

Book Review

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The Undertakers of the Great Oasis (P. Nokr.). By R. S. BAGNALL. Pp. xiv + 148, frontispiece and pls I–XIV. Graeco-Roman Memoirs, Supplementary Volume No. 1. London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 2017. ISBN 978-0-85698-234-7. Price £85.

This is the first volume in a new series of Supplementary Volumes to the Graeco-Roman Memoirs, which were traditionally devoted to the publication of texts stemming from the excavations of the Egypt Exploration Society, mainly the Oxyrhynchus papyri. This, however, is the edition of a group of papyri that were bought and spread over different collections, among which that of the Sackler Library at Oxford. Together they make up the private archive¹ of persons connected by their shared profession of *nekrotaphoi*, νεκροτάφοι, literally ‘performers of the funeral rites for dead bodies’ or undertakers.² The texts of this archive are dated between 237 and 314 CE, a long period of time, with two peaks in the dates. It has been thought in the past that they might actually be part of two different archives. Bagnall, however, convincingly shows (p. 3) that this is not the case, the main argument being the existence in the archive of a text (text 11) dated 247 CE, and of its copy dated 40 years later (text 21). The relationship between the different groups of texts is proven by the fact that fragments belonging to papyri now in the British Library (21, 38) and the Sorbonne (19, 23) were found in the Sackler Library. The content of the papyri is as to be expected for a private archive, including petitions, mandates, loans, contracts, receipts and letters; most of the documents are in fact copies.

The archive was found in the ‘Great Oasis’, or Khargha Oasis, probably in or near the village of Kysis, in the 1890s.

¹ It is confusing that Bagnall also uses the word ‘dossier’ several times to describe this ‘archive’ (e.g. p. 9, p. 104), disregarding the distinction that papyrologists usually make between dossier and archive (see K. Vondorp, ‘Archives and Dossiers’, in R. S. Bagnall (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (Oxford, 2009), 216–55).

² Bagnall translates this as ‘person who buries dead bodies’ (p. 7); compare LSJ s.v. where the word νεκροτάφος is equalled with νεκροθάπτης ‘grave-digger’. I prefer the translation ‘performers of the funeral rites for dead bodies’, because it is in line with the first meaning of θάπτω in LSJ: ‘honour with funeral rites’ and with Bagnall’s own remark that ‘The term means rather more than grave-digger, however’ (p. 7). Note Bagnall’s remark that νεκροταφίς is now a ghost word.

The papyri were subsequently sold to different collectors. Apart from the papyri in the Oxford collection, other groups of papyri ended up in the Bodleian Library and the British Library, three are now in the Sorbonne and one papyrus is housed in the Archabbey of Beuron. After Sayce published some fragments in 1894,³ Grenfell and Hunt published 11 more complete texts of the archive as P. Grenf. II 68–78 in 1897. In 1996 the Bodleian part of this archive, nine mostly fragmentary papyri, was published by Salomons in P. Bodl.⁴ In this volume the still unpublished texts and fragments of this archive housed in the Sackler Library are published by Roger Bagnall, accompanied by re-editions of the earlier published texts so as to have the whole archive conveniently available in one up-to-date book.⁵ The text editions have benefited from the eyes of other papyrologists, and in the first place the eyes of W. B. Henry who is thanked for his readings and interpretations in several places. The result is a very thorough and trustworthy edition, presented in the same familiar layout as the Oxyrhynchus papyri.

The protagonists of the archive are the descendants of Katamersis and of Polydeukes alias Mersis, who was a freed slave of two great-grandsons of Katamersis; family trees of their respective families can be found on p. 5. In general, and maybe contrary to what one might expect in the case of undertakers, the combined texts show that the owners of the archive were no outcasts, but rather belonged to the upper-middle class of society (notwithstanding the fact that none of them knew how to write). See, in particular, the Introduction, paragraph 4: ‘The nekrotaphoi and their status’. The people mentioned in the archive lived in the village Kysis or in or near the capital city Hibis, the place where probably most of the documents were written on behalf of the undertakers. Words used in the texts to describe the undertakers are, apart from νεκροτάφος plus its female forms νεκροτάφη and νεκροτάφισσα, ἐξωφυλίτης and female ἐξωφυλίτις (lit. ‘the one who lives outside the gate’) and ἀλλόφυλος (lit. ‘of a different race, tribe or class’). All three words are now, taking into account the evidence of the new texts, regarded as occupational terms, ‘generic terms for funerary workers’ in the third and fourth centuries CE; see the well-founded discussion on pp. 7–9. The texts actually

³ Known as SB I 4651–4656; 4654 + 4655 were republished by J. Bingen = SB VIII 9873.

