Ph.D. Evaluation

Marek Dospěl, Bir Shawish, Small Oasis: Ostraka and Other Inscribed Material

Program of Study: History
Field of Study: Egyptology
Supervisor: Prof. Miroslav Bártá
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1. SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The doctoral thesis under review, Bir Shawish, Small Oasis: Ostraka and Other Inscribed Material, is the editio princeps of a corpus of 50 ostraka – next to 10 already previously published inscriptions (dipinti and graffiti) by the author¹ — from Bir Shawish in the El-Hayz Oasis. All inscribed material is written in Hellenistic Greek (koinê). It came almost exclusively to light during a survey and subsequent excavations by a team of the Czech Institute of Egyptology in 2005 and 2007 at the site of House 3 in Bir Shawish. The author documented and studied the material on three separate occasions (on site in 2007 and 2009 and in the magazines at Bawiti in 2014).

The thesis is divided into four main chapters. In the first chapter ("Dissertation Overview"; pp. 19–30), the author provides a general overview of the content of the study, its place in the context of current archaeological and papyrological research in the oases of the Western Desert and the methodology applied throughout the study of the material.

The second chapter ("Bir Shawish in the El-Hayz Oasis"; pp. 31–55) consists of a general topographical, historical and archaeological introduction to the El-Hayz oasis in general and the site of Bir Shawish in particular. The author briefly treats the main areas of occupation in the El-Hayz oasis and provides a historical overview of human presence in the oasis from prehistoric until medieval times and the research carried out from the early nineteenth century to the recent French and Czech excavations. A subchapter focuses on the site of Bir Shawish and especially House 3 from where almost all inscribed material, treated in the thesis, originates.

The third chapter ("Inscribed Material from Bir Shawish"; pp. 57–164) forms the very core of the thesis. Following introductory remarks on the editorial process, the author places the ostraka and inscriptions in their archaeological context. The ostraka are organised into six main categories according to content: accounts and lists, memoranda, receipts, orders and notes, letters and texts of uncertain content. Each individual document

¹ See M. Dospěl, "Written, inscribed and some decorated material from Bir Shawish, El-Hayz Oasis", in M. Dospěl – Lenka Suková (eds.), Bahriya Oasis. Recent Research into the Past of an Egyptian Oasis, Prague 2013, esp. pp. 94–110.
is treated separately and presented in a standardised manner. For each ostrakon the author provides its unique publication number (O. Bir Sh. xx), the object number given to it at the time of excavation, the archaeological context of the find and specific circumstances of its discovery, the dimensions and state of preservation of the text carrier, the location, extent and completeness of the text, a general assessment of the scribal hand and an overview of previous publications of the material, if applicable.

A commented and annotated edition of the ostraka and other inscribed material follows. Next to the text itself it consists of the critical apparatus (with a.o. corrections of non standard spellings and grammatical errors) and a translation (if possible). A final section contains a commentary on specific terms, the reasons behind the choice for a specific translation or more background information with references to inscriptions with a similar subject matter from elsewhere in the oases of the Western Desert.

In the final chapter (“Discussion of Selected Aspects of the Documentation”; pp. 165–224) the author focuses on specific elements of the inscriptions that provide further information on life in Bir Shawish in late antique times. He deals with the following topics in more detail: dating systems in use, the various types of commodities sold/bought, the types of measures used depending on the commodity, references to local administration and estate management, personal names featured in the inscriptions, references to religion and the presence of the military in the El-Hayz oasis. A brief chapter (“Late Antique Bir Shawish in Papyrological Perspective”; pp. 225–227) concludes the volume with some general remarks on the studied corpus of inscriptions and proposals for future research.

Next to the text itself, the study also contains the obligatory lists of all ostraka, dipinti, graffiti, tables, figures and plates that feature throughout the volume (pp. 9–11; 15–18), concordance tables for easy orientation between the excavation/object number and the publication number in a series of appendices (pp. 229–236), a detailed set of indices (pp. 237–245) and a reference bibliography, subdivided into dictionaries, language grammars, on-line resources and general studies (pp. 247–265).

All 50 ostraka as well as the 10 inscriptions that form the core of the study are rendered in plates at the very end of the volume, with the ostraka (plates 1–L) shown both in colour as well as infra-red images. A DVD containing all 50 ostraka in high resolution colour and infra-red photographs forms also part of the publication.

