



1993

Papyrology and Byzantine Historiography

James G. Keenan

Loyola University Chicago, jkeen@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/classicalstudies_facpubs



Part of the [Byzantine and Modern Greek Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Keenan, JG. "Papyrology and Byzantine historiography" in *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 30, 1993.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classical Studies: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).
© 1993 James Keenan.

Papyrology and Byzantine Historiography

Egypt of late antiquity, often referred to as Byzantine Egypt, was for years the outcast of papyrological studies.¹ It is only recently, partly in the wake of studies on the reign of Diocletian and his fourth-century successors, that the keen interest of papyrologists and historians in Egypt of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods has carried over into the later period. Perhaps responsible for the old indifference was, as Rémondon suggested a generation ago, the scholar's prejudice against those periods that are judged decadent;² or, to put the matter as Johan Huizinga did in the preface to his 1919 classic, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*:³ "History has always been far more engrossed by problems of origins than by those of decline and fall." Presumably, then, by these terms, scholars are by inclination drawn to the study of vibrant and expansive eras, with Gibbon the grand exception who proves the rule.

It is, however, also true that Byzantine Egypt was trapped from the outset in a limbo-like state between Byzantinists and papyrologists. The time period, traditionally from A.D. 284 to the Arab conquest of the early 640s,⁴ was too early, the place too far out of the mainstream of imperial

¹For so short an article, this one has a curiously long and complicated history. The earlier pages were part of a long article written in 1978 that seems unlikely ever to be published, at least in the form in which it was written. The ideas in the later pages were first presented to Loyola University's Medieval Studies Committee on March 27, 1992. Cobbled together, these two halves, in revised form, became a paper presented to the 18th Annual Byzantine Studies Conference in Urbana, Illinois, October 9, 1992. With minor revisions, that paper provides the text for the article that is printed here. This itself is a reprinting, with some revisions, of an offering in the Festschrift for my Loyola colleague, George Szemler: W. J. Cherf (ed.), *From Alpha to Omega: Studies in Honor of George John Szemler on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Chicago 1993) 111-22. What is presented there and here, I should stress, is not a comprehensive treatment of the topic, but an essay with the work of Sir Harold Idris Bell providing the centerpiece. There is some dovetailing with Leslie MacCoull's "Towards a New Understanding of Coptic Egypt," in MacCoull, *Coptic Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Variorum Collected Studies Series, Brookfield, VT, 1993), chapter I, translated from an Italian original published in 1990. For personal reminiscences about Sir Harold Bell, I deeply thank Professors B. R. Rees and J. David Thomas.

²"[Situation présente de la papyrologie byzantine]," *Akten des XIII. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses* (Münch. Beitr. 66 [1974]) 367-72.

³First published in Dutch in Leiden in 1919; 2nd edition 1921; English translation 1924. I have consulted the Doubleday Anchor Book Edition (Garden City, NY, 1954).

⁴This is the dating that seems to have become canonical with L. Mitteis and U. Wilcken's *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyruskunde* (Berlin-Leipzig 1912). For a recent, thorough discussion of alternative "periodizations" (and terms), see Andrea Giardina, "Egitto bizantino o tardantico? Problemi della terminologia e della periodizzazione," in *Egitto e storia antica dall'ellenismo all'età araba. Bilancio di un confronto* (Bologna 1989) 89-103.

political life to attract the interest of Byzantinists; the time was too late to interest papyrologists, who by and large had been drawn to their specialty after initial training as classicists. Even Harold Bell, one of the founding fathers of Byzantine papyrology, openly confessed that when he began "by the mere accident of fortune" to specialize in papyri of the Byzantine and Arab periods, his preference had been for those of the Ptolemaic age.⁵

