

Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore. *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt: 300 B.C.-A.D. 800*. With contributions by Evie Ahtaridis. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006. Pp. xiii + 421. ISBN: 0472115056. \$75.00 USD, cloth.

**1.** Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, both professors at Columbia University, are distinguished scholars with impressive publication records of relevant titles in the fields of papyrology, the classics in general and Greco-Roman Egypt in particular. This somewhat predestines them to compile collections of significant first-hand sources like this one containing women's letters from ancient Egypt. Usually scholars utilize ancient literature written by men in order to paint a picture of women's lives in antiquity and late antiquity. Here readers are provided with direct attestations taken from women's private spheres, in other words, the letters they wrote themselves or dictated to a scribe. More than three hundred letters spanning the time from the arrival of Alexander the Great to the Arab conquest are presented in English translations and grouped according to specific themes and topics. However, this is not everything this fine collection has to offer: in ten introductory chapters the two authors do not leave any doubt that they are very circumspect about the problems involved in such a project. From their meticulous, concise, and always minute presentation of essential information in these chapters (1-93), which enables their readers to assess the letters on their own in an adequate and methodologically appropriate way, everybody interested in direct witnesses to women's lives—but also in the genre of the (private) letter in (late) antiquity—will certainly benefit from the details accumulated in the present condensed form. The English translation, appropriate due to the fact that the original women's letters are in Greek, Coptic, and Demotic, guarantees that a readership consisting of scholars interested in this or that aspect, specialists in the field, and also (advanced) students of academic disciplines adjacent to papyrology can profit from reading the introduction and then the letters themselves. It may be regarded as superfluous to point out that this collection is relevant to everybody interested in the living conditions and the world of ideas of women in (late) antiquity, but sometimes statements like this must be made, because scholars of the history of early Christianity, as well as those commenting on biblical writings, are also included.

**2.** Bagnall and Cribiore are aware of the limitations a printed version of a collection of letters like theirs suffers from. Further letters will be published in the future, corrections may be necessary due to new insights in vocabulary, new readings of doubtful letters, new reconstructions, and the like. Therefore, it is helpful that their work is available as an electronic book at <http://www.humanitiesebook.org>, a site run by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). This not only has the advantage that fuller commentaries and links to other sites on the Internet will be possible, but also illustrations of the letters can be made accessible more easily and on a broader scale than is possible in a printed book that is necessarily circumscribed and must be produced at a reasonable cost. Illustrations and images are more important the more a visualization of scribes' hands and the layout of a papyrus or ostrakon become essential for conclusions. It is to be hoped that the project will be installed very soon at a permanent Internet location in a similar layout as, for instance, the Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS). Be that as it may, even without the wider online database the book under review is a real treasure box that contains essential factual information next to very entertaining and stunning details preserved in individual letters.

**3.** In the first chapter ("Introduction: This Book and How It Came to Be Written", 1-4) the genesis of this book, its organization, and the style of citations and images are presented. The second chapter ("Why Women's Letters", 5-11) justifies the concentration on women's letters and, for example, discusses the problem of how and if at all we can tell whether a letter is written

or dictated by a woman. In addition to gender issues Bagnall and Cribiore address matters of socio-cultural significance (such as: How many people could read and write at all? Which class do the women who are represented in the letters belong to? What do we expect to learn from the letters and what are their value?). Chapter three is dedicated to the corpus of letters in general (“About the Corpus of Letters”, 12-24) and specializes on the definition of a letter, letters belonging to an archive, and developments and formalities in Ptolemaic, Greco-Roman, and (early) Byzantine letter writing. It is striking that the percentage of women’s letters increases with the appearance of Coptic. Then the authors try to interact with the “Late Medieval Letters as Comparative Evidence” in chapter four (25-32), which are family letters from England from the fifteenth century, before they deal with the conditions and settings for “Writing and Sending Letters” (33-40) in the next chapter. There they point out that Coptic letters are mostly preserved on ostraca whereas Greek letters are mainly written on papyrus. It is important to know how and by whom these letters were transported from a sender to a recipient (usually by a trusted person so that they need not be sealed); some of the letters are or may be copies that were never sent. Chapter six (41-55) is dedicated to “Handwriting”, a subject matter that is quintessential for identifying the people behind a letter, or at least getting closer to them. Bagnall and Cribiore introduce the different styles of handwriting, briefly evaluate the database in general, and finally focus on women’s hands and the problem of dating handwriting. The issues tackled in this chapter are crucial for non-specialists so that they are able to follow the methodological assessment of the individual letters. According to the two authors, there is a somewhat more oral character in women’s letters as far as “Language” is concerned, which is central in chapter seven (56-67). Of equal importance are social status and the educational background of the people who wrote or dictated the letters. Consequently, Bagnall and Cribiore address the phenomenon of rare words. Chapter eight is concerned with the “Economic and Social Situation” (68-74). Keywords are, for instance, ‘property’, ‘money’, ‘movable goods’, and ‘offices’. No less apt for the study of women’s letters are the subjects “Household Management and Travel” of chapter nine (75-83), because here the active role of women is highlighted (running households and being active in several businesses). The last introductory chapter (84-93) is best described by its title: “Practical Help in Reading the Letters”. Significant terms are defined and the way in which the letters are presented is explained.

**4.** The bulk of the book comprises the presentation of more than three hundred women’s letters (95-406). First come those letters that belong to archives and dossiers (categorized into 21 sections) followed by all the other letters grouped according to specific topics and subjects, which are as follows: family matters and health, business matters, legal matters, getting and sending, work (agriculture), work (weaving and clothes making), work (other), journeys, literacy and education, religion, epistolary types (urgent), epistolary types (just greetings and good wishes), and double letters on a sheet. For each letter specific information is presented as follows: abbreviation (according to the *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets*, <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>), who wrote to whom about what, date, location written, location of addressee, location found, language, English translation, commentary (description of handwriting, discussion of background), the present location of the object, and bibliography (if further literature is existing at all). With this fine pattern at hand readers are well guided by the two authors and enabled to find the appropriate information at once. Above all, the distinction between different forms of location (written, of addressee, and found) is, among many others, only one proof for the problem awareness and the precise method Bagnall and Cribiore apply to the data they focus on. The thirty-two illustrations not only serve as plain visualization but are also helps for the readers

to determine whether they want to share the given palaeographical description of the scribes' hands.

**5.** The book comes with a bibliography (407-411) and two indices (names, locations, subjects, and technical terms; 413-418; index of letters listed according to the *Checklist of Editions*). Of additional help are the lists of letters (ix-xii) and illustrations (xiii) at the beginning of the collection.

**6.** At the risk of repeating myself, this is a fine example of current scholarship, a reference tool that will not only be indispensable for all those who are interested in and conduct research into the world and the lives of women in Ptolemaic, Greco-Roman, and Byzantine Egypt. Everybody who is concerned about the living conditions of people from antiquity to the Byzantine epoch, their everyday lives, their social status, their educational background, and their way of thinking, to mention only a few aspects, will certainly profit from this splendid collection of women's letters. Moreover, the ten introductory chapters provide sound and concise information about how to assess this database and similar sources from ancient times. Above all, the reviewer appreciates that Bagnall and Cribiore are always careful in their judgments, never over-interpret their sources (though these are sometimes ambiguous), and never just note down suggestions, assumptions, or speculations. Indeed, this a fine piece of academic work that may serve as a role model.

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