

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 10 (1953)

Heft: 3-4

Artikel: Literature and society in the papyri

Autor: Roberts, Colin H.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-11577>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 08.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Literature and Society in the Papyri

By Colin H. Roberts, Oxford

It has, I think, long been accepted that the literary papyri are not only the concern of the student of Greek literature but can also legitimately claim the attention of the historian of Egypt. My purpose here is to examine more closely the relation between the literary and the documentary papyri: firstly, to determine, if possible, whether directly or indirectly, political and social considerations affected what was read and what was written in Egypt, and, secondly, to see what if any reflections we can find in the literary papyri of institutions or political events familiar to us from the documents or other sources. Much of what I have to say will necessarily be speculative, for such a theme inevitably lends itself to suggestions rather than demonstrations; and what is not speculative is apt, I fear, to be obvious¹.

As a first question we may ask what reflections of the racial and social policies of the early Ptolemies can be caught in the literary papyri. We have no clear statement of what Alexander's policy for Egypt was and probably it was not more than provisional when he died. But what he hoped to achieve may be divined from what he did; when he founded Alexandria he decided to build temples both to the Greek gods and to Isis; again when he reached Memphis, after sacrificing to the gods of both Hellas and Egypt, he instituted in the ancient capital a *γυμνασιὸς καὶ μουσικὸς ἀγών*. Here the problem was set; its solution was left to his successors. At first sight there may seem to have been little change: Egyptian religion was protected and flourished: Greek culture was spread throughout the land even if Greek institutions were only introduced to a very limited degree. But if we look closer we may discern a difference in emphasis between the policy of the first Ptolemy and that of his successors. Under Ptolemy Soter there were attempts to encourage Egyptian participation in the state at a high level; just as he chose as his advisers on religious policy both the Athenian Timotheus and the Egyptian Manetho, so there are indications among his subjects of some intellectual interest in the country in which they found themselves. The same Manetho wrote his

¹ To give chapter and verse for every statement and suggestion in this paper and to discuss the relevant literature would, even if desirable, clearly be impossible within the limits of the present volume. I have therefore confined myself in the notes, with two or three exceptions, to references to the texts mentioned. Since this paper was written in February 1952 Professor R. A. Pack has published his *Catalogue of Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt* (University of Michigan Press), not only the most up-to-date but much the most thorough and scholarly survey of the material; with the help of this many of my statements can be checked and perhaps corrected. In referring to the literary papyri I have in each case quoted the number in Pack's Catalogue. Most of the verse pieces will also be found conveniently collected in D. L. Page, *Greek Literary Papyri* (Loeb Library).

history of Egypt in Greek, basing it on Egyptian documents and dedicating it to the new king (it may be significant that our one fragment of Manetho on a papyrus² comes from a period, the fifth century A.D. when Greeks were again taking an interest in ancient Egypt as part of their struggle against the Christians). At a lower level Hecataeus wrote his *Aegyptiaca*, and one of our earliest prose papyri comes from a work on 'Barbarian Customs'³.

Fifty years later the impression we get is different; the fundamental Hellenic openmindedness and curiosity seems to have contracted and Greeks who were ready to be impressed by Egyptian religion found such an attitude not incompatible with a contempt for the Egyptian next door to them. I am not thinking in the first place of Alexandrian literature, for we may fairly regard Alexandria even at this period as attached to, rather than an intrinsic part of, Egypt; that literature indeed with its concentration on the ancient legends of Greece or the social life of court or city might almost as well have been written in Antioch or Pergamum; but the culture of the upcountry Greek who has bequeathed us our papyri, different as it was from that of Alexandria, leaves in this respect a similar impression. There were of course reasons for this; no longer part of a world empire Egypt as an independent state needed Greek soldiers and Greek technicians if she was to hold her own against Syria and Macedon. Greek manpower had to be attracted and it must be kept Greek. In a famous passage of the first mime of Herodas we find set out the bait to lure the Greek adventurer⁴; the attractions, the purely Greek attractions of Alexandria are set out in detail and there is no mention of Egypt – even though the soldier would probably find himself stationed in the Fayum or Syene rather than in Alexandria.

We can see perhaps more clearly how the problem was met in the school-book, or, as I should prefer to call it, the teacher's manual of the late third century B.C., found in the Fayum and published by Jouguet and Guéraud⁵. Tables of letters are followed by lists of deities and rivers, but the deities are Hellenic, not Egyptian, and while the Eurotas finds a place the Nile does not. In the second part we have a small anthology with some passages from Homer; but though some lines from *Odyssey* V is included there is nothing from the description of Egypt in Bk. IV. Then there are two epigrams; one celebrates the erection of a temple to Homer by Ptolemy IV Philopator, the other is a description of a fountain whose sculptures include statues of a Ptolemy and an Arsinoe. Thus we can observe in this manual how purely Greek education in provincial Egypt remained and how the only contemporary literature included has a propagandist slant. (Incidentally the inclusion of contemporary literature in the school curriculum seems to be peculiar to the third century B.C.; the rigidity and fixity of the curriculum as we see it in later texts may to some extent be accounted for by the desire to keep the syllabus entirely Greek.)

