AT HOME IN ROMAN EGYPT

What was life like for ordinary people who lived in Roman Egypt? In this volume, Anna Lucille Boozer reconstructs and examines the everyday lives of non-elite individuals. It is the first book to bring an "extended life course" approach to the study of Roman Egypt and Egyptology more generally. Based on evidence drawn from objects, portraits, and letters, she focuses on the quotidian details that were most meaningful to those who lived during the centuries of Roman occupation. Boozer explores these individuals through each phase of the life cycle – from conception, childbirth, childhood, and youth to adulthood and old age – and focuses on essential themes such as religion, health, disability, death, and the afterlife. Illuminating the lives of people forgotten by most historians, her richly illustrated volume also shows how ordinary people experienced and enacted social and cultural change.

Anna Lucille Boozer is Professor of Roman Mediterranean Archaeology and Ancient History at Baruch College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York (CUNY). Her research focuses on Roman Egypt, Meroitic Sudan, empires, and everyday life. She directs the CUNY excavations at Amheida (Egypt) and MAP: The Meroë Archival Project (Sudan). She has written widely on the social archaeology and history of Egypt and Sudan. Among her books are *A Late Romano-Egyptian House in the Dakhla Oasis: Amheida House B2* (2015) and *Archaeologies of Empire: Local Participants and Imperial Trajectories* (2020).

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A SOCIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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CONTENTS

Color plates are to be found between pp. 182 and 183.

PREFACE

When I was in grade school, I asked a teacher why most US Americans speak English even though we have such varied backgrounds. She replied that England won wars in our part of the Americas. I couldn't understand how wars and empires decided what language I spoke with my family at home in Williamsburg, Virginia. This question follows me to this day.

While I was an undergraduate at St. John's College (Maryland), I studied ancient Greek and a wide range of primary sources from the ancient world. Herodotus particularly fascinated me, and I wrote my bachelor's thesis on the concept of custom and change in *The History*. While this project taught me that philology and I were meant to be acquaintances rather than close friends, it also propelled me to research archaeological material for the first time. Aware that the Father of History is also called the Father of Lies, I wondered what the material world had to say about social change under Achaemenid Persian rule in Egypt.

I arrived at Columbia University for graduate study during the incipient planning phase for its excavations at Amheida (Roman Trimithis), directed by Roger Bagnall. The timing could not have been better. After writing an interdisciplinary master's thesis on the Achaemenid Persian occupation of Egypt's Western Desert, I changed my focus to the Roman period. Bagnall, who has spent his career making the everyday lives of people living in Roman Egypt more visible through his work with papyri and ostraka, became my PhD supervisor. I joined the excavation team at Trimithis and wrote my dissertation on two houses from the site.

As an archaeologist, I was astonished by the remarkable detail we could recover about the material lives of ordinary people. Many of our most evocative finds were ones that had been overlooked or unpublished by past excavations. The Columbia University (now New York University) excavations at Amheida offered a remarkable opportunity to fill these gaps. Inspired by the range of material we recovered, I knew that archaeology, papyrology, art history, and ancient history had to be combined if we were to understand how people experienced Roman rule.

Roman Egypt, however, suffers from the persistent postulate that it is odd. Beryl Rawson, a historian of ancient Rome, observed that Egypt poses

a nagging problem for scholars of the ancient Mediterranean: How "Greek" or "Roman" was it *really*? Egypt also offers better preservation and therefore more evidence than other provinces. What are scholars working in other provinces meant to do with this unfair distribution of evidentiary wealth? How, they ask, can findings in Egypt have any relevance to other regions of the Mediterranean?[1] This overwrought academic hand-wringing has largely been put to rest among polite publications.[2] But as any scholar of Roman Egypt can tell you, the topic is still very much alive and continues to arise in conversations with colleagues – and even, in my case, during job interviews.

Egypt, like other provinces in the multicultural Roman Empire, had a deep and interleaved history prior to Roman rule. As with data acquired from other provinces, the extrapolation of evidence from specific regional circumstances to empire-wide assumptions must be done thoughtfully. There are certainly particularities relating to Roman rule in Egypt, which I explore in Chapter 2, but all provinces had their own unique circumstances. We must remain alert to these differences whenever we draw from cross-regional comparisons.

The following pages demonstrate how evidence from a range of disciplines, regions, and temporal arenas can generate an intimate vision of antiquity. I hope that scholars working in other Roman provinces, on other Egyptian time periods, or even on other world cultures will embrace this approach. I firmly believe that interdisciplinary research holds the greatest promise for the study of antiquity and even of the contemporary world. It may even help answer that question I asked my grade school teacher.