2. FORMAL ASPECTS OF THE STUDY
The study is organised in a comprehensible manner, with individual chapters and subchapters marked in a coherent and logical style. The format and layout of the text leave nothing to be desired. The author demonstrates throughout the paper excellent knowledge of the specific terminology associated with the subject matter.
The paper is written in a straightforward style, making it – for the most part – easy for the reader to follow the argumentation and train of thought of the author. However, the text in its entirety would greatly profit from a thorough English language check. Next to the regular misuse (or absence) of the definite and indefinite articles throughout the volume, the syntax of a number of passages could also still be improved, making the text more fluent and thus less demanding for the reader to understand the exact meaning of the author.

The method of referencing, in both footnotes and bibliography, is clear-cut and follows standard practice. Citations are likewise rendered according to the expected format. In chapter 4.5 (i.e. Religion; pp. 211–217) a reference to the original place of publication of the two wine stoppers and the decorated bowl would have been appropriate (i.e. M. Dospěl, “Written, inscribed and some decorated material from Bir Shawish, El-Hayz Oasis”, in M. Dospěl – Lenka Suková (eds.), Bahriya Oasis. Recent Research into the Past of an Egyptian Oasis, Prague 2013, 91–112), but especially a referral to the article of A. Delattre – J. Dijkstra – J. van der Vliet, “Christian Inscriptions from Egypt and Nubia 1 (2013)”, BASP 51 (2014), 210, where the author’s interpretation of the figure on wine stopper 62.2/BS/07 is questioned (“as a crucified person seems slightly far-fetched...”), should have been included.

The chapter on personal names occurring in the inscriptions (chapter 4.4; pp. 204–210) would benefit from having references to the specific ostrakon/a in which a name appears in the relevant paragraph itself and not solely in the index (pp. 238–240). This would make it much easier for the reader to immediately access the ostrakon/a in question without having to first look it up in the index.

The thesis contains a series of minor mistakes, be it discrepancies between the numbering of the objects in the text, tables and relevant plates, a limited number of typological errors or the not always uniform treatment of similar categories (e.g. authors) in the body of the text. The following paragraphs provide an overview of some of the minor mistakes that came to my attention over the course of reviewing the work.

1. The following discrepancies occur between the numbering of objects in the text, concordance tables and the plates:
   * The third ostrakon is labelled “83.3/BS/07; 83.5/BS/07” in the text (p. 75) and the concordance tables (pp. 230–232 and 234), but “84.3/BS/07; 84.5/BS/07” in Plate III;
   * The eleventh ostrakon is labelled “83.6/BS/07” in the text (p. 90) and the concordance tables (pp. 230–232 and 234), but “84.6/BS/07” in Plate XI;
   * The thirty-fifth ostrakon is labelled “83.8/BS/07; 83.9/BS/07; 83.10/BS/07; 83.11/BS/07” in the text (p. 128) and the concordance tables (pp. 230–232 and 234), but “84.8/BS/07; 84.9/BS/07; 84.10/BS/07; 84.11/BS/07” in Plate XXXV;
   * The letter (doc. 37): the reference to the plates should be XXXVII_A and XXXVIII_B instead of XXXVI (p. 131);
2. A limited number of typographical errors and other small mistakes can be observed throughout the study, such as: p. 7 “Reasearch” instead of “Research”; p. 21 “deteriorating” of “deteriorating”; pp. 24 and 121: “osis” instead of “oasis”; p. 50 “avialble” instead of “available”; p. 60 “thier” instead of “their”; p. 63 “through out” instead of “throughout”; p. 68 “DSU” instead of “SU” p. 72 “chef” instead of “chief”; p. 74 “l” instead of “in”; p. 78 and 81 “concievable” instead of “conceivable”; p. 105 “apha” instead of “alpha”; p. 171 “February” instead of “February”; p. 174 “wheter” instead of “whether”; p. 195 “”stutuses” instead of “statuses”; and p. 209 “p3-p3-n3r” instead of “p3-p3-n3r”. One could also note the use of “-” instead of “—” in some footnotes (e.g. notes 24, 83, 148, 150, and 153)

3. In the main body of the texts authors are not always referred to in a uniform manner (e.g. on p. 201: Danielle Bonneau versus E. R. Hardy and M. Sampson).

These minor inconsistencies do however not detract from the overall quality of the research.

