

Talking back to the emperor

Roger S. Bagnall

ANDREW HARKER, *LOYALTY AND DISSIDENCE IN ROMAN EGYPT: THE CASE OF THE ACTA ALEXANDRINORUM* (Cambridge University Press 2008). Pp. vi + 256. ISBN 978-0-521-887892. \$99.

As so often, the subject of this book is in its subtitle; the title gives the thematic context within which the subject is explored. The term *Acta Alexandrinorum* is commonly used for a group of about 40 papyrus texts recounting trials of Alexandrian notables before various Roman emperors, with Gaius and Claudius the most commonly featured. The nature of the texts has been debated ever since the first such papyri came to light in the late 19th c., and they have attracted attention particularly because some of them have passages in which speakers denigrate the Jews of Alexandria or in which persons known from the other accounts of the Alexandrian Jewish troubles of the 1st c. A.D. figure as characters. A. Harker's book offers a welcome re-assessment of the genre from the point of view of the history of Roman Egypt and the culture of the Greek upper class of the Imperial period.¹ It does not attempt to replace H. Musurillo's corpus, now more than a half-century old,² but it does include an appendix (179-211) listing the *Acta* and what Harker calls "*Acta Alexandrinorum* related literature", the two forming together what he calls "*Acta Alexandrinorum* literature". The appendix does not, unfortunately, tell the reader to which category Harker assigns each piece, nor does it give the number for a given text in the Leuven Database of Ancient Books, for those items that the LDAB includes as literary.³ Separate lists would have been more helpful to the reader.

The distinction between categories is in fact important to Harker's argument, which is pursued through 6 chapters: 1. Introduction; 2. The embassies to Gaius and Claudius; 3. The *Acta Alexandrinorum*: Augustus to the Severans; 4. The *Acta Alexandrinorum*: The historical background; 5. Between loyalty and dissent: the *Acta Alexandrinorum* and contemporary literature; and 6. Conclusion. What Harker sets out to do is to contextualize the *Acta* in three ways: the historical setting that most of them adopt; the documentary format and (as he argues) basis of the *Acta*; and the larger intellectual and literary context of texts like the *Acta*. The first two contexts seem to me to be in tension with the third.

The introduction, apart from setting out the distinction mentioned above, gives a brief sketch of the nature of the papyrological evidence, with a description of Harker's approach to restorations (3):

Due to the poor physical state of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* literature, supplements have to be used. My method has been to use only the generally accepted supplements in this study. But I have tried to avoid being overly cautious.

The only actual evidence is the surviving text; restorations are only evidence for the editor's interpretation. The capsule summary of relations between what Harker terms "*Alexandria ad Aegyptum*" (5) and Rome, and between the Alexandrians and the Jewish population of Alexandria, is also unsettling at times.⁴ We are told that a re-appraisal of the *Acta* is needed, the reason for which seems to be the passage of time. There are in fact other and better reasons,

- 1 The book originated in a London dissertation directed by D. Rathbone. Curiously the book has no preface or acknowledgments and does not record this fact or anything else about its own history.
- 2 H. A. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs: Acta Alexandrinorum* (Oxford 1954).
- 3 There is also no concordance to publications, making cross-checking difficult.
- 4 E.g., p. 5, where we are told that Alexandrian citizens were exempt from the *laographia* (poll-tax) "which was levelled [sic] on all other inhabitants of the province", forgetting the citizens of Naukratis and Ptolemais, who were also exempt. The claim (6) that there had been a "long history of poor relations between the Greeks and the large Jewish community resident in Alexandria" elides significant scholarly controversy about just how long that history really was. See W. Ameling, "Market-place' und Gewalt: Die Juden in Alexandria 38 n.Chr.," *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft*, N.F. 27 (2003) 71-123, arguing for a much more contingent view of the events of 38-41.

the most important of which is that the interval since Musurillo's edition has witnessed a revolution in scholarly approaches to the culture of the Greek East under Roman rule. Some of this literature, going back to G. W. Bowersock's classic *Augustus and the Greek world* (Oxford 1965), is cited in chapt. 5 and influences Harker's discussion there. There has also been, as Harker rightly notes, a stream of new fragments of the *Acta* to nourish the discussion.