Finally, although it is true that Byzantine papyrus texts had been published in substantial numbers even before the turn of the present century, inspiring important monographs by Matthias Gelzer on civil administration and by Jean Maspero on the Byzantine army in Egypt,⁶ it was really the publication in the second decade of the twentieth century of large volumes devoted exclusively to papyri of the Byzantine period that made historical study of that period possible and profitable. Two editorial achievements tower above the rest: (1) Jean Maspero's edition of the papers of the sixth-century lawyer and poet, Dioscorus of Aphrodito, in three volumes of Cairo Museum papyri, and (2) Harold Bell's edition of the fifth volume of British Museum papyri, with more of Dioscorus's papers and half of the archive of Flavius Paternuthis, a soldier and boatman living on the Egyptian frontier at Aswan.⁷ In the next decade, the year 1924 saw publication of *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri XVI*, containing many pieces from the dossier of the wealthy and politically connected family of Flavius Apion and his descendants.⁸ Many more Byzantine papyri were in these years published from their collections in Munich, Florence, Berlin, Vienna, and elsewhere.

Amid the impressive flow of publications came the time to take stock of what the papyri had to say in general terms about Egypt and its society in the period papyrologists had agreed to call Byzantine. A series of appraisals were written; and with Maspero—at age 29—having fallen in battle at Vauquois on the Lorraine front in February 1915,⁹ it was only natural that Bell should have taken the lead with a classic article on "The Byzantine Servile State in Egypt," published in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* for 1917; its title was a modified borrowing from a recent (1912), influential

⁵In "Papyrology and Byzantine Studies," *Papyri und Altertumswissenschaft* (Münch. Beitr. 19 [1934]) 314-26, a paper delivered to the Third International Congress of Papyrology, Munich, September 4-7, 1933.

⁶M. Gelzer, *Studien zur byzantinischen Verwaltung Ägyptens* (Leipzig 1909); J. Maspero, *Organisation militaire de l'Égypte byzantine* (Paris 1912).

⁷*Papyrus grecs d'époque byzantine, Catalogue général des antiquités du Musée du Caire*, 3 vols. (Cairo 1911, 1913, 1916); *Greek Papyri in the British Museum V* (London 1917). A translation of the long neglected Paternuthis papyri, with extensive discussion, is a current project of Joel Farber and Bezalel Porten. See, for now, the series of articles in *BASP* 27 (1990) 111-62.

⁸*The Oxyrhynchus Papyri XVI* (London 1924), edited by B. P. Grenfell, A. S. Hunt, and H. I. Bell.

⁹A poem by Maspero, written the night before his death, appears in a translation by Bell as "Last Lines from the French of Jean Maspero," *JEA* 3 (1916) 293.

essay by Roman Catholic man of letters, Hilaire Belloc.¹⁰ This was followed in the 1920s by a string of articles on the same theme: by Friedrich Oertel,¹¹ Leopold Wenger,¹² A. E. R. Boak,¹³ John Grafton Milne,¹⁴ and with a few reprises by Bell himself.¹⁵

Although it may be unfair to criticize these works together instead of severally,¹⁶ it is nonetheless clear that a certain pattern runs throughout. To begin with, they tend to be essays or lectures, based, it seems, more on past experience in editing papyri than on fresh historical research and intensive rethinking of the problems and questions under consideration. They tend, moreover, to latch onto and to rework the same themes, to such an extent that these themes quickly emerged as hard and fast clichés that went beyond the reach of the evidence. Most of these had appeared already in Bell's article of 1917. Government administration is there said to have been dominated by fiscal self-interest, relying on compulsion to insure the cultivation of land and performance of essential services, the former in some measure carried out through application of the principle of corporate responsibility, the latter by a system of compulsory services (liturgies) that bore heavily upon, and in the end obliterated, "the middle classes." There was both demographic and agricultural decline. The bureaucracy, expanded through Diocletian's reforms, was hopelessly corrupt. With the growth of large estates in Egypt, there came into existence a class of serfs. In fact, "[t]he whole agricultural population," Bell wrote, in terms borrowed from Sir Henry Maine's *Ancient Law*, "was subjected to the principle of status: that is to say, its position was determined not by free contract but by hereditary liability" (p. 100). Peasants were bound to the soil, senatorial classes tied to their cities. The principle of heredity was also applied to vital trades, so that "craftsmen had become little better than serfs" (p. 101). The landowning classes lived well, but over against them "was the great mass of the proletariat, rural and urban, hopelessly poor, burdened with taxes and

¹⁰"The Byzantine Servile State in Egypt," *JEA* 4 (1917) 86-106.