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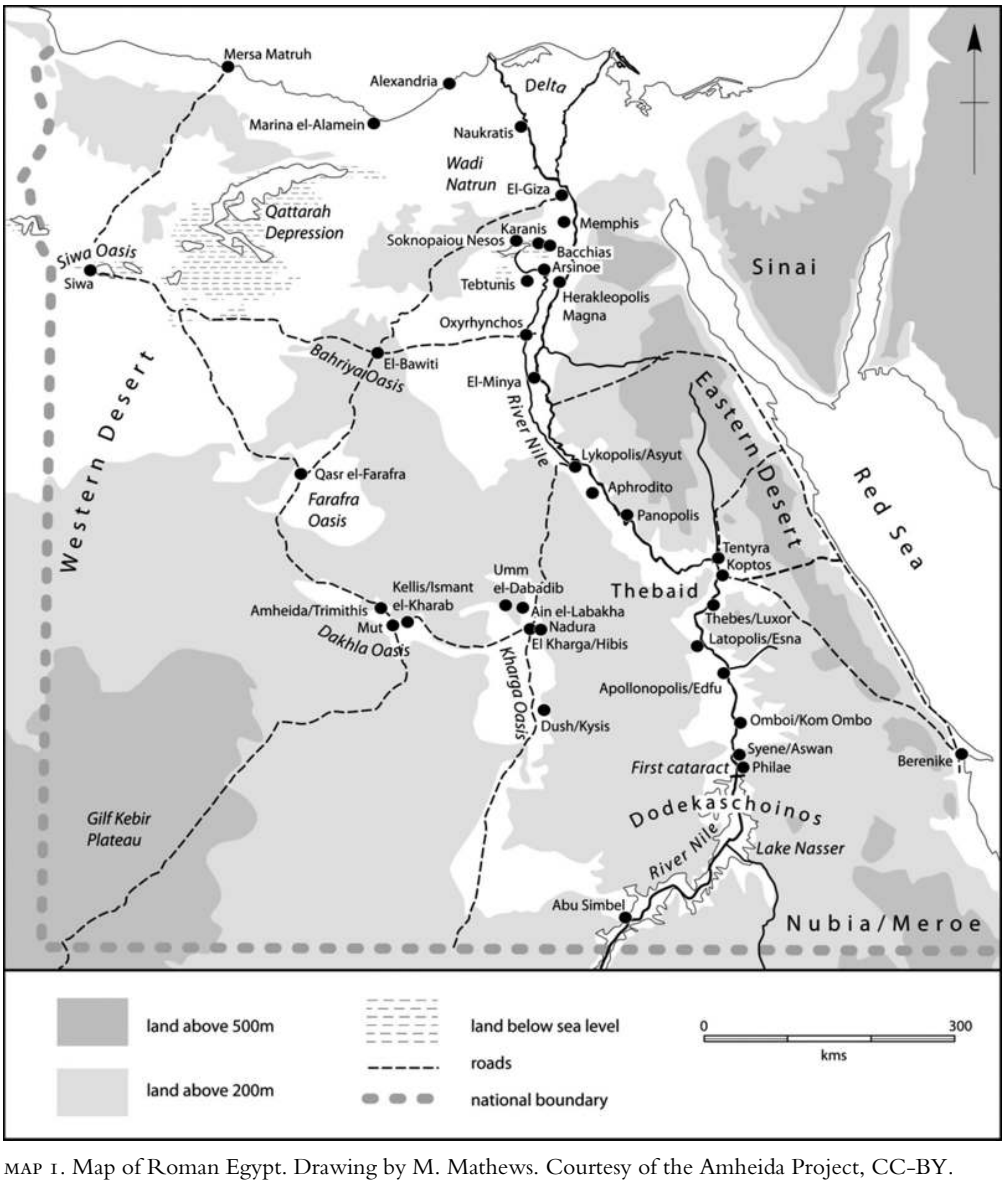
I finalized this book for publication during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis. Many colleagues sent me PDFs of their manuscripts while I quarantined with my toddler in New York City without access to libraries or museums. Craig and Carol Boyer graciously supplied me with funding for Richard Feit to edit the manuscript. He saved me from the typographical errors that I myself missed due to weary eyes. I am grateful to Beatrice Rehl at Cambridge University Press for her enthusiasm and patience during this difficult time.

Finally, I would like to thank Baruch College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York and especially my students and colleagues in the Department of History and the Anthropology Program.

Most significantly, I dedicate this book to my daughter, Lillian Rose Boozer-Velasco, an incipient speaker of English and Tagalog at home in New York City.



MAP 1. Map of Roman Egypt. Drawing by M. Mathews. Courtesy of the Amheida Project, CC-BY.