Broadly speaking, the attempt to anchor the *Acta* in their historical and documentary setting seems to me less successful than the analysis of their literary context. It would be unfair to blame the author for that fact, because the literature on these texts has been dominated by their supposed connections to the historical events of A.D. 38-41, to which chapt. 2 is devoted. The other sources for these events are extremely tendentious, and the attempt made here to reconstruct the events is vulnerable to the partisan nature of the surviving accounts, particularly in Philo and Josephus. It would have been helpful to have a more explicit statement of method here, because a straightforward reconstruction based on assuming the good faith of all of the writers is not likely to yield good results. For example, the treatment of "documents" cited by Josephus wavers between seeing them as real but edited and recognizing them as forgeries. In the other direction, the discussion of the status of the copy of Claudius' letter to the Alexandrians preserved in *P.Lond.* VI 1912, as part of the papers of the tax-collector Nemesion (from Philadelphia in the Fayyum) tends to assign to Nemesion a kind of agency in editing the text for which there is no basis. We know nothing at all about how the text came to be in the form in which it was copied by Nemesion.

Chapter 3 tries to sort out the character of the "*Acta Alexandrinorum* literature" in all its variety. Harker sees a range of textual types from documentary to literary, with some documentary texts having a literary flavor and many literary texts adopting documentary traits. At the documentary end, as he sees it, are the many copies of imperial or prefectorial letters and edicts; he cites, for example, *SB* XII 11012, the letter of Nero to Ptolemais Euergetis in the Fayyum confirming the privileges of its hereditary Greek-settler class. He wonders (49) why some of these texts exist:

It is more difficult to explain the presence of imperial letters to Alexandria in the *chora*. Although some may have belonged to Alexandrian citizens living in the *chora*, others were the possessions of native Egyptians who were interested in events in Alexandria and were not reading them simply for practical purposes.

How does he know? This assessment does not in my view adequately take account of the importance of imperial letters for citation in court, for example, although Harker is well aware of the value of such texts in legal contexts. (Why he thinks the number of preserved imperial rescripts is too large to be accounted for by their having been collected in view of litigation, I do not know.) There is a bizarre suggestion (55) that a letter of Elagabalus preserved in an official roll in the Boubastite nome in the Delta was "for the *strategos*' entertainment". That is not why official records tended to be created and maintained.

Throughout this chapter Harker wrestles with the boundary between literary and documentary texts, leaning strongly toward seeing it as porous. It is true that today most papyrologists do not see this distinction as being as neat as it has generally been taken to be in the past. A verse of Euripides copied by a schoolboy is not a "literary" text in the same sense that a book roll containing a play is. A highly rhetorical draft of a petition is not the same sort of document that a lease of land is. Horoscopes and questions to oracles are texts of everyday life but not "documents" in any legal or official sense. The binary classification is no longer viable, even if most of our research tools are still founded on this kind of division — as, for example, in the limits on what is included in the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri.

But that does not mean that it is impossible to distinguish between copies from the official archives of the minutes of a real trial, on the one hand, and a fictional scene written in courtroom style, on the other. Harker's sense of documentary character does not seem well developed; for example, he does not cite any of the recent literature about petitions, which are

no less documentary for having a strongly literary flavor.⁵ He expresses the view (63) that "it is unlikely that a large, excited crowd would cry out the same thing all in unison for a scribe to record neatly in the text". The ancients did not agree with this opinion. Acclamations are routinely recorded in official minutes of all sorts of bodies, ranging from the council of Oxyrhynchos (*P.Oxy.* XVII 2110: "The senators cried, 'What is on the tablet is valid: what has been rightly ordained must not be infringed'") to the Roman Senate (e.g., the series of acclamations in the minutes of the meeting at which the *CTh* was approved; see Pharr's translation pp. 5-7).

It is this lack of clarity about the nature of documents and their distinctions from literary texts that leads to the somewhat contradictory conclusion (98) that the *Acta Alexandrinorum*

developed from a documentary foundation, with writers adding their own personal touches to the texts and making further editorial amendments which modified the stories to agree with their personal sympathies, usually the cause of the unsuccessful Alexandrians. The writers of some stories however may have retained the format of what had become an established and popular genre, but not necessarily the documentary foundation.

The fact that these stories adopted a courtroom style is no more significant for an origin in genuine documentary archives (which Harker believes to have been constituted by reports brought home by Alexandrian ambassadors who were not executed) than are courtroom scenes in modern novels. The one presupposes the existence of the other, but the existence of the real in no way provides evidence that the fictional is a reworking of the real.

Chapter 4 continues with some of the same issues, framed in a historical background. Thus (100)

The problem therefore becomes one of accessibility, and whether the assumption that emperors would allow copies of their own records to be taken by either the victorious or the aggrieved party is plausible.

This view is not Harker's invention, to be sure:

The general consensus, as argued by Musurillo, is that the *Acta Alexandrinorum* stories were based on the official trial minutes stored in Rome, which were reworked to a greater or lesser extent by later writers.