The school which used this text was a private one. At first glance it may seem

² Pack 1017. ³ Pack 1706. ⁴ 1, 26 sq. ⁵ Pack 2068.

anomalous that in a country where economic life was controlled by the state to a degree unparalleled until modern times the schools remained private and free, the more so as in other parts of the contemporary world we find the state undertaking responsibility for education. The explanation is political. The Ptolemies were determined to preserve and improve on the tradition of centralised government they had inherited and in consequence could only tolerate the Greek city within very strict limits. In 300 years of rule only one Greek city was founded in Egypt and that by the first Ptolemy; this consistent policy is underlined by the second Ptolemy's foundation of not less than five cities in the Ptolemaic domains outside Egypt⁶. An official system of Greek education could not exist without the machinery of the city state. But though they would not make this major concession there are indications both in the documents and the literary texts that the state was not entirely disinterested in education. In the *Dikaionmata* we find that teachers of Greek together with athletes and trainers are given exemption from certain taxes and the evidences of state or royal interest in the private gymnasias are unmistakeable; for example, we find that the local strategos is interested in the upkeep of a gymnasium built by private money and dedicated to the king⁷.

Can we detect any trace of State influence in the books read by these provincial Greeks? We possess now enough literary papyri for it to be more than a matter of chance if 30 MSS. survive of one author, 2 of another, although there may be a variety of explanations. Clearly we must proceed cautiously. To start with, it is a common temptation of historians to make every fact tell a story, or rather the story that suits the particular historian's thesis—we should be rash to infer much from the fact that one reader owned, and left to us, our copy of the works of that uncritical polymath, Julius Africanus⁸. Secondly, there are the chances of excavations; and papyrologists should be more awake than most scholars to the dangers of the argument from silence; the length of life of a given town or village will often determine how much of its earlier levels—particularly of its written material—survives; consequently archaeology and the history of the sites will lead us to expect more Roman than Ptolemaic texts. The third reservation may be stated thus; it is important to remember that some people read books merely because they like reading them, and there is probably no one to whom we owe so many of our papyri as the amateur of letters; his existence, indeed, is the presupposition of any attempt to direct the course of literature.

It is easy to be misled here. Zenon, whom we know better, perhaps, than any individual in the papyri, was for long regarded, as his great archive was in course of publication, as the typical Greek business man who cared for none of these things. Then as his papers went on being published, this hard-headed man was

⁶ See V. Tscherikower, *Mizraim* 4–5, p. 43.

⁷ See O. Guéraud, *Ἐντεύξις*, p. 21.

⁸ Pack 31.

discovered ordering from a local poet two epitaphs on a favourite hound⁹; from his library almost certainly comes the earliest MS. we possess (and a very good one) of Euripides' *Hippolytus*¹⁰; and in a letter in the Columbia collection¹¹ we find him ordering books to be sent from Alexandria to his young brother, Epharmostus. Not that the latter's education was "disinterested" in the sense of being purely literary; the books include a collection of speeches or writings about embassies and it is not unlikely that this young brother was intended for Government service¹².

And in the next century, among the papers of the recluse of the Sarapeum, Ptolemæus, we find fragments not only of Euripides and perhaps Menander with which he hoped to educate a recalcitrant young brother, but also specimen drafts of official correspondence, with the names left blank¹³. Ability to write Greek vigorously, clearly, and fluently was an obvious requisite for the civil service (was not Lucian himself a Roman civil servant in Egypt?); and so the Government would have had a natural and proper interest in Greek education. But if we want a conclusive proof that literature was pursued for its own sake, we may recall the evidence for the education of women. Outside the court, women played no part in administrative or social life and their social importance even was slight in provincial life under the Ptolemies; but all the same we hear of girls receiving a literary education. A girl who is away with her mother¹⁴ writes to her young sisters not to worry, not to play outside in the courtyard, and to attend to their books; just as some 300 or more years later a boy writes to his father, the governor of a small province, "please tell my guardian to send me all that is wanted for school, such as a reading book for Heraïdous", and Heraïdous is a Greek name¹⁵. And education for girls may not have been purely domestic; among the mummy portraits of the second century A.D. there is one realistic in treatment and severe in appearance of a lady with the legend "γραμματική"¹⁶.

That this interest in literature and the arts was spontaneous is beyond question; it was a natural Greek reaction to a foreign environment. Other colonising peoples have tried to maintain their national exclusiveness through sport or religion; no other has had this instinctive feeling for the importance of literature and the arts as an activity as well as an inheritance in which national identity existed.

To return to the literary papyri: we possess about 240 literary papyri of the Ptolemaic period (rather under 12% of the total of literary papyri found) and among them verse pieces outnumber prose by two to one. That Homer should

⁹ Pack 1394.

¹⁰ Pack 290.

¹¹ *PCol. Zen.* 60.

¹² See L. Pearson in *Cl. Phil.* 44 (1949) 200 sq.

¹³ See Wilcken, *UPZ* 473 sq. and 622 sq. (these drafts most probably belong to the archive; the literary texts are noted under Pack 292).

¹⁴ *PAth.* 60.

¹⁵ *PGiss.* 21.

¹⁶ See W. M. Flinders-Petric, *Roman Portraits and Memphis* (iv) pl. II.

be far and away the most popular writer needs no comment except perhaps this: Homer was a link binding everyone speaking and writing Greek as no other author was; he was common to all cities and all races and dialects; we can imagine that he united the Greeks living in an alien land—whatever their *origo*—as nothing else did.