⁴ P. Bodl. I 32, 33, 43, 46, 50, 51, 165, 167, 169.

⁵ A concordance of previous publications and P. Nokr. numbers is found in P. Nokr. on pp. 147–8.

do not reveal much about what exactly the profession of a *nekrotaphos* entailed, but it must, next to providing them with a grave, also have included the responsibility for the mummification of the bodies. The profession is mentioned in passing when a person is described, or when the ownership of the right to take care of the dead in a certain location is at stake. Only sometimes details about the daily business seep through, like in the well-known letter specifying the cost of a funeral (18) or the even more famous Christian ‘letter about a body’ sent by one presbyter to another (28, formerly known as P. Grenf. II 73), with a new attempt at a reconstruction of what had happened: Bagnall makes clear how many of the earlier interpretations are based on wrong assumptions or mere speculation, and comes with a new hypothesis: a lady named Politike (or described as πολιτική, ‘prostitute’) was sent to the Oasis, and died there. The *nekrotaphoi* of the Oasis brought her body to her hometown Toeto, where it was kept by the local *nekrotaphoi* until her son Neilos arrived. The son would later, when he visited the Oasis, be able to tell the *nekrotaphoi* there what their colleagues in Toeto had finally done with the body. The involvement of our *nekrotaphoi* with the body would explain the presence of this letter in their archive.

The 50 often fragmentary texts (48 plus nrs 6A and 12A), are presented in chronological order;⁶ 28 of them are re-editions of earlier publications, some with new fragments added. Eleven of the texts are (copies of) *petitions*, directed to the *strategus*, the *praeses* or even the prefect of Egypt, on subjects regarding property and status, like the disputed ownership of a *nekrotaphic* practice (15, 23 – with a spiritus asper in l. 8), violence suffered by a group of *nekrotaphoi* represented by an Aurelius Pmarsis (19),⁷ control of inherited property (27) often including (shares in) a *nekrotaphic* practice (30, 43, 47), with 43 incidentally showing that women also travelled from the Oasis to the Nile valley. The fragmentary petition 35 has the earliest use of *δεσπότης* in the consular date (16 February 307). Fragment 38 is directed to the *praeses* Satrius Arrianus, known as persecutor of Christians, by a grandson of the freedman Polydeukos, complaining that his wife and children were enslaved. New fragments could be added to this interesting, earlier published text.⁸ In general, the petitions show that most conflicts took place between members of the same community of undertakers. Conflicts are also displayed through texts like the fragmentary sworn undertaking to appear before a court (36) and the renunciation of a claim on the rights to 10 days’ use of a hunting ground (2, 3). This hunting ground is argued to have been mainly used for netting migratory

birds; text 5, a lease of this same hunting ground, shows that it was also used for planting trees, probably palms (20 young trees planted instead of rent).

In the five *mandates* of the archive, people authorise (early use of *ἀποσυνεστηκέναι*) someone else to register an official deed in Alexandria: in 4 (republished with new fragments) this regards a deed of manumission (of Polydeukes himself), as well as of a gift of a one-third share of a house; in 10, ‘perhaps the richest document of the archive’, the registration regards a deed of gift, including shares of wells, hunting grounds, shares of *nekrotaphic* practice in Hibis, Kysis and other villages, as well as house lots; in 13 the mandate regards the registration of a deed of gift of one-eighth of a fourth share of a *nekrotaphic* practice and a quarter share of a house. Text 25 gives interesting new information on how arbitrators were appointed: a woman probably from the *nekrotaphic* family writes a mandate for another *nekrotaphos* ‘to travel to the upper country and to take my place before the *prohedros* of the city of the Mothites, to undergo selection by lot as arbitrator’ (l. 6–10). The *loans* of money include 1, 33 (two copies on one papyrus), 39 (borrower’s copy) and 46; 17 is the acknowledgement of receipt for the repayment, after 18 years, of a loan secured by a mortgage consisting in the right to five days’ use of the water from two wells.

