

From Hermopolis to Antioch in business class

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JOHN MATTHEWS, *THE JOURNEY OF THEOPHANES. TRAVEL, BUSINESS AND DAILY LIFE IN THE ROMAN EAST* (Yale University Press, New Haven 2006). Pp. xvii + 244, figs. 30, maps 3. ISBN 978-0-300-10898-9. \$60.

The archive of Theophanes, *scholasticus* of Hermopolis in the first quarter of the 4th c. A.D., has long deserved more attention. The original publications were short on historical commentary and, in the case of the accounts, lacking in translations to make them widely accessible. The letters, which have considerable interest for the religious environment in the period just before Constantine's victory over Licinius, received a detailed treatment by A. Moscardi long ago,¹ but the accounts have been largely unexploited except as a quarry for details. Now they have their own study, this lively and enjoyable book by J. F. Matthews.

Despite the letters, Theophanes is hardly a real figure to us apart from the journey to Antioch, probably undertaken in 322 or 323, the daily expenses of which are recorded in detail in the Rylands papyri that form the basis of this book. Although some of the accounts in question are incomplete, the pattern of spending is consistent enough that it is possible to reconstruct some aspects of the journey with confidence; others escape us entirely, by not generating an expense that could be recorded in the ledger by Theophanes' clerk. There are no letters written from Antioch to help fill in the local colour or the events of Theophanes' stay there, on a mission that seems destined to remain unknown to us. Matthews speculates that it was not in his official capacity on the staff of an imperial official (perhaps the *katholikos*) that Theophanes travelled (he was not entitled to an expense allowance, it seems, although he moved by the public post), but defending the interests of his home city or province in some matter. That may be, but it is only a speculation based on one remark in a letter of introduction, and the explanation of that remark could be something different.

We have, therefore, a kind of archetypal situation for the historian using papyri: an intense light shed on a limited subject, with deep shadows all around it. The fact that most of the action takes place outside the boundaries of Egypt may help make the information of these accounts less specifically Egyptian than what we find in most papyri, and Matthews argues in the introduction (chapt. 1) that this helps the archive meet the test of typicality. He recognizes, however, that in reality it poses the question in a different fashion, and typicality is in general probably a red herring. Theophanes was undoubtedly anything but typical of most travellers, with his access to the *cursus publicus* (which cost him nothing, it seems) for himself and his substantial entourage. Then as now, it was better to be in business class. But Matthews is surely right in asserting that the journey, and travel in general, were commonplace. Travel was slow, difficult, and expensive by modern standards, but ancient people did not judge it by these standards, and if they needed to travel they did so. Modern scholars usually overestimate the effectiveness of barriers to travel and transport in antiquity, especially by land.

The methodological problem remains: how can one make the microhistorical details of something more than antiquarian interest? Matthews' implicit answer is to interleave the chapters devoted to Theophanes' accounts (3, "The road to Antioch"; 5, "At Antioch"; 6, "Homeward bound") with others that sketch a context. Chapter 2 is devoted to Hermopolis, his home and starting point, chapter 4 to "Travel and topography", particularly of Antioch. But these can only with difficulty be connected in any significant fashion with the trip itself, a problem pointed out by R. J. A. Talbert in his review (*BMCR* 2007.02.31). Talbert remarks on

1 "Le lettere dell'archivio di Teofane," *Aegyptus* 50 (1970) 88-154. See now M. Choat, *Belief and cult in fourth-century papyri* (Macquarie University 2006), who discusses Theophanes at various points, especially 90-94, arguing that "If the letters are assessed on their own merits, rather than placed in the context of the archive, it is difficult not to accept *P.Herm.* 4 as Christian, possibly too *P.Herm.* 5" (by "Christian", he means that Christians appear in them). He is more sceptical about *P.Herm.* 6. Matthews' comments on p. 30 could use modification in light of Choat's careful analysis.

"Theophanes' own sheer elusiveness", a frustrating characteristic that makes a direct connection between the orderly world of the accounts and the context (more successfully sketched in the case of Antioch than of Hermopolis²) almost impossible to detect. Talbert reacts to this by suspecting Theophanes of being "on the whole ... rather a dull cove" who does little that we can identify to fill the long leisure hours when he could not be working on the case (whatever it was) that brought him to Antioch. That is probably overinterpretation, the result of desire to have more than the documents will give us. We cannot reconstruct Theophanes as a whole person.