Nor is this surmise; in the popular literature of the period we need only recall the epigram celebrating Ptolemy III's erection of a temple to Homer, preserved in the Jouguet-Guéraud schoolbook¹⁷, and the anapaestic poem of the first century B.C. in praise of Homer in the *Berliner Klassikertexte*¹⁸, whose theme is precisely the universal appeal of the poet. No other writer was so regarded and so honoured. Drama, particularly New Comedy, is next in popularity; in prose, the fashion goes for history, especially Hellenistic and contemporary history.

It is no matter for surprise that in this age there was a particular interest in Alexander, more even in him as a legendary figure, the prototype of the Greek colonist and adventurer than as a historical figure. Thus in a Milan text¹⁹ he is represented as addressing a prayer to Sarapis; here we glimpse not only the symbolic importance of the Sarapis cult, but of the feeling for Alexander as the source of all that on which the regime rested.

What is startling is to note that throughout the whole papyrus period the next most popular author after Homer is Demosthenes with over 80 MSS.; yet not one of these can be assigned definitely to the Ptolemaic period; two only are placed in the late first century B.C. and so may be late Ptolemaic or Roman. In the third place comes Euripides—easy, fluent, exciting on the stage and in the study, full of psychological interest that would make him acceptable to the readers of New Comedy and the novel—his popularity needs no explaining; but unlike Demosthenes, he is well represented among the Ptolemaic texts. A lack of interest in ancient as distinct from contemporary history might explain the absence of both Thucydides and Herodotus from the lists of Ptolemaic papyri; but why no Aristophanes? Menander, of course, suited the interests, the language, and the manners of the times; and Aristophanes was difficult—but so were the lyric poets, and Sappho at least was read in Ptolemaic schools²⁰. But plays, we know, were acted and it is hard to imagine that a presentation of the *Acharnians* or the *Knights* would have been welcome in Ptolemaic Egypt. (In Roman and Byzantine times he seems to have been widely read—but by that time he was a classic and innocuous.)

In philosophy the story is not much different; it is astounding that none of the great philosophic schools—Peripatetics, Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics—are represented, with possible exceptions of one fragment of Epicurus and one of Chrysippus on grammar²¹. They, as we know, held views on current social and economic

¹⁷ 11. 155–61. ¹⁸ Pack 1516. ¹⁹ Pack 1931. ²⁰ Pack 1134.

²¹ Pack 2006 and 160. On the views expressed here and in the following paragraph Professor Turner comments (a) that they do not take sufficient account of the perils of arguing *ex silentio*, (b) that our extant prose papyri represent in the main only the earlier

problems; the lexicographers quote a sentence of a third century Stoic almost certainly criticising a Ptolemy for treating the country as his private estate²²; we know, too, that critics of the régime (Sotades for example) could be vindictively punished, and we may recall the onslaught on the intellectuals of Alexandria carried out by Ptolemy Euergetes II.

Under any despotic regime philosophy is one of the earliest victims, and I cannot believe that it is a matter of chance that these philosophers were not read in provincial Egypt. And so with Demosthenes; the *Philippics* and *Olynthiacs* (which acquired a sudden popularity among classical students in Europe in the '30's) might have been dangerous reading particularly when there was a Cleomenes to urge the Alexandrians to set up a republic²³. There are indeed two MSS. of Plato from the third century B.C.²⁴; but Plato (who admired the centralised organisation of fourth century Egypt) might well have been found less unsympathetic than some of his successors—especially the Plato of the *Laws*.

I am not suggesting that there was an official censorship, rather something like a censorship by consent and in any case we must in this connection, as in others, draw a sharp distinction between the metropolitan culture of Alexandria (to whose savants the whole literature of the Greek world was available, largely through royal initiative) and the provincial culture we study in the papyri; from the point of view of the régime the reading habits of the scholars and writers of Alexandria (whose fame did much to enhance its prestige in the Greek world outside) may have been of little consequence compared with those of the average Greek in the country. And in this period the difference between the culture of Alexandria and that of the country seems to me to have been much greater than it was in, say, the second century A.D. The culture of Alexandria was intensive, learned, modernistic; by comparison, that of the country seems to have been diffuse and popular with little occasion or incentive towards experiment or novelty (here the absence of the *πόλις* with all its opportunities for self-expression and communication may have been decisive). That may be why there are no MSS. of Callimachus, Theocritus, Apollonius Rhodius, or Aratus among the Ptolemaic papyri, and this

part of the third century B.C., (c) that there are a number of unpublished prose scraps of a philosophical character in the Hibeh collection (some of which will be published in *PHibeh* II). I would agree that this is the kind of argument which may easily be overturned by a new discovery; but it would not appear on present information that there are any texts of moral or political philosophy in the Hibeh collection, and only such texts would be relevant to the present argument.

²² See W. W. Tarn in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 14 (1928) 260.

