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# Rosetta

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<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue18/Booth.pdf>

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**Raffaella Cribiore and Roger S. Bagnall. *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt: 300 BC-AD 800*, (University of Michigan Press, 2009). Pp. 440. ISBN: 9780472115068**

*Review by Charlotte Booth*

This was a fascinating book which has been reprinted numerous times since its original publication in 2006. It is an offshoot of an online database of women's letters which includes links to the Greek texts, illustrations and extended chapters. It comprises two sections, the first composed of ten introductory chapters and the second a corpus of texts which include translations with explanatory notes. The writing style of the book is chatty and easy to read, but the integrity of the research is maintained throughout. It is clear the authors have a real passion for their subject.

Letters make up the largest category of surviving papyrus and this enables us to catch a glimpse of the private lives of the otherwise anonymous women of Roman Egypt. Although papyrus was expensive only 7% of letters were written on reused papyrus and a common opener in Coptic letters was an apology for using ostraca rather than papyrus. Ostraca use became more common for Coptic letters, whereas the earlier Greek letters were primarily written on papyrus. Another common opener commented on letters which had gone astray, with most people defending themselves assuring the recipient that the letter or goods had been sent. However, with no personal addresses during the period, letters were addressed by region or village and to the individual's connection with notable figures. Some letters bear no address at all indicating verbal instructions were given to the messenger, friend or acquaintance that happened to be travelling that way.

The letters demonstrate a varying level of literacy. Some were clearly fluent in writing but chose to pay a scribe to write for them, and then to annotate, correct and sign the letter before sending it. Other women wrote the letters themselves, as can be identified through the speed of writing, the complexity of the language used and the spelling. Handwriting does not play as much of a part in identifying female writers in Roman Egypt as it may do in other periods of history. Handwriting was classified into categories; professional or scribal for those who wrote every day, secretarial for literate women who did not write daily and personal hands for the inexperienced writer. All of

the women were placed within the latter two categories and it was suggested that some may have worked as secretaries in large households or estates. Not all the professional handwriting was clearly written however and the authors of *P.Oxy.91217* and *Haun.2.18* “are not particularly concerned with legibility” (p. 43) which is surprising if they were being employed to write. One woman writing in her own hand obviously exerted herself with concentrating and comments; “I... wore myself out writing you the letter” (p.43).

The letters are primarily written in Demotic Egyptian before the mid-fourth century CE when Coptic was introduced. By the fifth century Coptic had completely replaced Greek in women’s letters. Chapter 7 discusses the language in some detail, in regard to changing popularity as well as the syntax, vocabulary and structure of the letters. The style of letters changed over time. Elaborate formulaic greetings and sign-offs being popular in the Ptolemaic Period even between family members. This became less popular in the Roman Period with letters being opened by colloquial greetings, only for a revival of formality in the Byzantine Period. Sometimes hired scribes changed the dictation to sound more formal, or to correct grammar and structure. On other occasions, they listened to the gist of the problem or request and then wrote the letter in their own words. However, it is possible in some of the letters to identify the voice of the individual women, especially if the scribe has recorded her words *verbatim* or she has written the letter in her own hand. Such natural flow is identified through colloquial language, short clauses, unconnected thoughts, repetition and even curse words. Demetria for example writing to Apia in the first half of the third century CE (*P.Hamb 2.192*) curses because “the damned skipper left without any reason” (p.66 & p.330). This is unlikely to have been written by a scribe.

In chapter 4 the authors chose an interesting corpus of comparative material. They compared the content and structure of women’s letters from the fifteenth century CE to the ancient material, as the authors of the later letters came from similar social and cultural backgrounds to the ancient Egyptian letter writers. These letters came from four families; the Pastons, the Stoners, the Plumpton and the Celys. The content of many of these letters also contained lists of items which were required by the author as a sort of shopping list. The relevance of this comparison between letters from mediaeval European families and ancient Egyptian letters was not clear to the reviewer. It was concluded that many elite mediaeval women were unable to write but

may have been able to read and therefore their letters were dictated to a scribe. Some of the women simply added their signature to the bottom. Although both the Mediaeval and the ancient Egyptian letters contained shopping lists and were sometimes written by scribes with the author's signature at the end, whether this was a truly valuable comparison was not clear.

In chapter 8 the authors discuss the social status of the Egyptian letter writers and from the contents of the letters which concern property, land, employees and large sums of money it is clear they were members of a wealthy elite. However after the fourth century CE, letters begin to include ecclesiastical and monastic references which emphasise their poverty. The status of these women is further discussed in chapter 9 particularly in regard to property and household management. Between one fifth and one third of all property in Roman Egypt was owned by women and they were responsible for its management. This included buying, selling, paying wages, and dealing with tax and other legal aspects. It was not uncommon for women to have to travel on in order to conduct estate or property business and there seem to have been few or no restrictions on women travelling. The letters indicate the most common reasons for travel were childbirth, visiting family or business.

The introductory chapters provide a potted history of the period as well as providing context for the letters and their authors. The letters in the corpus come from a combination of archives including the Zenon Archive (Ptolemaic), the Isidora to Asklepiades dossier (first century BC), the Apollonius Archive (second century CE) and a number of individual letters. The corpus is arranged via archive or dossier where a collection of material is available, and otherwise by theme or topic, including family matters and health, business matters, legal matters, work: agriculture, work: weaving and clothes making, and literacy and education.

These thematic sub-headings are not on the contents page, so to look for something in particular is rather inconvenient, as one has to flick through all the pages to locate it. Additionally the letters are not in chronological order within the themed section and in the index of letters at the back no dates are given meaning trying to isolate letters from a particular date requires one to read the headings of every letter.

However, the translations themselves are clear, and the notes provide useful information as well as context for certain phrases or references. An analysis is also

given of the handwriting of each letter and therefore the literacy level of the author. A bibliography is provided for each letter enabling the reader to continue their research.

This is a very useful and fascinating book offering an insight into the lives of women from Ptolemaic to Byzantium Egypt.