

Hannah M. Cotton, Robert G. Hoyland, Jonathan J. Price, and David J. Wasserstein, eds, *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2009. Pp xxx, 481. ISBN 0521875811 or 978-0521875813.

This collection of papers examines over 1000 years of linguistic, religious and political change in the eastern half of the Roman empire, particularly through a study of inscriptions. The internationally known authors—experts in Greek, Aramaic, Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, Syriac, and Coptic to mention only a few—bring impressive expertise to the study of the interactions among domestic and imperial languages. While many of the papers originate from a conference in Jerusalem, others were solicited from scholars not in attendance; this combination brings a welcome balance to the collection. In fact, a special strength of the volume comes from juxtaposing articles which offer quite different interpretations of the same or related documents. The combination of fresh readings for well-published documents and inscriptions with the presentation of newly discovered ones leads to revised chronologies and interpretations. Altogether the volume illuminates the linguistic and epigraphic legacy of a world extending from Egypt to Asia Minor, from Persia to Palestine, from Syria to Arabia.

In the Introduction Fergus Millar interweaves the various analyses of cultural identity, contact and competition. He notes the mass of new evidence and the “suggestions of new starting points” for understanding the interplay of these languages (p.11). I have followed the order of the chapters in this review.

In the section on Latin as a language of power, Werner Eck and Benjamin Isaac offer quite different interpretations. Eck analyzes the proportion of Latin and Greek inscriptions in four cities; he finds four times as many Greek inscriptions as Latin ones in Ephesus and Perge, but a preponderance of Latin inscriptions in Heliopolis in Syria (modern Baalbek) and Caesarea in Judaea. Eck links the lasting use of Latin in those latter two cities to the continued presence of government officials and retired Roman soldiers in these reputed military colonies.

Although Benjamin Isaac accepts Heliopolis and Berytus as colonies founded for discharged Roman soldiers, he disagrees with Eck that Caesarea was a true colony but argues that the numerous Latin inscriptions found there (411–600) come from Caesarea’s role as a center of government. He suggests that Caesarea was honored as a titular colony for its support of the Roman campaign in Judaea, and argues strongly that the imposition of a colony of soldiers, such as occurred at Jerusalem (Aelia Capitolina) would have been punitive. He also notes the strong presence of Latin inscriptions in the non-colonial cities of Palmyra, Bosra, Gerasa, Petra, Caesarea Philippi, and Arados. The clear disagreement between Eck and Isaac makes for lively reading and prompts further analysis of the precise status of Caesarea. I found this question of colonial status and the use of Latin especially interesting due to my own studies (*Roman Berytus: Beirut in Late Antiquity*, 2004).

Marijana Riel brings lively new insights to the question of family relationships in the Greek and Roman world from 200 BCE to 300 CE by a sympathetic analysis of inscriptions for *threptoi*, “nurtured” children. They may have been slaves or children related in some way to their owners or seemingly most often, those rescued from exposure.

Angelos Chaniotis examines some fascinating inscriptions which record confessions of sin, or ask for help in solving the cause of illnesses, or offer restitution for crimes committed either against the god[s], an individual, or a community in Roman Asia Minor. These inscriptions preserve speech acts and promises made to the deities and form part of collective ritual and worship. The clear implication is that a sense of guilt motivated many of the commissioners of the inscriptions, and this psychological aspect of the public drama is riveting.

In a methodological essay Hannah Cotton attempts to extract the remnants of Nabataean law concerning the disposition of dowry from a deceased mother as preserved in the Petra papyri. This is a difficult enterprise, and although well-presented, is not persuasive, to this reader at least. The evidence seems too far scattered in language (Greek and Nabataean), time (five centuries) and space to demonstrate continuity of custom; the difficulties are in fact presented by Cotton herself.

Nicole Belayche in her article on languages and religions in second–fourth century Palestine asserts that the presence of many soldiers and officials in the region accounts for the Latin names (some preserved in Greek), Latin-named deities, and epigraphic formulae. She assembles many interesting examples of *realia* which she relates to texts in Jerome, Tertullian, Josephus, and the rabbis. Actually her arguments go a long way to explain the presence of such “Roman” cultural structures such as cremation, amphitheatres, and Mithraea.

Walter Ameling produces a magisterial study of Jewish inscriptions from both Asia Minor and Syria, based on the corpus *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*. Not surprisingly he finds that the inhabitants of Asia Minor, being further from Jerusalem more readily adopted Greek for inscriptions and also asserted their citizenship in *poleis*. On the other hand, he finds that other than in Palmyra, which seems to have been home to many bilingual Jews, there was a tendency in Syria for inscribers to use Aramaic rather than Syriac, which came to be regarded as a Christian language. Also his observation of onomastic patterns reveals that while Greek Biblical names were used by both groups, the Jews did not add declensional endings but the Christians did. Also for the most part, the tombs were intended for one (*mone*) person only and were not to be reused.

Ted Kaizer analyzes the inscriptions from Dura-Europos for patterns of usage of Greek, Palmyrenean, Aramaic, Syriac, and Hatrean, and Latin. Since many of the Palmyrenes were attached to the city as part of the Roman army, they used all three languages but expressed uniform religious sentiments of gratitude to their gods, even those not unique to Palmyra. In general Greek really was the *lingua franca* of the city and was used even by officials with Latin or Semitic names in their inscriptions. The

synagogue inscriptions were equally divided among Greek, Aramaic, and Persian languages. The house church inscriptions used only Greek with one graffito from the courtyard in Syriac. So the cross-cultural mix was not very well-blended.