²³ Professor Turner would explain the absence of any texts of Demosthenes or Aeschines in this period on the ground that they were *démodé*, in subject, treatment, and style. In support of this view we might point to the absence of other classical prose authors (e.g. Thucydides) from the Ptolemaic papyri and to the fact that these are only three papyri of the Attic orators which are undoubtedly Ptolemaic (Pack 964, 965, 1016). On the other hand there was plenty of scholarly interest in the orators in the Hellenistic age and though these aesthetic considerations were important, I doubt whether in themselves they prove a sufficient explanation.

²⁴ Pack 1083 and 1096. In addition two anonymous fragments of the third century B.C. may come from commentaries on the *Phaedo* (Pack 1992 and 1993).

though the interest in contemporary literature was greater in Ptolemaic than Roman times. The great writers of Alexandria were certainly read and read extensively in Roman and Byzantine times, but by then they were "classics"; and this brings us to a new development in the cultural life of Egypt.

The diffuseness of provincial culture, the avoidance of new and sophisticated forms, the tendency towards what Greeks had in common rather than to what separated them, led in time to a certain standardisation; when this, quite independently, was reinforced by the critical work of the Alexandrian scholars, separating the genuine from the false, the stylistically correct from the incorrect, the result was the creation, for the first time, of a "classical" culture, built upon a carefully selected standard literature, and of a conscious tradition. The roots of this are in the Ptolemaic age; its growth belongs to the Roman. We know that the State was directly interested in one of these processes; it is not improbable that both were regarded as different facets of a single policy.

The final stage, obvious if undesirable, of this process whereby the selection of some books involve the rejection of the rest was not reached for a long time (later, I think, than many scholars hold) and was never, in our period, quite complete; but facts speak more clearly than generalisation and I propose to quote the case of one author, Euripides.

I have counted 67 papyri of the plays²⁵, known or unknown of Euripides, excluding quotations in Satyrus and Favorinus; incidentally he is the only classical writer, apart from Homer, to be cited in a document, for when the town council of Hermopolis welcome home a distinguished fellow townsman in the reign of Gallienus, they show their appreciation by putting in a line from the *Ion*; true, the Town Clark misquotes not once, but twice, leaving a yawning hiatus in the middle of the line—but to be quoted by a Town Clark²⁶ at all is real fame. In date they range from the third century B.C. to the sixth or seventh A.D., and not less than 50 of the 67 fragments come from plays we already possess. From the third century B.C. there are 5 fragments of known plays against 5 of new; after that the proportion of new fragments never in any century equals that of known ones, nor does it reach the same figure again. From the second century A.D. we have 7 known fragments against 4 new, while in the succeeding century we have 9 known fragments and no new ones; the following centuries yield 14 known fragments and only 2 new. Thus the trend in taste and standard of education that led to the selection of 10 of the known plays for school reading can be shown to have begun before the beginning of the Roman period. It is no accident that the *Medea* is represented by more fragments than the *Hecuba*.

²⁵ Although I have excluded simple quotations, I have included extracts in anthologies (e.g. the Strasbourg papyrus [Pack 313]) and consequently in a few cases the same papyrus has been counted twice. There are also problems of doubtful attribution of the new fragments; and I have included one or two papyri of extant plays which will be published in *POxy.* XXII. But though the precise figure is open to argument, the overall picture remains the same.

²⁶ *CPHerm.* 125 B 7.

Moreover, the known plays divide into two groups; those 10 which at some time were selected for reading in school and furnished with notes, and the remaining 9 all of whose titles begin with eta, epsilon, iota or kappa. The survival of these 9 was a matter of chance, and we have no reason for thinking that they were more admired or more read than others now completely lost. Of our 50 fragments of known plays not less than 47 come from the ten select plays, three only from the remaining 9 plays and none of these three is later than the third century A.D. On the other hand the 47 MSS. of the ten select plays are spread all over the centuries so that this frequency is not a consequence of the Roman selection. Thus the selection—in other words, the formation of the classical tradition—is seen not to have been an arbitrary act but in keeping with the general taste of the Hellenistic age and it is satisfactory to us in as far as it suggests that the Euripides we know is essentially the same as the Euripides of antiquity.

There is one other phenomenon worth mentioning in this connection and that is the popularity of the anthology, particularly in Ptolemaic Egypt. The anthology, when it is more than a collection of drinking songs like the Elephantine skolia, is a demand for the best or the most representative in the shortest possible space. It represents one possible reaction to the situation in which the Greeks of the dispersion found themselves. Another is to shut oneself up against the barbarian flood, to write with pedantic insistence and learned allusion to make sure that the outsider will not understand you, to safeguard the letter of Greek civilization even at the cost of sacrificing its spirit; this way to the ivory tower was taken by many of the poets and scholars of Alexandria. The alternative is to popularise and make easy; the anthologies together with Homer provide something on which Greeks of different origins could agree—the lowest common denominator of a culture at its time of greatest diffusion. These are extreme reactions; the middle way between them leads to the establishment of a classical tradition and this is what we can trace in the excellent and scholarly texts of Pindar, the lyric poets, Plato and the tragedian which the Roman age has bequeathed to us.

