

ONE

HOMELIFE

INTRODUCTION

The real essence of an age is better revealed among trivial and commonplace things than among prominent monuments and great leaders. This book explores the undervalued remnants of daily life because these artifacts allow us to consider the people of Roman Egypt on their own terms. We achieve a remarkable degree of empathy, recognition, and even culture shock when Romano-Egyptians show us and tell us about their daily lives through the papyri, objects, and art that they left behind. This intimacy is at its most compelling in the home.

Most people in Roman Egypt – farmers, donkey drivers, artisans, women, children, and the elderly – thought about domestic concerns rather than historically significant subjects such as war, political intrigue, economic restructuring, and the biographies of “great men.” Although historically significant events surely impacted these people, their daily focus was on cooking meals, tending to a sick relative, celebrating the birth of a child, provisioning their home, worshiping the gods, maintaining cleanliness, and enjoying the company of friends and neighbors. Everyday life is not more important than all other historical concerns, but it should not be buried beneath significant events.

The beginning and ending years of this book, from Rome’s annexation of Egypt in 30 BCE to the founding of the Eastern Roman Empire in the fourth century CE, mark a period of remarkable changes.¹ During the course of Roman rule, ordinary people helped transform Egypt from a society with

many hallmarks of the pharaonic era to one that survived the overhaul of these same traditions. The population grew rapidly under Roman rule; until the modern era, there were more people living in Egypt during this period than any other. This enlarged demographic expanded the territorial limits of their society by establishing extensive trade and agricultural networks on the fringes of Egypt. During the third century, these same people also began to embrace a new religion – Christianity – which, by the fourth century, impacted health care, dress, the role of women, and the treatment of the dead.² Amid all these changes, many of the old traditions remained firmly in place. Worklife still pulsed with the swelling of the Nile, and domestic religion changed slowly, even after the advent of Christianity. By paying close attention to the differences that we find among surviving traces of homelife, we can listen and watch as people from the past slowly but surely made the changes that historians describe as large social, religious, and economic shifts.

I have two major goals for this book: one descriptive and the other interpretive. One major concern of the book is to evoke the textures of homelife through the words, objects, and visual culture that the people of Roman Egypt themselves produced. Roman Egypt is well suited to answer this descriptive goal because it preserves more evidence of homelife than anywhere else in the ancient world, a remarkable state of affairs made possible by the unique preservation conditions found in Egypt's hyperarid environment. By joining this evidence and allowing the people of Roman Egypt to speak for themselves, this book exposes a range of ancient voices.

For example, personal experiences within Roman Egypt differed depending on one's gender, age, ethnicity, social class, and so on.³ One Oxyrhynchite Greek gives voice to prejudices that may have been common among his social group:

Please send me a policeman with a warrant against Lastas. . . . He has afforded me considerable violence. Don't forget! You know how Egyptians are.⁴

That parting remark denigrating Egyptians betrays one of many social divisions once present in Roman Egypt. While ethnic stereotyping does not seem to be common in the papyrological record, the writer clearly expected his reader to understand and empathize with his negative characterization of Egyptians. Scholars of the ancient world have come to expect such discord but are challenged to uncover evidence of it. Roman Egypt, thanks to its dry climate, offers us rich source material for studying social divisions at an unprecedented level of detail. Our other source material, which we will encounter later in this chapter, provides equally vivid testimony of homelife in Roman Egypt.

The second goal for this book is an interpretive one; I aim to find and demonstrate how ordinary people contributed to the historical changes that can

be defined as broad themes, such as the demographic, religious, and cultural changes that are visible on the large scale. This interpretive goal brings the evidence from Roman Egypt to bear on how we consider social changes to develop in any society.