But Harker tries to salvage even the rudeness of the Alexandrians, based on an inscription from Dmeir, in which an advocate objects to imperial jurisdiction. That is not persuasive; the personal abuse characteristic of the Alexandrian texts is not present in the inscription. No more convincing is the citation of the Aphrodisias imperial dossier. These were public texts, not records of criminal trials. All of this leads to (111):

The writers of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* proper would have found the outline of the proceedings of their embassies in Rome archived in their city records, and undoubtedly breathed fresh life into them, as other ancient authors did. The extent to which the writers rehydrated the accounts that they found is shown both in the numerous contradictions in the stories and in their narrative elements.

[Lexicographers take note: this may be the first use of "rehydrate" to mean "fictionalize". Its author's fondness for the metaphor is reflected in its re-appearance on 176.]

Much more persuasive is the section on readership (112-19), adducing the cases of the learned Karanis tax-collector Sokrates, as well as the earlier Nemesion. The find pattern of the *Acta* fragments makes it clear that their readership was not in any way tied to Alexandrian residence or citizenship; rather, individuals of Greek culture but legally of Egyptian status, living in the metropoleis or even villages, could and did own and read these works (119):

Reading stories containing positive descriptions of Alexandria and its heroic citizens was a vehicle for socially ambitious Egyptians to lay a claim on a Greek identity which subsequently allowed them to gain status and prominence in their local communities.

Harker proceeds to canvass a variety of other contemporary texts suggesting dissidence, like mimes, oracular texts, and prophecies, and the slender evidence that texts like the *Acta* existed for cities other than Alexandria.

5 See particularly D. Feissel and J. Gascou (edd.), *La pétition à Byzance* (Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, Monographies 14, Paris 2004), especially the article of J.-L. Fournet, "Entre document et littérature: la pétition dans l'Antiquité tardive," 61-74.

He then turns to the important observation that the surviving fragments of this literature are heavily of the Severan period, and that none is much later than that date. Why does this genre disappear in the second half of the 3rd c.? His conclusion (139-40), is:

I believe that the reasons for the decline of the *Acta Alexandrinorum* literature lie more in the social, administrative and legal initiatives passed in the Severan period.

By this he refers to the introduction of municipal councils, the Antonine Constitution, the rise of Christianity in the mid-3rd c. and beyond, and the competition from Christian martyr acts. I do not find this very persuasive in detail. Christian martyrologies were not in wide circulation this early,⁶ and, if anything, the introduction of the city councils should have spurred an interest in literature read by Egyptians with upward aspirations. Indeed, the chronological pattern is entirely consistent with a view that the Severan changes helped increase the readership of the *Acta*. The disappearance of these texts from the Fayyum villages is readily explained by the archaeology of papyrus finds there. The real question is: Why do we not continue to get them at Oxyrhynchus, which dominates our 3rd-c. papyrus documentation?

Chapter 5 provides, as I have indicated, a very different kind of context, one formed by the Greek literature of the Roman period. Harker enumerates a wide variety of texts in which resistance to tyranny, trial scenes, tales of resistant suicide, anecdotes of confrontations with emperors and kings, and other forms of something less than full support of the imperial system are portrayed. Jewish and Christian texts follow in the path broken by their predecessors. The lives of philosophers are a particularly fertile source of anecdotes, as in the case of Apollonius of Tyana. Harker sees strong similarities, even direct verbal links, between the earliest Christian acts and those in the *Acta Alexandrinorum*. There is not enough evidence to show literary dependence, he thinks, but they were mutually influential. It is not obvious, however, how this influence can have worked if it is true that no one was still reading the *Acta* when the Christian acts began to be composed in quantity.

Generally speaking, Harker argues, the Second Sophistic and Greek thought of the High Imperial period is full of criticism of Rome and of emperors, embedded in works that also express acceptance and even loyalty. A sense of Greece as enslaved because of its own failings and a depiction of specific emperors as tyrannical or at least flawed are both commonplace. The thematic material of this literature thus often reflects the same general outlook as the *Acta Alexandrinorum*.

If this book helps to bring the *Acta Alexandrinorum* into the wider discussion of the imaginative literature through which these themes were worked out in the first three centuries of the Roman Empire, it will have served an important purpose. As I have indicated, I do not find the case that this literature was closely tied either to historical events or to documentary archives to be very compelling. But this was an approach that Harker inherited from earlier scholarship and, to the extent that he has wrestled in great detail with the implications of this approach, he has also performed the useful service of showing its limits and just why his more original deflection of the study in a literary and cultural direction has a great deal of merit. We may hope that it will encourage more work in this vein.

roger.bagnall@nyu.edu Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University

⁶ Harker himself takes a different tack in the next chapter: "However, the Christian acts did not displace the *Acta Alexandrinorum*. By the time Christianity became established in Alexandria, the late third-early fourth century, the *Acta Alexandrinorum* were already defunct" (161).