So far we have seen Hellenism establishing itself firmly, consolidating its position at the cost of new gains (as we see it in provincial Egypt it was not, perhaps could not, be creative); but in one field it was defeated, that of religion. Religion was the victor's Achilles' heel. (After all, there was no one Greek religion; certainly there were no Greek religious classics, or a religious literature that could become classic.) Documentary and literary papyri alike bear this out. At the end of the third century B.C., a Greek commemorates his gratitude to the Egyptian god Amenothos for healing him after eight years of sickness²⁷; the doctors, he says, had been unable to help him (and it is indicative of the gulf between Alexandria and the provinces that there are no papyri of the third or second century B.C. recording the great advances in medicine made by the school of Alexandria). In the third century B.C. we have a purely Greek hymn in honour of Demeter from

²⁷ SB 7370.

the Fayum; but already the early second century B.C. produced a hymn in which Greek and Egyptian elements are blended, a line from Euripides' *Phaenissæ* being used as a kind of hieratic chant in an invocation of Amun²⁸. More striking is a text known as the Oracle of the Potter in which Egyptian nationalist and religious elements are blended. An unpublished Oxyrhynchus papyrus gives us a new and longer text, and a fragment in Dublin proves that this text or something like it was current in Egypt in the late third century B.C.²⁹. Already at this early date linguistic and religious boundaries do not coincide. Here for the first time we encounter what I should call 'suppressed literature'—the kind of writing which could hardly have been popular with those in authority, would not have found its way into state libraries and for our knowledge of which we are entirely dependent on the papyri. The classic example of such a work is the *Acta Alexandrinorum*³⁰ which came into existence to encourage the aspirations and soothe the vanity of the Greek aristocrats of Alexandria; the Oracle of the Potter and other similar texts were written to give expression to the feelings of inferiority and injustice of a class lower in the social scale. For in this apocalyptic vision of the troubles of Egypt under foreign soldiers, of this expulsion by a "King from the South", of the subsequent restoration of an Egyptian golden age marked by the destruction of the "city by the sea" and the return of the gods to their old abode of Memphis, we find a Greek expression of the bitter feelings of Egyptian nationalism, a nationalism expressed largely in religious terms. The new texts make it clear that this document is not, as some scholars e.g. Reitzenstein had thought, a witness to Jewish or Persian influences; it is a transcription, amended and brought up to date, of ancient Egyptian prophetic literature—a popular, not a scholarly production. The Greeks are specifically mentioned as the enemy, and identification of the "city by the sea" which is to become a place "where fishermen dry their nets" (a prophecy fulfilled in the Arab conquest) with Alexandria cannot be in doubt. In its xenophobia, its religious fanaticism, its dreams of power, this popular literature illuminates the state of feeling after the battle of Raphia when the Ptolemies were forced to make concessions to their Egyptian subjects, followed by a century of racial tension, unrest and rebellion at home and declining power abroad.

I have mentioned that the establishment of a classical tradition belongs to the Roman period; why this should be so is, I think, reasonably clear. Roman cultural policy was clear and unmistakeable and so a much briefer treatment may be adequate. As usual, Rome defined, organised, separated (*divide et impera* is not an unfair summary of her Egyptian policy). Egypt was to be contained: Romans, apart from privileged tourists and the handful of high administrators (Roman officials were relatively fewer in Egypt than were British administrators in India)

²⁸ See G. Manteuffel in *Tell Edfou* 1939 (Cairo 1950), ostrakon no. 326 p. 332.

²⁹ The new text together with the Dublin fragment will be published in *POxy.* XXII.

³⁰ A complete collection of the *Acta* with revised texts and commentaries will shortly be published by Dr. H. A. Musurillo.

were excluded from Egypt. As a counterweight to the Egyptian elements, and to enable the country to be run, the Greeks were encouraged, but only up to a point. For a Greek of one of the three cities to become a Roman citizen was not easy unless he were willing to join the Army; for a Greco-Egyptian much more difficult for an Egyptian impossible. The barriers were clear; the penalties (as we know from the documents, above all the *Gnomon*) for trying to jump them were severe and were enforced. The Greek element was concentrated in the metropoleis; the village gymnasia disappear, while cultural life in the towns is for the first time organized, placed under official supervision, and in Augustus' reign some kind of register of the privileged Greek or Grecised class was made. To the Greek with no political ambitions, that is to the majority of Greeks in the country, this position was satisfactory. The privileged classes (there were certain gradations within them) were financially favoured; and as the principle of Roman rule was that of "fiscality", as M. Martin among others has demonstrated³¹, i.e. that the interests of the Roman treasury are in all circumstances paramount, as numerous petitions and decisions of magistrates show, we may be sure that such concessions would not have been made unless great importance were attached to the results.

Let us look briefly at the effect of this policy on the fortunes of Greek and Latin literature in Egypt. For most Greco-Egyptians, Roman rule—particularly in the second century—brought stability and security and a fair degree of economic prosperity. We possess far more literary papyri from the second century than from any other, that long period of peace and prosperity, if also of stagnation; and I think this is not merely due to the chances of excavation. For a study recently made of the figures for literacy in Egypt by Signorina Calderini³² shows not only that the number of literates was greater, but that the proportion of literates to illiterates is higher in this century than in any other. This, together with the wealth of literary papyri that we have recovered from one not particularly important provincial town—Oxyrhynchus—is a striking testimonial to Roman rule. And the policy of organising and concentrating intellectual life in the "metropoleis" was not without its rewards. Civic pride and civic loyalties were potent factors in the second and third centuries A.D.; whereas to-day they express themselves mainly in athletics, the Greek tradition was sufficiently strong in centres such as Arsinoe, Hermopolis, Oxyrhynchus for them to take a literary and artistic form as well. There were festivals of Homeric recitation, of drama, of music as well as of sport; distinguished performers came from outside and local talent was encouraged. This feeling found expression in occasional verses and scenarios whose literary merit is as small as their historical interest is considerable. There is the libretto for a mime, the characters in which are Phoebus and Demos, to celebrate the advent to the throne of Hadrian³³. More significant, perhaps, of the feeling

³¹ See V. Martin, *Histoire administrative* in Otto and Wenger, *Papyri und Altertumswissenschaft* (Münchener Beiträge xix).