Take weaving, for example, a traditional female craft common in Egyptian, Greek, and Roman societies. In Trimithis House B2, I found evidence that women wove both linen and cotton.⁵ Linen had an ancient pedigree, with a long history of use in Egypt. But cotton was a relative newcomer, having been introduced from Sudan to this area of Egypt sometime during the second century CE.⁶ And although Egypt's Roman rulers did invest heavily in agriculture, it was local enthusiasm – not imperial demand – that brought the fiber to local looms. Cotton's path to its current global dominance can thus be traced to the humble courtyard of a Romano-Egyptian home.

Only in the past few decades have scholars begun to acknowledge the active role of ordinary people in shaping history. Before the 1970s, most social theorists described human behavior as formed, constrained, and ordered by socioeconomic *structures*, such as capitalism, colonialism, and racism.⁷ Others, such as the sociologist Erving Goffman, set aside broad structural formations to focus closely on interactions between individuals.⁸ In this way, an opposition arose between the scholarship that prioritized structure and that which focused on an empowered individual, otherwise known as an *agent*; the so-called structure/agent dichotomy.

In the late 1970s, scholars began to try to overcome this dichotomy. Pierre Bourdieu, a French theorist, developed the concept of a deeply internalized *habitus* to describe how socially and bodily ingrained attitudes, mannerisms, and skills shape how agents perceive and act on the world around them.⁹ Shortly thereafter, more anthropologists began to explore the relationship between agents “on the ground” and overarching structures, arguing that the two held a dialectical relationship rather than an oppositional one.¹⁰ In other words, these theorists suggested that agents could transform – through their everyday *practices* – the structures that constrained them. This body of scholarship, called *practice theory*, showed how ordinary people, as a collective, could be a force in history instead of merely the objects of history.¹¹ As studies of ordinary people have become more common, scholars have shown how they have contributed to historical transformations from a range of societies.¹²

Theodore Schatzki's contributions to practice theory in particular have influenced my own perspectives on social change. In his later work, Schatzki embraced an explicitly material-based account of change, rooting the “character and transformation of social life” in the sites where it takes place.¹³ Change occurs according to the constantly evolving arrangement of *orders* (e.g., people, portable objects, architecture) and *practices* (e.g., activities) within what Schatzki called *sites of the social* (the spatial context).¹⁴

Within this book, I draw selectively from these theoretical advances to explore how the entanglement between households and structures created social change.¹⁵ Although I avoid cumbersome theoretical terminology throughout this book, I use the terms *participants* to designate human and nonhuman entities, and *practice* to describe the embodied activities of social agents. My prose should make sense with or without considering or even accepting its philosophical underpinnings.

It is not always easy or advisable to draw firm lines around social contexts. This book sharpens its focus on the home and the mundane participants and practices within it because the household is the smallest accessible social unit in Roman Egypt. Occasionally, I reach beyond the walls of the house to follow participants and practices to other contexts, such as the temple and the tomb, to understand them better within the domestic setting. Scholars rarely connect these arenas. But without such connection, a vital, unified dimension of antiquity risks being fractured by synthetic – and often false – divisions.

Although I am sometimes forced to take a synchronic approach to my study of the home, I describe diachronic developments whenever the data permit it. History is not only about the past and sequential steps of change. It can also be about the persistence of patterns over long periods of time, or about situating and analyzing the participants and practices that come into clear focus within a single physical space.¹⁶ Ultimately, I argue that the home is an important locus not only for understanding social life in Roman Egypt, but also for exploring social change more broadly. Since Roman Egypt preserved more substantive data on homelife than any other society prior to the modern era, it offers us an opportunity to explore the bedrock foundations of ordinary people as agents in historical change.

HOUSES AND HOUSEHOLDS

A house is a physical structure that serves as a home. Houses in Roman Egypt ranged from simple, single-room shacks of straw and reeds to complex, sprawling structures of stone and brick. Roofs were simple, non-load-bearing screens or load-bearing structures of wood beams or solid mud-brick vaulted construction. Lockable doors secured nearly all these houses as protection for both people and possessions (Figure 1.3, items 6 and 10).¹⁷ Most windows were small and located immediately beneath the ceiling, serving only to supply light and air.¹⁸ Some houses had cellars, and most had usable rooftop space. Exterior courtyards filled with small animals, storage structures, stables, dovecotes, chicken coops, waterpot stands, bread ovens, and hearths extended the houses' living and work spaces.