The journey, including the stay in Antioch, is presented in a straightforward fashion. Matthews has provided a translation of the text (Appendix 2 gives a long list of notes on the reading, restoration, and interpretation of the accounts, serving as a basis for the translation) for each segment, preceded by a synthesis of the contents and a reconstruction of the itinerary and stay. He persuasively assigns (against C. H. Roberts' text but in accordance with his better instincts) *P.Ryl.* 639 to the earlier part of the stay in Antioch. Not all of the accounts survive in a final fair copy, and Matthews has had to do a good amount of work to pull the data together. He sees much of *P.Ryl.* 627 as referring to a household, not to travel baggage; that lightens Theophanes' burdens considerably (Matthews discusses this papyrus in Appendix 1), but the entourage was still substantial, probably at least 10 on the outward journey, he thinks (see further below).³

Even if the book contained nothing else, the translations of the accounts would be an important contribution to making this material available. In the sample that I checked, Matthews' notes to the text were sensible, his description of the state of the papyrus in accordance with the edition, and the translation accurate. It is regrettable that the reader does not have access to images of most of the papyrus; those in the book are for illustration rather than verification, and only a bit of *P.Ryl.* 637 is illustrated. The John Rylands University Library has, however, begun digitization of its papyrus collection, and we may hope that the Theophanes accounts will soon be available online (see <http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/insight/papyrus.htm>; two Theophanes papyri are online, but not any of the accounts). It is therefore impossible to judge the soundness of Matthews' own suggestions for the text without visiting Manchester (the library in Deansgate reopened in May, 2007) or ordering photographs. But this is presumably a temporary problem, and we owe Matthews enormous thanks for making available a good translation, with quite a number of original suggestions for interpretation.

The analytic meat of the book lies in chaps. 7 and 8, in the first of which Matthews analyzes the amounts that Theophanes' staff paid for various goods, compares them to prices known for these goods in the *Edict of Maximum Prices* a little over 20 years before, and tries to recon-

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- 2 In part, this is a function of Matthews' greater knowledge of Antioch, in part of his dependence for Hermopolis on D. Frankfurter's *Religion in Roman Egypt* (Princeton 1998), on which see the encomium at 17 n.13. Unfortunately, this leads him to reproduce from Frankfurter statements that are misrepresentations of evidence, without having troubled to verify them. One of the most striking examples is the claim (19) that "At Oxyrhynchus, there is evidence ... for a ritual dinner, or 'symposium', ... as late as 462". This is based on Frankfurter's statement (122) that the Thoëron of Oxyrhynchus was still active in 462, "when a symposium is to be held in it. The space evidently continued to maintain at least some holiness. The Thoëron had been the site of ritual dinners through the third century, so a symposium may not have constituted a break with the temple's ritual tradition". This in turn was evidently borrowed, without verification, from J. Quaegebeur, W. Clarysse and B. van Maele, "Athena, Neith and Thoëris in Greek documents," *ZPE* 60 (1985) 225, which Frankfurter cites. In reality, the document in question (*PSI* III 175) is a lease of a *symposion* in a house located in the sanctuary of Thoëris for an indefinite period on a monthly basis. A *symposion* in such a context simply refers to a room in a house, often used for habitation but sometimes for other purposes; see G. Husson, *OIKIA* (Paris 1983) 267-71. The lease provides no information about the intended use of this room, and there is no basis for the assertion that a "symposium" was to be held in it. References to sections of cities by the names of temples located there are *not* evidence for the continued activity of those temples.
- 3 How many clerks it included is hard to say; Matthews does recognize (49) that the accounts speak with the voice of a clerk, not of Theophanes himself.

struct the amounts purchased for the prices given (something only occasionally indicated directly in the accounts). He argues that the prevailing commodity prices at the time of the journey were on average about 5 times those at the time of the *Edict*, with about 4 to 7 times at the extremes. This seems roughly correct, although in most of the Egyptian evidence bulk commodities seem to me to have risen more like 4 than like 7 times. But price evidence is very scanty from the early 320s, so the kind of range used by Matthews seems reasonable enough. Applying this rule of thumb and the plausible conviction that the quantities in which goods are tarified in the *Edict* reflected normal selling practices, he is able to give the accounts a much more usable quantitative character than they ever had before; they had seemed just one more example of the exasperating character of accounts on papyrus, which rarely tell us all of the information we need to evaluate the value of the data. Matthews has dispelled this despair. Probably not every conclusion is correct, but mostly they ring true. This is a major advance.

In chapt. 8 he sets out to evaluate the size of the travelling party and then considers the quality and quantity of its diet, though he concentrates mostly on a qualitative description. Theophanes comes across as a very Roman eater; he may never have touched garlic and onions the whole time, as they are bought in tiny amounts and may well have been eaten only by his slaves. The diet of the slaves is hard to discern, as we can only roughly tell what of the purchases were intended just for Theophanes and his *côterie*, what for everyone, and what only for the slaves. Only with the distinction of fine bread and common bread can we be confident, generally speaking. The accounts make it easily possible to tell what was bought every day (or almost so), what was bought less frequently but probably consumed every day, and what was more episodic or rare. The overall picture is very Mediterranean, rather than N European, which is rather reassuring.