³² *Aegyptus* 30 (1950) 14 sq.

³³ Pack 1384.

the new rulers of Egypt could evoke is an epigram on Octavian³⁴ in which he is equated with Zeus Eleutherios, and is regarded as the Benefactor who gives the waters of the Nile (as were the Pharaohs before him, and Byzantine magnates after him)—*ἀπτόλεμον καὶ ἄδηρον Ἐλευθερίου Διὸς ὄμβρον*. Then there are the verses in honour of a youthful gymnasiarch of Oxyrhynchus, and great benefactor of the gymnasium, Theon³⁵; and if I have understood this rightly, the writer is saying that his former benefaction of oil is now matched by a benefaction of a different and higher order—I suspect a gift to the library of the gymnasium. And then there is the encomium on the fig, in fact an encomium on Hermes, in other words of one of the two patron deities of the gymnasium—written most likely for some local celebration³⁶.

The evidence for this feeling is particularly strong in the late third century; this may be fortuitous or it may reflect the relative prosperity of Upper Egypt at a time when Alexandria and the Delta were suffering from invasion and counter-invasion. An unpublished papyrus from Oxyrhynchus³⁷ gives a list of successful competitors for the years 261–288; they include heralds, solo performers on the trumpet and—most numerous of all—poets. Our information about such festivals usually derives from the municipal accounts; this is a happy exception. For, if I have read the preamble correctly, it is a list of those entitled to tax exemption on the ground of their success; we have long known that winners in the great professional and international games were entitled to exemption and sometimes to free maintenance for themselves and their heirs; but it is new that victors in the annual contests in provincial towns were given such an incentive. It is evidence both of the flourishing state of Oxyrhynchus and of State, or municipal, support of the arts in a dark period of Roman history. The names of the poets survive; that their poems have not, we need not regret unduly. We should perhaps also note that in the Roman period Egypt contributed over again and more notably in the field of religion. In literature Roman Egypt (outside Alexandria) has no names of eminence, few of any distinction; but she can claim Origen, probably of Greco-Egyptian descent, and the last great name in classical philosophy, Plotinus of Lycopolis. However, the contribution here of the literary papyri (if we except magical texts) has been slight until M. Schérer's sensational publication of the Origen MS.³⁸ At a lower level the religious situation in the country is well reflected in the literary or quasi-literary texts; to omit the magical texts and mention only the most celebrated of the rest there is the famous invocation of Isis³⁹ in which the international and syncretistic character of the cult is not less clear than its basic Egyptian nature, and the Praise of Imouthes-Asclepius⁴⁰; the mix-

³⁴ Pack 1395.

³⁵ Pack 1470.

³⁶ Pack 1962.

³⁷ This text will be published in *POxy.* XXII.

³⁸ J. Schérer, *Entretien d'Origène* (Textes et Documents IX).

³⁹ Pack 1925.

⁴⁰ Pack 1926.

ture of popular Greek 'aretae' stories with Egyptian motifs (such as the discovery and translation of the sacred book) is characteristic of the situation outside as well as inside Egypt.

At this point we may conveniently pause to consider what traces are to be found in the literary papyri of various institutions known to us from the documents; the evidence, such as it is, comes mostly from the Roman period, but not exclusively and in this field what holds good of the Roman period may be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Ptolemaic. We have already seen that two or three of our texts stand in a direct relationship to the gymnasium, of all institutions the most important for the cultural life of the country and of which our knowledge is so deplorably incomplete. Possibly many of our literary papyri by their very existence bear a silent witness to its vigour; its decline and disappearance in the fourth century may have something to do with the marked drop in the number of classical texts from that century onwards. The connection of the school with our literary papyri is much clearer; not a few of them, Latin as well as Greek, have their schoolroom origin stamped on their face, whether in the painful and laboured script of the schoolboy, the marks put on them by the master, or the Greek translation or glosses liberally supplied for the teachers' benefit in certain Latin texts. We have already noted that the demands of the school curriculum may have been in part responsible for the interest in Hellenistic history in general and Alexander in particular in the Ptolemaic age just as they undoubtedly were throughout our period for the popularity of Homer and Menander; but the school, just as the gymnasium, has contributed to the *Kleinliteratur*—there is the charming School-Song, or perhaps we should call it the Song of the Model Schoolboy⁴¹ written in anacreontics and published by Vitelli nearly fifty years ago.