Unlike the houses of modern Western cultures, these ancient dwellings rarely had rooms set aside for a specific purpose; each room changed its

function during the course of the day according to the occupants' needs. Cooking could take place either inside or outside, often in the presence of animals such as chickens and pigs.

The social unit that lives within a house is called a *household*. The households that we will meet included family members, servants, slaves, apprentices, renters, and any other people who lived within the same house.¹⁹ In other words, households were not nuclear families.²⁰ They were familial, social, and business relationships that take place within a single house. Because they arose out of marriage ties, blood relationships, friendships, and economic happenstance, household arrangements could be complex. Egypt's papyri preserve some examples of the convoluted domestic arrangements that could arise:

I, [Hermas], son of Ptolemaios, acknowledge that I have received from Tapekysis the three hundred [drachmai] in silver in cash and in place of the interest I shall agree that she shall [live in] the aforesaid house for so long as I may owe it, [and . . .], and I shall guarantee (it) with every guarantee and shall deliver it free from [. . .], and (whenever I shall repay the money), if it shall appear that she has undergone any expense, I shall repay it as stated above.²¹

In this loan agreement, the lender, Tapekysis, waved the right to receive interest on her loan to Hermas, and in return, he granted her the right to reside in his house. The agreement also allowed Tapekysis to rent space in the house to other people, which may suggest that Hermas was not actually living in the space himself.²² Although we cannot fully understand the context of this loan agreement, it reminds us that the physical house was not simply a vessel for families.²³ Indeed, contracts and wills suggest that there was a “flexible and mobile” residence pattern, in which people moved in and out of rooms and houses in response to changing economic and social circumstances.²⁴

In addition to serving as a residence, Romano-Egyptian houses were the center of worklife, with businesses, craft production, and domestic labor filling their walls. Life and death resided together in houses; women gave birth, and most people took their last breath at home. The personal significance of such events ensured that even a short residence within a particular house might enfold that space with strong emotional memories.²⁵ Even an individual's repetitive everyday practices in each house shaped their expectations for future homes. Together, these entangled practices and emotions made the home the primary locus of social life, whatever vantage we take on it.

Households not only had wide varieties of configurations and functions; they also changed over time.²⁶ The term *household life cycle* refers to the different transformations that a single household might go through over the years. It would be ideal if we could examine this cycle in its entirety – a household's foundation, periods of expansion and contraction, and dissolution. We are

rarely so lucky. Each household has its own cycle and duration of stages depending on the changing circumstances of individual household members.²⁷ The *life course* is the individual's unique life pattern. When conception and the afterlife are included in this approach, as they are here, the pattern is called an *extended life course*.

Although the individual life course and the household life cycle are distinct, they dovetail. Marriage, the birth of a child, the death of a spouse, and other life events impact both the individual and the household. The individual life course – including marriage patterns, child rearing, and old age – has grown as a vibrant area of research in recent years and informs my own method for exploring homelife.²⁸ Chapters 3 through 9 of this book tell the story of the Romano-Egyptian household from a life-course approach, drawing attention to the many variables that might shape an individual, a household, or even a generation. Chapters 2 through 9 each opens with a short vignette about two fictional individuals – Pamoun and Tabes – whose life courses we follow as they experience particular moments in their household's life cycle. This historical fiction helps make the experiences of Romano-Egyptian homelife more evocative.

