Charles University in Prague
Faculty of Arts
Program of Study: History
Field of Study: Egyptology

Teze disertační práce

MAREK DOPĚL

Original title: **Bīr Shawīsh, Small Oasis: Ostraka and Other Inscribed Material**

Czech Title: **Bír Šawíš, Malá oáza: Ostraka a další nápisový materiál**

Supervisor: Prof. Miroslav BÁRTA

Expert Advisor: Prof. Roger S. BAGNALL

Submitted in May 2015
The present work is the result of my doctoral studies at Charles University in Prague and New York University. It is dedicated to the inscribed material from a late antique settlement at the site of Bīr Shawīsh in the now-barren area of the Small Oasis (called Al-Wāḥat al-Bahrīya, in Arabic). The edition of these primary sources constitutes the very core of this work (Chapter 3). This inscribed material consists of two major groups of papyrological evidence: documents written on ostraka and informal inscriptions on various supports written in pen or incised with a sharp tool. The texts on ostraka are written in Greek and together with the rest of the inscribed material date to the turn of the fourth century and early fifth century.

At the same time, this work is the first comprehensive treatment of a group of sources from the recent Czech excavations at Bīr Shawīsh; it contributes substantially to the documentation so far available from the Western Desert in general and the Small Oasis in particular, as the newly published inscribed material doubles the number of texts from the Small Oasis published to date. As is apparent in Chapter 4, the new corpus contributes to the interpretations of the economic, administrative and social history of late antique Egypt, while challenging some earlier interpretations and posing new questions or opening different perspectives for future research.

The volume has been conceived to proceed from general information to more specific, from contextual data to the presentation of specific original source material and, ultimately, to a synthesis thereof. It opens with tables of edited inscribed material for immediate orientation of whoever wants to check a specific text or inscription. It is followed by Table of contents and Foreword and Acknowledgements. Introductory matters are also represented by Lists of Tabular and Pictorial Data, which direct the reader to a specific table, figure, or plate within the volume.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the dissertation. It comprises of four short sections where I present an account of my personal engagement with the project and the development of the goals I have pursued; it further introduces the methods and tools I used in researching and writing this work; and finally, I offer my view of where the present work belongs within the current research in the field of papyrology and late antique studies in general.
Chapter 2 provides necessary background information on the archaeology and history of the area from which my material originated. Proceeding from larger context to more specific matters, I first present an introduction to the geographical and historical setting of the Bahṣīya Oasis within Egypt; then I descend to the Oasis proper to provide an overview of the sites and human presence in the research area of El-Ḥāyz, asking also more general questions, such as about the end of the occupation of the region in Late Antiquity. The following sub-chapter offers an overview of early Western encounters with the area and the first research initiatives carried out there. Sub-chapter 2.4. finally details the recent exploration of El-Ḥāyz by the mission under the auspices of the Czech Institute of Egyptology. Within this section, I present the scope of the research, individual approaches, challenges, and issues. The final section Chapter 2 focuses on the site of Bīr Shawīsh, from which the material presented in this work originates. I provide a general overview of the site, its main components and characteristics; my particular attention is then paid to House 3 and its archaeology. And finally, I try to assess chronological frame for the archaeological contexts from which came my inscribed material. In doing so, I look for chronological information in the texts themselves, and for other securely datable material, such as coins. After laying these foundations for a proper understanding of the inscribed material, I move to the very core of my work.

In Chapter 3, I finally present the papyrological and epigraphic material – ostraka and other inscriptions. First necessary technical information is provided on editorial procedure, followed by the assessment of archaeological context of the material. Commented and annotated edition of ostraka according to the standards of the field is next, followed by similarly commented and annotated edition of other inscribed material. This section of my dissertation is by far the bulkiest, presenting unpublished ancient sources.

The last Chapter 4 consists of an analysis and synthesis of selected matters that are inherent to the edited documents and other inscribed material. In this part of my dissertation, I attempt to analyze and synthesize what the inscribed material tells us about various facets of late antique life at the site of what is today called Bīr Shawīsh. It is only natural (because implied by the texts themselves) that I discuss the issues of inner dating of the texts, agricultural commodities and units used to measure those commodities; I also examine what the texts reveal about the state
and local administration and management. My particular attention then turns to the onomastics and then to the matters of religion, as it is mirrored in all available archaeological material from the site. The chapter closes with a discussion of the assumed presence in the research area of the Roman army; to this end, I first examine the archaeological records and then any possible traces of the army in our texts.

Titled “Bīr Shawīsh in Late Antiquity” are a few concluding notes, in which I summarize the presented corpus and offer some general observations and suggestions for future research.

Appendices provide concordances between Excavation (or Object) Numbers and Publication Numbers. A separate table presents the archaeological context of the entire corpus, arranged according to the archaeological context (unlike in Chapter 3, where the information is arranged according to Publication Numbers).

Invaluable for good orientation in the volume and indeed mandatory in any publication of papyrological material are Indices, forming a highly informative part of the work.

Plates at the very end of the volume offer the possibility for anyone to check individual ostraka, consider problematic readings and get sense of the material aspects of the texts and inscriptions. The same photographs are provided on the enclosed DVD, which gives anyone a possibility to digitally modify or enlarge individual pictures in high resolution.