The popularity of the theatre and the long-continued interest in theatrical performances deserves more attention in this connection than it has received. A recently published papyrus gave evidence of a theatre in use at Memphis in the second or third century A.D.⁴², and we already knew of their existence at Arsinoe, at Oxyrhynchus, and of course in the Greek cities; and a Berlin papyrus preserves a list of stage properties required for a vaudeville acted in the fifth or sixth century A.D.⁴³; but it seems to be doubtful whether we can infer, with M. Rémondon, from an allusion in a Coptic text that Aristophanes' plays were still performed at Panopolis in the fifth century, though in passing we may note that we have—from Arsinoe, not Panopolis—a sixth century MS. of the *Birds*⁴⁴.

The importance of clubs in the social life of the country is well-known, and it may not be fanciful to connect with their activities some of the drinking songs that the papyri have preserved for us, just as when reading the Song of the Nile Boat-

⁴¹ Pack 1536.

⁴² P. Fouad Univ. 14.

⁴³ R. Rémondon, *L'Égypte et la suprême résistance au Christianisme* in Bull. Inst. franç. Arch. Or. 51 (1952) 63 sq.; the Aristophanes papyrus is Pack 78.

⁴⁴ Pack 1895.

men⁴⁵ with its blend of popular and classical characteristics, its use of accentual side by side with quantitative scansion, and the conventional 'comparison' of Nile and ocean, or the Song to the Winds of Rhodes⁴⁶ it is difficult not to think of the grain-ships, the sailors and the travellers journeying from Egypt to Alexandria or Alexandria to Italy whom we meet in the documents. The hymn to the Nile may have had a religious appeal as well; the cult of the Nile can be followed from the earliest days down to late Christian times when the *Neilōa* were still celebrated⁴⁷.

When we remember what was the policy of Augustus and his successors towards Egypt we may well ask what conceivable interest the inhabitant of Egypt had in learning Latin—unless he was a citizen of one of the three Greek cities and wished to join the Army. *Seposuit Aegyptum*. There were of course no Latin colonies. So whereas Northern Africa produced a long line of names distinguished in Latin literature, there is none from Egypt until we come to Claudian at the end of the fourth century when Egypt's position was radically different. For the first 250 years of Roman rule in Egypt the number of Latin literary papyri (even if we include a single line of Virgil written as a school imposition) does not amount to more than seven, and four of these seven can definitely be associated with the Roman Army; for the hundreds of new Greek literary texts recovered from Oxyrhynchus in the same period, there are two Latin—both fragments of historical works. In the third century A.D. the political and social position was changed by the *Constitutio Antoniniana* and the percentage is slightly higher. Among the Greek papyri of the Ptolemaic period are several works on Roman history (among them Polybius and Sossylus on the Punic Wars); and it is not, I think, a coincidence that so high a proportion of the Latin papyri earlier than the reign of Diocletian are from historical works (among them Livy, Sallust, and several anonymous fragments). The Greeks of Egypt had every reason to be more aware of Rome as a historical force than of Rome as a nurse of poets.

The most striking instance of the effects of a political change on the cultural life of the country is provided by the reforms of Diocletian. For the first time Egypt was really integrated in the Empire. Latin became the official language of the country, e.g. judgment was given in Latin in the higher courts, some knowledge of it was necessary for the higher posts in the Egyptian civil service, and classical Roman law tended more and more to become the standard law of the country. The reasons for this were probably complex; Egypt's peculiar position must have been irritating to the creator of the new absolutist and bureaucratic state, and was no longer justified either by the unique importance of her corn production or by fear of her religious influence; above all, Latin was now thought of as a common bond to unite the Eastern provinces and to check such separatist

⁴⁵ Pack 1518.

⁴⁶ Pack 1520.

⁴⁷ See R. Keydell in *Hermes* 69 (1934) 420 sq.

tendencies as had been patent in Egypt in the third century. The propaganda in favour of Latin was not at the start unsuccessful; more Latinisms appear in common speech, and even the ordinary, as distinct from the official, Greek handwriting shows strong Latin influence (which indicates how the schools cooperated in the new policy). For the 320 years preceding Diocletian's reform we have only eighteen literary texts; for the two centuries between Diocletian and Justinian we have sixty-five, if we include the fragments of the Latin legal classics. The majority of the strictly literary texts are of Cicero and Virgil and many of these have their educational purpose written large across them in the Greek notes and glosses they carry. But there is no Catullus, no Lucretius, no Ovid, no Horace; the poets are represented by a page of Juvenal, a substantial fragment of Terence (as yet unpublished), possibly by a scrap of Lucan⁴⁸. Though Egypt shared in the recovery of the fourth century, we may doubt whether the policy of Latinisation paid in the long run. Latin literature was too alien to be absorbed into Egypt and though Greek continued to flourish for a while, we may suspect that this division of the forces of classical culture stimulated and strengthened the nationalism and separatism it was designed to check.

