

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The City in Roman and Byzantine Egypt* by Richard Alston

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Haas also overlooks the ideological implications and intertextual and rhetorical aspects of his sources, especially the role of literary *topoi*, which are so important in ancient sources, taking many texts at face value, and thus constructing what I would regard as a biased picture of late antique Alexandria. One of his contentions is that communal identities were more rigid and boundaries more sharply defined in Alexandria than in other late antique cities. He explains this by 'a particular set of local circumstances', such as 'long-standing hostility between Greeks and Jews', or the fact that 'the persecution of Christianity was particularly fierce in Alexandria' in the third and early fourth centuries (pp. 335–6). Most of his sources, contemporary or not, were strongly influenced by religion, and thus tend to present the communities as much more strictly defined, and in more competitive terms than was really the case. Ewa Wipszycka, whose work is strikingly little used here, has shown how accounts of hatred between Greeks and Copts were biased and late—in fact, a myth created in anti-Chalcedonian circles after the Arab conquest.

Haas's attempt to 'examine one of Alexandria's most important inhabitants—the Christian layman' (p. 190)—suffers from yet another defect: the tendency to 'imagine' what he does not know or cannot infer from his sources. The section in Chapter Six entitled 'The Christians of House D' starts with a quotation of the closing lines of the liturgy of St Mark. Haas then proceeds to describe how the crowd returned slowly to their homes, as an introduction to the description of a 'typical' house in the Kom el-Dikka neighbourhood. Passages such as the following (p. 191) are worth quoting:

[Our Christian] proceeds through the Agora and pauses to see if any new laws that might affect his family or his business are posted. He passes quickly by the imposing statues arrayed outside the Tychaion, and he recalls rumours he had heard recently that the statues (under the influence of evil demons) had spoken to terrified witnesses in the dead of night, announcing the sudden death of the emperor Maurice. After making the sign of the cross, he hurries on.

He soon strolls along two large blocks of the Via Canopica until he turns south into his own neighbourhood. As he does so, he utters a short prayer, repeating a portion of the Anaphora of the service he had just attended.

This sort of narration may have the advantage of making the topography and ordinary religious practice come to life, but it also includes a number of choices and interpretations. How much an 'ordinary Christian' would have heard of the rumours mentioned by Theophylact Simocatta (*Hist.* 8.13.7–14), whether he was literate, or whether 'a portion of the Anaphora' was the most typical prayer uttered by people to obtain divine protection for their neighbourhoods—in fact, whether they uttered such prayers at all—are questions that deserve at least a short discussion. As Haas concedes, the life of 'the rank-and-file members' of the city's communities is a 'particularly elusive subject', and this is not only true for Alexandria, as he seems to believe. There is a great amount of scholarly literature on the difficulty of access for historians to the realities of ordinary people, and one would have welcomed at this point a discussion of these problems rather than an elegant, narrative *tour de force* filling the void.

It is a pity that after collecting such an amount of evidence, for which one is naturally grateful, Haas did not manage to exploit it successfully, either on the 'erudite' side, or in the more conceptual aspects, which lack serious construction. His book will remain essential as a source of general information until a new monograph appears, but will not radically alter our vision of fourth- and fifth-century events, or of Alexandrian topography.

ARIETTA PAPACONSTANTINO

The City in Roman and Byzantine Egypt. By RICHARD ALSTON. Pp. xvi + 479. London and New York, Routledge, 2002. ISBN 0 415 23701 7. Price £65.

Long though it is ('a matter of some shame', p. 2), this book consists of just six chapters, and of these the first ('Introduction') is but three pages of historical sketch, approach, and boundary-

setting. The second ('Cities and space') is a breathless grand tour of theory, and the remainder move from smaller to larger spatial units: 'Houses' (ch. 3), 'Streets, districts and neighbourhoods' (ch. 4), 'The city' (ch. 5), and 'The city, region and world' (ch. 6). The length of the chapters (138 pages in ch. 5, the longest), coupled with their poorly-articulated internal structure (the sections are not listed in the Contents), at times gives the reader a sense of lacking location and direction. The publishers certainly deserve some of the blame for inflicting on the reader a book as poorly organized and undisciplined as this is. Nor can they escape some of the censure for the pandemic slovenliness in matters of Greek accentuation, in citation (Alston complains (p. 46) about the 'cabbalistic' nature of papyrological abbreviations, but his claim to help the situation by using those of the *Checklist* is false; P. Green. [sic] instead of P. Grenf. is only his most distinctive contribution), in geography (p. 110, Marina el-Alamein, just 100 km west of Alexandria, is placed 'on the border between Egypt and Libya'), and in everything else philological. My favorite is the theologically risqué Hagiou Theotokou omou (p. 387, duplicated), supposedly a *laura* in Arsinoe; *homou*, of course, just means 'altogether' in the account being cited, and at last report the Virgin Mary was female. The problem is not, as Alston suggests (pp. 2–3), that he has not re-read the papyri on photographs; it is that he does not give the impression of being able to read the printed editions. Bibliography is voluminous but rarely cited where someone has already made a point being argued here, and citations (in social science format) are far too often lazily lacking in page numbers, leading one to wonder where in a book of hundreds of pages a particular question has been treated. Once again, where was the copy-editor?