3. GENERAL EVALUATION

The topic of the paper and related issues and questions are clearly defined in the opening chapter of the volume. The author has organised the work in a very logical manner, always keeping track of the main research questions. As a result the thesis represents a unified text with lucid argumentation supported by apt and comprehensive evidence and source material. Different point of views on specific issues are identified and presented in a clear manner, with the author showing the ability to convincingly argue his chosen point of view (e.g. the discussion whether the praeipositus mentioned in doc. 15 is a civilian liturgical official or rather a military official – see pp. 96–97, 193 and 223–224).

The subject is appropriately positioned within in its general historical and archaeological context as well as in the context of previous research in the second chapter of the volume, but on occasion one feels that the author could have expanded upon the topic or added more detailed information. I add in the following paragraphs a few suggestions for further research or for minor additions to the chapter in case of future publication.
1. In the historical overview of the history of the El-Hayz oasis it would have been interesting to find the author’s thoughts on whether or not the fourth oasis in the well-known list of seven oases from the Horus temple of Edfu is in fact the El-Hayz oasis (i.e. Edfou VI, 19, 12 – 25, 10; for the specific reference to the fourth oasis: Edfou VI, 22, 6–9). The inscription, located on the interior side of the enclosure wall of the temple and dated to the joint reign of Ptolemaios IX Soter II and Cleopatra III, lists seven oases of the Western Desert (Kharga, Dakhla, Farafra, “Sekhet-Imat”, Baharya, Wadi Natrun and Siwa). The question whether “Sekhet-Imat” refers to El-Hayz or another oasis has been a topic of discussion in the past (A suggestion originally made by A. Fakhry in The Egyptian Deserts: Bahria Oasis II, Cairo 1950, pp. 50–52 and elsewhere; recent overview with references in S. Aufrère, BIFAO 100 (2000), pp. 79-129, esp. pp. 99–104).

2. Although House 3 at the site of Bir Shawish is to date only partially excavated and the results of the research only preliminary published, no attempt was made to place the house/estate into a more general context (whether from an architectural or archaeological point of view). A comparison of the general layout and ground-plan of House 3 with similar structures in for instance the Bahariya or Dakhla oases (e.g. Amheida, Ismant el-Kharab) and dated to the same era might have provided more information on the type of building and its function, resulting in more complex understanding and background for the site from which the text corpus originated.

The core of the study is made up by the detailed publication (editio princeps) of a corpus of 50 previously unpublished ostraka in the third chapter. The author follows up-to-date standard philological and papyrological methods and procedures for the publication of the ostraka and the other inscribed material, demonstrates throughout that he is well acquainted with the material and its specific characteristics as well as the relevant background literature and the invaluable online sources (especially search engines related to full-text databases such as the Papyrological Navigator and Trismegistos People) on the subject.

The analytical part of the doctoral work in chapter four is hampered by the limited amount of material that formed the basis of the study. The corpus is almost entirely derived from a single house in Bir Shawish, a site that was moreover not excavated in its entirety, and most of the texts are only partially preserved and do not always allow for a clear understating of the content. Despite these limitations, the author has managed to place individual texts into the broader context of local practices (e.g. the manner of dating and measuring, the meaning of specific titles etc) and/or events, among others by frequently referring to papyrological documents with a similar subject matter especially from elsewhere in the western oases as well as the Oxyrhynchites. In doing so, the author clearly demonstrates that even a limited amount of inscribed material from small sites, such as the 50 ostraka from a single house in Bir Shawish, can contribute to a better understanding not only of local and/or regional particularities and the micromanagement of a single estate (oikos) in an out-of-the-way small oasis, but also provide information on broader topics and lead to a better insight into administrative and economic activities and peculiarities and social and religious developments in late antique Egypt.
Finally, the author is to be commended for having included a DVD with high resolution images (both in colour and infra-red) of all 50 ostraka discussed in the study. This provides the reader with the electronic means to quickly verify readings and to check and draw one’s own conclusions regarding a number of problematic readings and the solutions suggested by the author.

4. OVERALL CONCLUSION

Overall the study clearly indicates the author’s ability to appropriately question and critically examine historical documents next to modern research and publications, as well as his capabilities to contribute to a better understanding and further development of specific topics in the study of ancient Egypt in Late Antiquity.

The study conforms, both in form and content, to all requirements expected of a doctoral research. As such I would recommend that the study should be accepted for defence in front of the appropriate committee and be classified as “prospēl”.

Reviewer

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