We have noticed that one effect of Diocletian's reforms was to assimilate Egypt much more closely to the other Eastern provinces and this process as well as the protracted cultural and political struggle between pagan and Christian, national separatism and the central authority, is mirrored in the literary papyri. Indeed at no time are the literary papyri closer to the political and social life of the country than they are in the fifth and sixth centuries—even if we must in the same breath admit that at no time is their strictly literary interest less. In the considerable mass of contemporary writing (and the proportion of contemporary to classical texts is remarkably high) and, what is more surprising, writing on contemporary themes, we have verses in honour of Maximus, an eminent citizen of Tyre⁴⁹ and the laments for the Professors of Beirut⁵⁰; these remind us that celebrated as are the relations between the Christians of Egypt and those of Palestine and Asia in the age of monasticism and the first Christian pilgrimages, ties no less close existed between the supporters of the old culture in the different countries⁵¹. To be a scholar or a 'philosopher' was to be an avowed defender of paganism; these verses on professors and similar effusions have more significance than may appear at first sight. I suspect that most of our Byzantine literary papyri had for those who used and owned them a political as well as a literary significance.

It is noticeable that the form in which many of these compositions is couched is

⁴⁸ Juvenal = Pack 2291: Lucan = Pack 2294. The Terence will be published either in *POxy.* XXII or XXIII. The figures given above for Latin literary texts are maximum figures, i.e. they include glossaries, alphabets, etc. which are on the borderline between literary and documentary texts. Texts not of Egyptian provenance are excluded.

⁴⁹ Pack 1476.

⁵⁰ Pack 1474.

⁵¹ See most recently R. Rémondon's article cited above no. 43.

the epic; and the marked revival of epic or hexameter verse is again not peculiar in any way to Egypt, although Egypt's share in it was outstanding; she can claim not only Pamprepus and Nonnus of Panopolis, but (the most distinguished poet of the time) Claudian himself who was born in Alexandria. This fashion for epic has its roots in the third century, and from this century we have a number of anonymous hexameter fragments among the papyri; but their themes are provided by classical legend and mythology, not by contemporary persons or events, with the possible exception of the poem on Maximus, which I should prefer to attribute to the early fourth century. The earliest, perhaps, is the Berlin poem on the Persian Wars of Diocletian⁵², a poem that takes its place with encomia on the wars of Constantine and Julian which have no connection with Egypt or papyri.

There are however compositions that reflect particular Egyptian interests and events; for example, the fifth century poems celebrating imperial victories against the Blemmyes, the barbarian invaders of Upper Egypt⁵³. But the most attractive of all these compositions is a poem on the creation of the world and the elements⁵⁴ in which (as Keydell has shown) an Egyptian legend of the 'flame island' at Hermopolis where the sun was born is linked with Greek elements—for example the importance assigned to the foundation of a city and its foundation legends (another example is Nonnus' treatment of the myth of Beirut). If this poem, in Keydell's phrase, a 'Patria Hermopoleos' is not by the Egyptian Soterichus who wrote in Diocletian's reign a *Πάτρια Ὁάσεως*, it is near to it both in time and (we may surmise) in spirit; like it, it is native in origin.

In verse such as this we find a new type of patriotic poetry in which Egyptian and Greek elements are fused, not casually or formally but substantially in a union of the older cultures against the new. Not all local poetry is of this quality. On the whole the better poets, Nonnus and Pamprepus did not choose Egyptian themes; one writer indeed did, Dioscorus of Aphrodito, but interesting as he is to the historian, to the student of literature his compositions have only pathological interest; these 'unlovely laments at which he labours' (to adapt one of his own phrases, *ἀνίμεγα δάκρυα μόχθων*) cannot, by the most generous use of the imagination, be described as literature.

But Dioscorus has a different importance for us; a study of his character and career (for which we are indebted to Maspero and Bell⁵⁵) not merely gives us an insight into the cultural conflicts of the period but enables us to understand why any literary papyri at all have survived from the Byzantine Age. It was for example typical of him that he should have copied, seventy-five years after it was written, the petition of Horapollon⁵⁶ simply because it was a piece of impressive writing by the last of the *philosophoi*; that petition takes us within the circle of defiant

⁵² Pack 1471.

⁵³ Pack 1475.

⁵⁴ Pack 1472: Cf. Keydell in *Hermes* 71 (1936) 465 sq.

⁵⁵ See J. Maspero in *Rev. Et. Grec.* 24 (1911) 426 sq. and H. I. Bell's introd. to *PLond.* V.

⁵⁶ *PCair. Masp.* III 67295.

champions of Hellenism. The petitioner's grandfather had written treatises on Alcæus, on Sophocles, on Homer; he may himself be the author of a surviving treatise on hieroglyphics. Here the two interests, the Greek and the Egyptian, both covered by the term 'philosophia' meet in the one family.

We owe much to Dioscorus' passion for collecting remnants of the ancient world—not only this revealing document, but the great Cairo codex of Menander itself. And perhaps we shall not go wrong if we take Dioscorus the collector rather than Dioscorus the composer as symbolic of Egypt's function as we see it in the literary papyri of the Greek and Roman periods. We must admit that the literary qualities of the works written in Egypt (if we leave out of account Alexandria) are disappointing enough by any standard. Greco-Roman Egypt was not one of the creators of classical culture; it was a preserver and transmitter and Dioscorus' preservation of the Menander codex may well stand as the classic example of that function. To this concentration on the classic past we owe the literary papyri; we may also reflect that the survival of any Greek literature at all was made possible by two institutions which have in common only their Egyptian origin, the Museum of Alexandria, which passed the torch of scholarship to Constantinople, and, as it developed outside Egypt, monasticism.