If we leave these irritations to the side, what do we find? Chapter 2 leads us to the conclusion that this chapter has been 'a search for theory, a way of seeing the world, of which the rest of the book is merely a worked example' (p. 43). Alston disclaims either truth or objectivity, settling for an 'informed reading'. Although this book does not derive from a thesis, the chapter reads like nothing so much as an introductory thesis chapter, full of unnecessarily schematic descriptions of critical stances that in reality are more nuanced. It could have been cut to a fraction of its size. There is not really much new in learning that historians are not omniscient or free of context, interests, and bias. Fortunately, the common sense that is regretfully dismissed as inadequate as a theoretical stance rescues Alston from either grand deterministic theories or postmodern tendencies to see individual acts as atomistic and unconstrained (p. 38). For better or worse, in any case, the claim that this book is heavily theoretical is untrue. Most of it is unvarnished recounting of data and evidence, with thin slices of theory at the ends of chapters.

With chapter 3 the journey from house to world begins. Here, as later, evidence from villages is used alongside that from cities. The question of what 'city' means is not, in fact, engaged until chapter 6, and then only to the point (p. 410 n.1) of saying, unhelpfully, that 'a city should be a densely occupied centre of population'. This is not a minor point, because one of the most important issues about the cities of Roman Egypt is precisely their relationship to the villages, from which they were differentiated with increasing sharpness. Here we get no clear distinction between village and urban houses, either in archaeology or in texts, and the Fayyum villages dominate the discussion of the Roman Period, particularly on key issues like the sharing of houses by multiple families. The persistent use of English houses as the main comparand is not enlightening. There is no discussion of Ptolemaic evidence to provide a benchmark for the changes in the Roman Period, on which some stress is placed. What we do get is a compendium of information, both papyrological and archaeological, which will be very useful to anyone wanting to study the subject, and a stress on the great diversity visible in the record.

Much emphasis is placed on the ability of houses both to reflect and to create social and cultural values and structures, but in the end any such connection of the houses we see with social and ideological change remains entirely speculative. Alston asks particularly how far one can discern the extent to which houses were intended to be open to the outside world or to provide a closed refuge for the family. The evidence is mixed, and he sensibly avoids trying to force it into a single mould or to describe any single pattern in women's relationship to domestic space, but he does argue that houses embodied heavy emotional investments. The lack of focus and structure, however, leads us through by-ways like brother-sister marriage and the economic role of women, interesting subjects on which nothing both new and true is said here and which are not very tightly

linked to any overall direction in the argument. The chapter concludes with the view that new forms were the product of new ideologies ('such as Graeco-Roman culture or Christianity') and reflect deep cultural change. Unfortunately, the lack of long data series in any one environment leaves it unclear how much we are looking at regional variation, differences between economic levels, urban-village divisions, or diachronic change.

From the house we move, in chapter 4, to larger units, streets, and districts. We are warned at the start that 'the results of these investigations are, frankly, confusing' and that comparative evidence will be called on to compensate. Much of the chapter is devoted to listing and discussing the administrative districts of the cities (especially Hermopolis, Thebes, Oxyrhynchos, and Ptolemais Euergetis) in an attempt to see how far these corresponded to neighbourhoods with some social coherence. The organization looks fairly stable until the fourth century. Administrative units varied greatly in size and nature from city to city, for reasons we do not know; Alston argues that the system of *amphoda* is essentially an early Roman innovation, even though many of the landmarks after which they were named were Ptolemaic in origin. On the whole, he believes that the administrative divisions were not entirely artificial and did reflect something of the social organization of cities, but the nature of the documentation makes it hard to have any confidence, and there is no sign that neighbourhoods were in any way closed units. The late antique divisions begin, in Alston's view, to look somewhat like parishes. Among the strengths of the chapter is the demonstration that despite occasional *amphodon* names suggesting the contrary, practitioners of occupations were not geographically clustered. What I find importantly lacking is any thought about the complex interplay between the Egyptian residential quarters and the axial armature overlaid on it by the Romans, so compellingly analyzed in William L. MacDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire, II. An Urban Appraisal* (New Haven, 1986).

The kernel of the book is the long chapter on the city. Alston's first concern is to demonstrate that the Egyptian temples were still vital parts of the city and important economic engines in the period down to Trajan, although they were brought into the Roman administrative framework and lost much independence. Once again, much of the evidence is from villages, thus obscuring any possible differences in the evolution of these settlements. But it is hardly news that the temples were still strongly in business in the first century, or for that matter, the second. One has only to consider how many new temples were built in the western oases, where settlement was expanding rapidly in this period.

