Roman Egypt” (207–25), James Keenan, “Byzantine Egyptian Villages” (226–43), Bernhard Palme, “The Imperial Presence: Government and Army” (244–70), Joëlle Beaucamp, “Byzantine Egypt and Imperial Law” (271–87), and Todd Hickey, “Aristocratic Landholding and the Economy of Byzantine Egypt” (288–308). Palme notes the function of some military garrisons as local police forces, while Beaucamp finds evidence for the preservation of local legal conventions (regarding wife-abduction, for example) despite imperial decrees to the contrary. Petra Sijpestijn’s concluding chapter on “The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Beginning of Muslim Rule” (437–59) likewise focuses on the administrative and economic features of Arab rule, which only slowly brought the Egyptian populace to Islam through—apparently—tax incentives.

The volume’s special attention to economic and administrative features of Byzantine Egypt is only partially excused by the predilections of the papyrological record. Bagnall has made a great effort to include monastic culture as well, but there remain significant gaps in coverage of public culture (festivals, spectacles, etc.), domestic culture, and such important late antique arts as mosaics, stonecarving, and iconography. Of course, these kinds of complaints will be inevitable. In the end, *Egypt in the Byzantine World* offers an unparalleled collection of survey articles and thus a vital reference source for any library.