While the individual is the social unit below the household, the neighborhood or village is the social unit above it.²⁹ Relationships among local households were central to people's lives, even if individuals were not linked by blood. Of course, in small villages – and even in cities – one's close neighbor was likely to also be a relative. Those who were not related might still be linked by firm social bonds or economic dealings. In Roman Egypt, a mosaic of kinship groups and close-knit relationships created a sense of community. Life among neighbors was personal. It could hardly be otherwise. Birth, old age, sickness, and death were as regular as the rising sun, and the needs of the most vulnerable – the orphaned, the abandoned, the disabled, and the elderly – were society's collective concern. Such social bonds created strength within the fragility of human life. Although neighborhood relationships are not the main focus of this book, I touch on them throughout, since they contribute to a full understanding of the Romano-Egyptian home.

SOURCES

This book draws from three major categories of ancient material: textual, archaeological, and visual. Each type of evidence has distinct advantages and disadvantages. Historians may be able to reconstruct a family's genealogy from textual sources, but unless the source material provides remarkable detail, they will not know precisely where individual family members lived at particular points in time.³⁰ Meanwhile, while archaeologists cannot determine the biological and social relationships between occupants of a physical domestic space,

they can uncover people, places, and objects that no one chose to record in documents or images. Visual evidence provides evocative likenesses of past peoples, but social conventions dictated these same images, so we cannot appropriate them wholesale. Since there are significant gaps in our data, even when drawing together a range of sources, I bring in a fourth type of evidence: comparative data from other Roman provinces and ethnographic sources. These comparative data give us insights into past actions that have left no archaeological, textual, or visual trace in Roman Egypt. It is worthwhile exploring each of these source types in more detail.

Textual Sources

Textual sources are central to studies of Romano-Egyptian homelife. This writing might be on monuments or metal (epigraphy), broken ceramics or stone (ostraka), or paper made from papyrus plants (papyri). Papyri in particular have provided us with an inimitable glimpse into homelife in Roman Egypt. An immense number of personal documents – shopping lists, wills, letters, writing exercises, and others – give us unprecedented insights into historical events, village happenings, and personal histories. These details let us see the changes of daily life in the language of those who lived them. We can also hear more intimate voices. Papyri allow us to overhear anxieties, pain, joy, and other emotions that come from people living their daily lives.

Listen as one Titianos, in a letter to his sister, describes the illness that plagues him and his household:

Titianos to his lady sister, greetings. Since I found someone who was coming up in your direction, I was encouraged to write to you what has happened to me. I was gripped for a long while by illness so that I couldn't even stagger. When my illness ceased, my eye suppurated and I had trachomas and I suffered terribly and in other parts of my body as well so that it nearly came to surgery, but thank God! My father is still ill, for whose sake I stayed there though I was ill myself, and for his sake I am still here. . . . Everybody at home fell ill, my mother and all the slaves, so that we don't even have any help, but for everything, we pray to God unceasingly.³¹

Titianos's physical and emotional anguish are clear and familiar as is the casual mention of slaves, an institution that, though seen here through the distant lens of antiquity, is all too vivid in our own far-too-recent past. We are privy to love, violence, anger, and anxiety.³² Papyri give us access to slang terms, prejudices, beliefs, and heartbreak. They are essential for creating historical accounts, and they are captivating because papyri bestow an immediate reality to these voices.³³

Contemporary histories and descriptions provide another window onto Romano-Egyptian homelife. The Greek geographer Strabo (64/3 BCE–24 CE) gave us our lengthiest literary description of Egypt shortly after it became a Roman province. Strabo sailed from Alexandria to Egypt's southern frontier and wrote an account of his travels in which he described the flora, fauna, and built environment of early Roman Egypt. As he went, he remarked on the localized religious practices and noticed that each city had its own patron deity.³⁴ Among the Egyptian voices from the early years of Roman rule, we have Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE–50 CE). Philo was a Greek-speaking Jew born and raised in Egypt. In his work *On the Contemplative Life*, he remarked on the greed and cruelty of the Roman tax system, which led to poverty and even violence. He also suggested that it contributed to the uncontrolled drinking habits of his fellow Egyptians. Juvenal (active in the late first–early second centuries CE) was a Roman poet whom Domitian (51–96; r. 81–96 CE) may have exiled to Egypt. Juvenal's satires demonstrate his strong dislike of Egyptians, whose superstitions he found loathsome and whose intermixing of ethnic groups he found dismaying.³⁵