Jonathan Price and Shlomo Naeh, in “On the margins of culture: the practice of transcription in the ancient world,” focus on the relationship of language and script; when are the terms synonymous (especially as regards Latin, Greek and Aramaic)? The point is made that many people in antiquity might have been bilingual in speech but monoliterate or even illiterate in writing, with the result that inscriptions might actually have been composed in one language but recorded in a different alphabet. The authors observe that dying languages are recorded in a dominant script when the former has become moribund. As for magic texts, maintaining knowledge of meaning is less important than using mysterious (i.e., unknown) words which is seen as efficacious and thus desirable. The authors address the question of why the term “Assyrian letters” is applied to Aramaic script. Deciphering puzzling comments in rabbinical texts leads the authors to conclude Aramaic script was to be used in Biblical texts, even to record other languages.

Sebastian Brock’s discussion of Edessene Syriac inscriptions in late antique Syria is elegant, lean and immensely useful to understanding key elements and chronology of Syriac inscriptions. The appendix of dated inscriptions is sure to be useful to readers who want to see an overview of the evolution of themes in the inscriptions. Also the detailed analysis and translation of selected inscriptions enhances the understanding of dating and formulae in Syriac epigraphy.

Dan Barag surveys the publication of Samaritan lamps, lintels, mosaics and coins. He places the development of Samaritan script in the fourth century CE by accepting or rejecting dates offered in other publications. He persuasively argues that the Samaritans were in conflict with the Christians and Jews in the Constantinian era and later abandoned paleo-Aramaic and paleo-Hebrew to stake out a separate religious identity.

Gideon Bohak discusses the “Jewish magical tradition from late antique Palestine to the Cairo Geniza.” Using a process I shall term ‘linguistic archaeology’ Bohak tries to identify magical recipes that ultimately were derived from Late Antique formularies by searching out rare Greek words and *magicae voces*. Although he concedes that the Cairo Geniza documents at their earliest date from the tenth century, he tries to eliminate elements that came from contemporary Muslim sources or Byzantine influence. The task he sets himself is difficult but rewarding as exemplified in his analysis of a polyglot lengthy recipe to be used against one’s court opponents, the “*antidiki*”, a word that reflects Late Antique legal terminology.

Axel Knauf extrapolates from the Nabataean style of the tomb of the Benei Hezir in Jerusalem that they became wealthy by their trading and land-leasing in the region of Moab when it was under Nabataean control. After a useful summary of events in which Nabataeans and Jews were either friends or foes, especially when Romans were the other players, Knauf then speculates that this Jewish family had made its fortune in the

area of Khanzireh, where they would be free from the restrictive Jewish law codes which hampered land development.

“Greek inscriptions in transition from the Byzantine to the early Islamic period” by Leah Di Segni is one of the jewels in this volume, for this reader at least. In a very important article which ought to be read widely, Di Segni revises upward and systematically the dating of both churches and monasteries by their mosaic inscriptions in Greek. As she points out, getting past the preconception that after 640 CE new Christian buildings and monuments were not erected is central to correctly assessing the evidence of varied dating systems and style of calligraphy. She would re-date many Christian structures to the mid-eighth century in Palestine and Jordan. In another section of her paper she demonstrates that the change from Greek to Semitic languages had already begun around the year 540, *annus horribilis* of the plague. She also demonstrates that in the 220 years prior to 565 CE the number of inscriptions was about equal in urban and rural contexts but in the 220 years after 565 CE, the preponderance were in the countryside. This transition indicates the move of the wealthy to supporting monasteries over city churches. Her analysis of changes in Greek due to Arabic influence is also fascinating, such as –a- becoming –o- and –p- becoming –b-.

I particularly applaud the inclusion of “Arab kings, Arab tribes and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in late Roman epigraphy” by Robert Hoyland who accomplishes several difficult tasks. He not only analyzes previously published early or Old Arabic inscriptions but also publishes some newly discovered ones. Then Hoyland synthesizes information from ‘Arabic’ and Greek inscriptions along with textual Byzantine sources and Muslim genealogies to trace the distinction between ‘Saracens’ (nomads) and ‘Arabs’ who eventually came to mean the settled inhabitants of Arabia. The article is valuable as well for the analogy with the evolving role of Germanic leaders and tribes in the Roman empire.

Sebastian Richter examines the “rise and decline of the Coptic language in late antique and medieval Egypt,” and states that Coptic existed as a literary language from 300 CE to 1300 CE in a mainly Christian context. Drawing on an extensive modern bibliography on the linguistic death of minority languages, he brings a fresh analysis to the question of why Arabic completely supplanted Coptic. Using tables of Coptic, Greek and Arabic contact and influence, he finally concludes (not surprisingly) that economics and status were primary factors in the replacement process. The earliest intrusion of Arabic loan words appeared in scientific texts and commercial records. This brief summary does not do justice to the complexity of Richter’s analysis.

Arietta Papaconstantinou in her chapter “‘What remains behind’: Hellenism and *Romanitas* in Christian Egypt after the Arab conquest” uses the evidence of papyri and inscriptions to illuminate how the supposedly opposed Christian communities of Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian persuasions actually shared a fascinating heritage of Byzantine names and legal formulae. Upper class Egyptians well into the Islamic era in both city and countryside retained Greek and Roman titlature and naming practices.

Thus some of the Arabic 'amirs were addressed with old imperial honorifics, such as *lamprotatos* (= *clarissimus*). Dating eras going back to Diocletian were used, and high status names such as Flavius survived. Greek names from the Old Testament, New Testament, and even classical literature (Aristophanes) continued to be used in names that had Semitic elements as well.

This volume will be of interest to historians and linguists of many eras and areas of the Roman East who are likely to have some cherished ideas revised and some new concepts stimulated.

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