One thing Matthews does not try to do, in these chapters or in the appendixes, is to calculate the total caloric intake of the group as a control on our estimates of the group's size.⁴ This is an exercise with many hazards, even after the work Matthews has done on estimating quantities purchased for the sums expended. But it seems to me worth trying, and I calculated the quantities of edibles purchased during the three-week period Pauni 5 to 25 during the stay in Antioch. I then converted these quantities to kilocalories, using values from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's web site.⁵ The result was that the total daily caloric value of the purchases, averaged over the 21 days, was 18,386. No doubt one will want to allow a margin of error, perhaps of 5-10%.⁶ On my estimate, about 64% of the calories come from bread, a fact that puts into perspective the large range of foods purchased. Slightly less than 7.5% comes from meat, sausage, cheese, and fish (both fresh and pickled). Olive oil accounts for 8%, wine and vermouth for 4%. Eggs provide 3% of calories. That leaves just 13.5% of calories for vegetables, fruits, nuts, and other goods.

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- 4 I may note that the description of Horos son of Bellos (164) is puzzling. Matthews takes it for granted that he is a slave, suggesting that "the patronymic may distinguish him from other servants called Horos and may even identify him as a homebred slave, or *vernula*, of Theophanes' household." Slaves did not have patronymics: see my "Freedmen and freedwomen with fathers?" *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 21 (1991) 7-8. Even though these accounts are not legal documents, there is no reason to suggest that someone with a patronymic is a slave. I have not seen a single instance in which it can be shown that this occurs. Why Aoros is described (166) as bearing an Egyptian name, I do not understand.
- 5 At [http://199.133.10.140/codesearchwebapp/\(awhfa3e125fbmx55ywklnf45\)/codesearch.aspx](http://199.133.10.140/codesearchwebapp/(awhfa3e125fbmx55ywklnf45)/codesearch.aspx). Two foods, anchovies and grits, purchased once each by Theophanes' staff were omitted, as there is no basis for judging the quantity. There were a few cases where we do not know the identity of a vegetable, and a few approximations have been introduced along the way.
- 6 I suspect that the figure is more likely to be an overestimate than underestimate. The reason is that modern American produce, grown with fertilizers and usually abundant water, is likely to be larger and more caloric than ancient. Errors of measurement and computation are likely to be immaterial in the aggregate. None of this probably adds up to very much. The chief uncertainty is how much was purchased with the amount stated; but our evidence is best for the foods that produced most of the calories, so the effect even here is probably fairly modest.

Those calories do not seem likely to have supported quite as large a group as those supposed by both Matthews and Talbert to have accompanied Theophanes. Matthews suggests that, apart from the senior staff (Eudaimon, Silvanus the *phrontistes*, and Eudaimon), plus the *cursor* Hermes, there must also have been a chef, a personal attendant for each of the senior staff and two for Theophanes, plus "a similar number of general slave attendants". That would give us about 13 or, even if general attendants were the same as the personal attendants, about 11. It is unlikely that the party subsisted on the 1,671 calories per day each available for a group of 11 (with substantially less for the slaves, one would imagine, since it is unlikely that the "executive staff" ate as few calories as the slaves did). Matthews has indeed noticed that the consumption levels in Pauni seem lower than earlier. He writes (93),

The explanation for the decline in expenditure must be a reduction in the number of people to be entertained. This might be either because groups that had been accustomed to eat together began for some reason to eat separately, or because of the departure of some of the people who had initially accompanied Theophanes to Antioch or who attended him there in the earlier period. In either case, the decreased consumption of both fine and common bread shows that the reduction in the size of the party was a reduction in the number of both free men and slave attendants.

It is likely, of course, that the slaves received a higher percentage of their total calories from bread than did the free men. One might hazard a guess that during this period in Antioch the party consisted of only 3 free men and 5 slaves. That would allow about 2,300 calories per day per person (less whatever was fed to guests, net of meals one enjoyed at the expense of others). That may not be precisely right, but it does suggest that, once he was settled, Theophanes did not maintain as large a party as on the road. It seems to indicate that the party cannot have been still larger, and an extension of this kind of analysis to other parts of the accounts might be worthwhile.

This book is, among other things, a striking example of the kind of value that non-papyrologists can extract from papyrus documents, and it is unusual in that Matthews went to the length of improving the text. It should stimulate further work on these accounts by virtue of its contributions to the text, the translations, and the analytic work done on goods and prices. As Talbert said, "it is, after all, largely a cookhouse-eyeview of the unnamed master's journey to Antioch and back that has endured", and there is surely more to be done in looking at what travel was like for the rest of the party, who travelled via *cursus publicus* but ate economy-class food. But we owe it to Matthews that this inquiry will now be able to be conducted on a sound footing.

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