Additional written sources, such as census documents and tax and court records, provide details about other aspects of homelife. In particular, these types of documents demonstrate the intersection between the state and the home. During the Roman period, the state privileged the Greek language and writing system for official documents, keeping with its practice, common since its earliest days, of delegitimizing local languages.³⁶ We also see state interference in the form of taxation and expectations of justice, both of which were shaped by the ethnic category the state assigned to someone. The Roman census, about which we will hear more in the next chapter, was a necessary step for developing and executing this taxation system, and it provides us with remarkable demographic details of households.³⁷ Court records give us insight into the economic and legal world of Roman Egypt, including episodes of domestic violence, robbery, and divorce.³⁸

Textual sources, despite their many benefits, have limits.³⁹ We usually hear from high-status adult men, because these were the people who were typically taught to read and write (Chapter 3).⁴⁰ Most of these sources are in Greek, the language and writing system of the state, which was a foreign language and script for most of Egypt's inhabitants at this time (Chapter 2).⁴¹ The papyri also do not evenly represent village and city life. We have more papyri relating to village life in the first centuries than we do for city life. Meanwhile, in late antiquity, we learn substantially more about city life and the relationship between cities and villages than we do about the villages themselves.⁴² And, perhaps most significantly, because a large part of the papyri dealt with property, people without property were systematically underrepresented. Thanks to

these biases, we miss out on a wide range of experiences of the humblest people in society.

A final issue pervades all written sources: textual sources record events, not deep backgrounds or happenstance. The nature of writing is that it seeks to make permanent that which might otherwise be impermanent. The reasons for making something permanent may differ; communication, systems of logic, and data storage are considered to be the most basic reasons for developing a writing system.⁴³ This partiality means that writing has a different logic from the sort of information that we can acquire from archaeological material, which was not left to us with the expectation that it would be found and interpreted. In order to learn about a wider range of peoples, places, and practices, we must consult additional sources, beginning with archaeological ones.

Archaeological Sources

Archaeology explores all physical remains related to past human behavior. It has the power to unearth the forgotten people of the past, whose history was never recorded. These silenced people – women, children, and the poor often among them – passed through life without recognition in written and visual sources, yet they produced vast portions of the archaeological record. Archaeology conjures up intimate narratives from the scatters of food remains, tools, house foundations, and even human remains to give us a more rounded picture of past practices and peoples.

Consider the wooden pull toy, in the form of a horse, found at Karanis (Figure 1.1).⁴⁴ People rarely discussed such mundane objects in letters or portrayed them in wall paintings. But this otherwise unremarkable wooden horse reveals a remarkable amount of detail about homelife. It was made using tools that few Karanis inhabitants would have kept in their homes. The workmanship, with clean, elegant lines and regular round wheels, suggests the skills of someone experienced in designing and creating such objects. A recently published photograph shows masses of similar wooden horses grouped together in a single room (Figure 1.2).⁴⁵ Together, this evidence suggests that a craft specialist may have produced horses such as this one at home for sale or for trade.

The object and photograph provoke questions that they themselves cannot answer; for example, what was the status of the child in the household? An object such as this might have been a special item purchased outside the home for a small child who would have delighted in this new toy. The maker of the object may have been a craft specialist whose entrepreneurship in the domestic market was a sideline or a vocation. And the object itself, insignificant on its own, nonetheless evokes a foundational aspect of intimate life in the home: the



1.1. Wooden pull toy in the form of a horse (Roman, Karanis). KM inv. no. 7692. Courtesy of the Kelsey Museum.



1.2. Excavation photograph of wooden pull toys (D) in the form of a horse, as found in Karanis BC72 K (Roman, Karanis). KM Photographic Archive inv. no. 5.2396. Courtesy of the Kelsey Museum.