

Early Christian Books in Egypt By Roger Bagnall

2009. London. Princeton University Press

This book is made up of four chapters, each representing a lecture given by the author at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, and is presented in a relaxed writing style which is very easy to read. However the book is an academic one and the reader will benefit more if they are familiar with Coptic Egypt, and some of the documents discussed.

The first chapter gives an overview of the problem with the dating of early Christian writing, with the conclusion that whilst most Christian papyri are published, there are very little, if any examples which can be dated securely to the second century AD. Some have attributed this to the lottery of archaeological recovery, although Bagnall argues this silence seems more likely to be a reflection of the small-scale spread of Christianity amongst the Egyptians; especially those who would write or own books.

The second chapter looks at two specific case studies where the dating has been under question; volume 69 of the *Oxyrhynchus* Papyri, and the other regarding the earliest known gospel fragments on papyrus. Bagnall spends the first part of the chapter critiquing the research of Thiede regarding these gospel fragments. The question of chronology is problematic in any aspect of the archaeological discipline, and this is particularly apparent when these fragments are being dated on archaeological context and handwriting analysis alone, meaning high and low chronologies are derived for each fragment. He also argues the point whether these fragments all originated under a single codex or were simply written by the same scribe.

The chapter on book production was particularly interesting with discussions on the cost of bibles during the third and fourth centuries, with a full bible costing an average man six months income, and therefore was out of financial reach of most of the population other than churches and monasteries themselves. The expense of producing a book meant that parchment and papyrus was often recycled and reused; with the interesting detail that worn out fragments of text were used to fill the bindings of the codices. This makes dating particularly difficult as the papyrus or parchment is often older than the text. Other such interesting nuggets are included in this chapter which demonstrate things have not changed much, as legal documentation cost double the price of any other scribal service!

The final chapter looks at the development and spread of the codex form of book, which is often thought to be introduced by the Christians. He examines the evidence and shows that although the codices were used for full copies of the Bible some Christian texts were still written on rolls. Bagnall discussed numerous codices of a non-religious nature dated to the second and third centuries, at a time when Christianity in Egypt did not have the numbers or influence on Egypt to introduce the codex. He brings the argument neatly round to the first chapter, and the problems

with the dating of the texts; as without accurate dating we are unable to clearly identify when the codex was introduced and whether Christianity in Egypt was strong enough to have been instrumental in its spread.

This book was well written, intelligent and cleverly argued and I can see how it "will be an instant and major classic in the field" as it is reviewed on the back cover.