I have decided to integrate archaeological data into my evaluations of the texts (ostraka). Although not a common practice in the field, such approach is increasingly advocated by scholars involved in current projects, perhaps most notably as demonstrated in the publication of new material from the Dakhla Oasis appearing in the series DOP Monographs. Archaeological data frames textual sources within the environment to which they belong, while the texts themselves provide information archaeology cannot. The integration of archaeological and textual material thus proves mutually beneficial to our understanding of both sources. To be sure, this would hardly be possible to achieve had the corpus not originated from a controlled excavation.
I further believe that presenting and considering textual sources (documents inscribed on material supports) together with other inscribed material (on various supports) and even with other material evidence enables us to appreciate texts as a specific group of artifacts and documents of material culture. For this reason, I include artifacts with decorative elements alongside inscribed material; I also detail the physical properties of edited inscribed material.

In my ambition to take a more anthropological approach towards the historical sources at hand, I have also decided to develop a separate chapter (Chapter 4) to address issues that merit attention from within the matters treated in the texts, such as agrarian economy, state and local administration, tenant-owner relationship, naming practices, religion, and involvement of the army. In that chapter, I make use of available comparative material from the Oasis and beyond (primarily from the Great Oasis) to analyze and summarize what the texts tell us about the lived realities, social interactions, and culture of the ancient people at Bīr Shawīsh. I also pose more general questions concerning late antique rural society at the edge of the Empire.

With this volume, I am knowingly positioning myself in the new trends within the fields of late antique studies and of papyrology in integrating different kinds of historical evidence to gain a more complex understanding about the issues inherent to texts, artifacts, and archaeological record alike.

Presentations and studies of papyrological evidence from the Great Oasis demonstrated the important contribution of texts to our understanding about local economies and about the complex socio-economic relations within the oasis and beyond. Although the size of our corpus of 50 short documents is small, this alone does not explain the sense of insularity that pervades the material from Bir Shawish. On the most basic level, this feeling of smallness might in part be a result of the obviously diminutive physical size of the Small Oasis and of even smaller area of El-Ḥāyz in its southern end. More importantly, however, the nature of the evidence itself creates this feeling of insularity. It seems safe to assert that the bulk of our ostraka contains transactions inside the economy of a single oikos or estate. At the same time, our documents are limited because they represent only “one side” of those transactions, the side which ended up in House 3. Furthermore, the actual
arrangements between the landowners and the tenant farmers are largely missing in our ostraka, for such specifics were usually specified in leases written on papyri rather than on potsherds. Finally, the limitations are also archaeological in nature, as the bulk of the data available comes from a single house and even mostly from its two rooms. This latter factor is clearly apparent on the only ostrakon that comes from the neighboring House 1: O. Bir Sh. 1 is very different in the form and content.

Notwithstanding the limitations, our texts do in one aspect attest to the connections with the outer world, as 1 is dated according to the Oxyrhynchite era; this we can take to underline the expected close connections of the Oasis to the Oxyrhynchites, but it also shows a local idiosyncrasy in employing a single-digit era date – a practice also extant in the only other instance from the Oasis (O. Dor. 2).

Although the administrative dependance of the Oasis on the Oxyrhynchites is a largely accepted fact, any details of that relationship remain unknown and unfortunately our texts do not elucidate matters any further. Our documents do not even contribute more toponyms to the oasite geography and onomastics.

Turning to the positive evidence, our texts seem to confirm the classicizing oasite tendency in giving archaic names in Late Antiquity. And even though it would be premature to assess the local agrarian economy in definite terms, the extant texts do allow a few observations. Our documents clearly demonstrate the general character of the agrarian production as being oriented on horticulture and arboriculture, rather than the traditional agriculture we know from the Valley, although the texts seem to suggest that El-Ḥāyz may have actually differed from northern Baḥrīya in being more self-sufficient in arable crops – perhaps more like the Dakhla Oasis. Relatively frequent in our documents are especially cotton and olive oil; these are typically oasite crops for two reasons: they do not like to be flooded and are high-value non-perishable products that could be shipped economically.

Importantly, cotton and olives depend on water resources for irrigation. Cotton is an especially highly water-demanding plant, one which demanded extensive natural resources. This point is important when thinking about the assumed aridization and ultimate abandonment of El-Ḥāyz in Late Antiquity. A
possible parallel might be found in the fate of the Aral Sea, whose waters had since 1950s been used by the Soviets to irrigate semi-arid regions of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to grow cotton for international market, eventually leading to its shrinkage to under 10% of its original size and destroying local ecosystems. While one should be careful comparing the causes of the environmental catastrophe in central Asia with the fate of El-Hāyż, the motivations of the agribusiness were likely the same: what might had brought huge profits to the propertied investors was capable of eventually bringing ruin upon a whole (eco)system. At the least, we can expect that the depletion of water and soil to grow these products had serious environmental consequences on the oasis. Future collaboration with archaeobotanists might bring valuable results.

According to our expectations, our textual and material sources attest to the wide-spread presence of Christianity at the site – through onomastics and iconographies across media, presenting us with Christian names, titles, and crosses. The inscribed material is especially interesting in its accounts of personal names inscribed on different kinds of earthenware of daily use (on lamps, lids, and a jar). Similar representations of the cross represent another noticeable element that reappears across different media; they are evident in the repeated employment of dotting and knobs (on two decorated jar lids and on the bowl).

Our understanding about agrarian practices of late antique Egypt depends heavily on the evidence from metropoleis; this distortion owes to the archaeological practice and to the sheer survival of papyrological documentation attesting to the world of urban magnates. Thus any evidence derived from the countryside is especially precious, and all the more so when it attests to the late fourth and the fifth century, when the documentation from villages is very poor. I hope that the future exploration of the El-Hāyż Oasis will yield more historical sources and that excavators, papyrologists and other specialists will effectively collaborate to provide a more complex, reliable and convincing account of the late antique life in that liminal part of the inhabited world.