After a digression into the Jewish community in Alexandria and its conflict with other elements in the city, we turn to the city in the second century. Here Alston sees much more change, including the first real signs of Romanization of civic space; he draws particularly on Hermopolis, Antinoopolis, and Athribis. Ritual life was increasingly reoriented toward the spaces and institutions of classical cities, as the elite participated in the imperial cultural system. This transformation was well developed by the early third century, when the nome metropoleis got their city councils. The process of formation of the civic elites, regrettably, gets almost no attention, crucial though it is for understanding how the Romans transformed the Ptolemaic nome capitals into cities.

The discussion of the third century steers away from talk of crisis, seeing neither long-lasting effects of the Antonine plague nor any sign that the urban elites were pulling back from the expansionistic ambitions that formed the Roman cities. This view seems to me largely right. Alston does see some growing reluctance to serve in liturgies (a subject upon which his bibliography is weak, with almost no sign of the works of Naphtali Lewis), but his observations on the attestations of public offices result in a classic display of 'chartjunk' (cf. E. R. Tufte, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* Cheshire, Conn., 1983), 107–21). We turn to the fourth century, with an extended topographic snapshot. There is much vacillation about the condition of the temples, mostly with no good evidence. The urban economy, Alston argues, was 'managed', and the unseen economy small. It is not obvious that the hidden economy is a meaningful concept for late antiquity. The modern equivalent comes into being because of taxes that did not exist in the ancient world, like value-added tax and income taxes. The important changes in civic government are discussed, with more 'chart junk' (and no attempt to normalize the data for variation in documentation). Like others, Alston sees an increasing concentration of

power in the hands of a smaller subset of the curial elite. The discussion of Christianization has nothing to add; the discussion (p. 283) of Egypt's literary stars misses the fact that most of them were Christians.

In the 'Byzantine' city Christian institutions were ubiquitous, and much space is devoted to enumerating them and to recounting the activities of bishops and monks. Alston emphasizes the limits of bishops' powers but sees Christianity as a powerful force, integrating the city as a community to a greater degree than was true in earlier periods. The period of Christianization thus marks the second major transformation of the period covered, the first being the adoption of Roman institutions and spatial patterns.

The final chapter looks at the city in the context of the nome (or civic territory, as it effectively becomes) and the larger world. The Roman city, it is argued, was significantly connected to the villages through the relationships of temples to one another and of the rural population to the city's temples. The evidence is not strong, but the historical function of the nome towns certainly included a strong religious component, and there is no reason that the central role of the city temples should not have continued in the early Roman Period. By contrast, Alston thinks that the other institutions of the Roman city had little impact on the rest of the nome. Once again, this argument ignores the problem of the constitution of the urban elite and its relationship to its rural properties.

Moving on to the fourth century and later, the loss of the temples' function is not, in Alston's view, compensated by the development of the structures of the church. It is not clear why this should be so, and we are offered neither evidence nor argument to support the view. The hierarchical connection of the cities with their bishops to the villages with their presbyters was far more immediate than the corresponding links of temples, and one might suppose that the bishop's power, whatever its limitations, ran much further than that of the urban priesthoods.

The economic integration of the cities is discussed without any serious consideration of diachronic change. The broad endorsement (p. 345) of the consumer city model is not argued. Instead, we are offered a long rant on modern economic development, ending in the view that Roman changes strengthening the urban elites may have reinforced urban markets at the expense of village economies. But Alston pulls back from the notion that the underdevelopment of rural areas was an intentional means of supporting the cities. Instead, he thinks, the profits from supplying the cities spurred rural investment. He sees a rise in the number of villages in late antiquity (best documented in the Oxyrhynchite nome) and compares the late antique efflorescence of the limestone massif in north Syria. It is not obvious that these views are irreconcilable. As I argued in *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), rural integration into the urban economy could simultaneously bring both increased investment in productive facilities and a loss of economic diversity at the local level. This is indeed a recurring pattern, visible in developed countries today, where the mobility offered by motor transportation has led to the disappearance of retail business in smaller settlements.

As will be obvious, I have found this a frustrating book. It assembles a large amount of material and sometimes subjects it to interesting analysis. Generalizations and conclusions are rarely extreme and usually rooted in common sense; they are also for the most part unoriginal. There is no strong thematic or argumentative thread running through these many pages, and the information is only rarely connected to the theoretical concerns. It looks as if nothing once read or investigated was ever jettisoned as insufficiently germane to the overall purpose, and that purpose is often obscure. In short, this is the material for a book rather than the book itself. Readers tempted to use it simply as a quarry, however, must bear in mind that the sloppiness and lack of philological competence mentioned earlier leave the tables and notes full of booby-traps.

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