In the *contracts* of sale, the sold objects are: a half-share of *nekrotaphic* rights in the village of Pmounesis and surrounding country for 300 drachmas (in 244 CE, text 9, with new fragments); an unknown object for 500 drachmas (14); a white female camel, bought from a cavalryman belonging to the Secundi Promoti of the Legio II Traiana, stationed in Tentyra, for nine talents (in 302 CE, text 32); and a half-share in a donkey for two and a half talents (in 307, text 37), with the remarkable clause: ‘I agree that it is not allowed for me to stand away from the donkey nor for you to separate me from her’ (ll. 12–14). Other texts show female undertakers performing the job of wet-nurse: in 40 a female undertaker from Mothis in the Dakhla Oasis acknowledges the receipt of wages for working as a wet-nurse for an undertaker in Kysis; in 41 we have the fragmentary remains of a wet-nursing contract. Text 24 and the better preserved 34 contain deeds of divorce, made up by the husband to the wife and guaranteeing her future right to re-marry as well as renouncing any future claims on her property. The wife’s renouncement of future claims on her dowry, present in 34, is missing in 24. Of the remaining texts, I would like to mention the receipt of a corpse that was sealed for transport (45) and the receipt for payment of *commodium*, which must have been a tax in kind as a gratuity for officials and was paid on the special request of the prefect Valerius Pompeianus (31). The whole body of texts in this archive not only provides information on the families of undertakers, but also touches on broader subjects, discussed in the Introduction to the book, such as slavery and manumission, illegitimate children, legal representation, or the importance of access to water.

The edition of every single text conveniently includes the TM-numbers for further online reference and, in the case of re-editions, starts with information about previous editions of and publications about the papyrus in

⁶ Although one could argue that 6 (dated c. 240 CE) should have been placed before 5 (dated 27 July 241), and 23 (c. 290–92) before 22 (c. 298–314).

⁷ Or rather Pmarsis instead of Pmarsis: in the place where this part of the name is best preserved, 9, 2, the reading epsilon is certain; in 9, 19 I would prefer the reading Πμέρσις over Πμάρσις, and I would even prefer reading Πμέρσις in 20, 5 (based on the plates: frontispiece and pl. VII).

⁸ In the line-by-line commentary of 38, change (line) 11 into 11–12 (γένος is supplemented in l. 12, while the ‘alpha instead of omicron’ refers to l. 11).

question.⁹ The texts are concisely and clearly introduced; the Greek transcriptions with *apparatus criticus* are followed by translations and commentary. Word indices¹⁰ and concordances of texts conclude the volume. Black-and-white images of the newly edited papyri from the Sackler Library including those originally published by Sayce and of two papyri from the Sorbonne are found on the frontispiece and at the end.¹¹ This new edition of the archive of the *nekrotaphoi*, updated and completed with 22 new texts

and with numerous new fragments belonging to the already published ones, provides us with a wealth of information and references, piecing together the details, not only about the life of the families of the *nekrotaphoi* and their place in society, but also about life in general in the dry land of the Great Oasis in the third and fourth centuries CE.¹²

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⁹ References to the *Berichtigungsliste der griechischen Papyrusurkunden* (BL) are sometimes, but not always added: for instance, BL XI, 45 was overlooked for text 1, 10–11; BL XI, 195 for 4, 3–6, 6–7; BL XI 44 for 6, 4; BL IX, 266 for 9, 5, 13; BL XI, 210 for 9, 2; and so on. This is fine when the literature referred to in the BL's is cited anyway, but in some cases the earlier authors of corrections are thus not given due credit.

¹⁰ It would have been interesting to mark the many *hapaxes* and other rare words and expressions in this archive, such as the new names: [Τα]παροῦτις and Πηχίς; the new place-name Πμουνηψιν; the word ἔντασις (new for papyri) and the unusual expression ἀκήρατοῖ σου αἱ ἀκοαῖ ‘your ears are untainted’ in 23; the use of παρανέγων, ‘collated’, underneath contracts which is rare elsewhere, but common in this archive (see 6, 7n.); and e.g. the new words and names read in 10 (also leading to the ghost word πολυδρία).

¹¹ Other printed images were sometimes published in the earlier editions (see the headings of each text – add the plate in C.P.Gr. I, Tav. XXXV for 40), but for 12 of the texts, and the main parts of two more, no image is available at all. The images of 19, 23, 37 are already found online (see <<http://papyri.info/>> accessed 6 July 2019 under the respective TM-numbers). Hopefully, the images of the remaining papyri in this archive will soon all find their way to the internet.

¹² The only thing I would have welcomed on top of everything this book offers is a tabular overview of the archive, containing the details of the whereabouts, contents, all (re-)publications and published images of each text. But, of course, nowadays one can use Trismegistos and the links to papyri.info for such an overview. In Trismegistos the archive is known as *Nekrotaphoi of the oasis* (Arch ID 147), see <https://www.trismegistos.org/arch/detail.php?arch_id=147> accessed 6 July 2019.