¹¹"Der Niedergang der hellenistischen Kultur in Ägypten," *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum* 45 (1920) 361-81 (especially 373-81), reprinted in Oertel, *Kleine Schriften* (Bonn 1975) 287-310.

¹²*Volk und Staat in Ägypten am Ausgang der Römerherrschaft* (Munich 1922).

¹³"Byzantine Imperialism in Egypt," *AHR* 34 (1928-29) 1-8.

¹⁴"Egyptian Nationalism under Greek and Roman Rule," *JEA* 14 (1928) 226-34. See also Milne's book, *A History of Egypt under Roman Rule*, 3rd edn. (London 1924), and another article, "The Ruin of Egypt by Roman Mismanagement," *JRS* 17 (1927) 1-13. At times Milne, a specialist in numismatics, manages in presenting his general views to out-Bell Bell.

¹⁵"Hellenic Culture in Egypt," *JEA* 8 (1922) 139-55; "An Epoch in the Agrarian History of Egypt," *Receuil . . . Champollion* (Bibl. de l'École des Hautes Études 234 [Paris 1922]) 261-71; "The Decay of a Civilization," *JEA* 10 (1924) 207-16.

¹⁶Wenger's (above, n. 12) has always struck me as the most original and challenging of the group.

liturgies, fleeced by corrupt officials, continually toiling with no hope of bettering their condition, and in constant fear of finding their way into prison, whether it were the state prison or the private prison of some great landowner" (p. 103). Life in Egypt in the last days of Byzantine rule was, Bell asserted, an existence of "appalling dullness" (p. 104). In the end, the Arab conquest was not a miraculous victory, but "merely the inevitable collapse of a structure rotten at the core" (p. 106).

Much of what Bell wrote in 1917 was repeated through the 1920s, but with an additional twist: Egypt's erosion was seen as being attributable not only to political, social and economic factors, but also to cultural forces. Egypt, which had been blessed by a millennium of Hellenism, witnessed in late antiquity Hellenism's disintegration. With the Arab conquest, Egypt regressed, becoming "once more a part of that Oriental world from which the fiery genius of Alexander had separated her for a thousand years."¹⁷

Some twenty years later in Bell's Gregynog Lectures for 1946,¹⁸ much the same kinds of things were still being said. Still present were the cultural decline and the reclaiming of Egypt by the Orient, and "the Byzantine servile state, a vast hierarchy of caste and calling, each hereditary and inescapable." Although social rigidity was not absolute, "the average man was fixed for life in the station to which he was born." Some softening of Bell's views were, however, soon to be found in Claire Préaux's article on "The End of Antiquity in Egypt" (1949)¹⁹ and in Germaine Rouillard's little book on "Rural Life in the Byzantine Empire" (1953);²⁰ but these works were still much affected by the old clichés. Thus the only real stab at revisionism at this time was due to Allan Chester Johnson, who in books published in 1949 and 1951²¹ argued for the general vitality of Byzantine Egypt and for the particular prosperity of its peasantry—better off, he maintained in a flight of hyperbole, than in any other period of Egyptian history.²² On publication, such views found little in the way of acceptance.²³ For the most part they met with rejection,²⁴ especially from Harold Bell

¹⁷Bell, *JEA* 8 (1922) 155.

¹⁸Subsequently published as *Egypt from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest: A Study in the Diffusion and Decay of Hellenism* (Oxford 1948) chapter IV.

¹⁹"La fin de l'Antiquité en Égypte," *Cd'É* 24 (1949) 123-32.

²⁰*La vie rurale dans l'empire byzantin* (Paris 1953).

²¹*Byzantine Egypt: Economic Studies* (Princeton 1949), written with L. C. West; *Egypt and the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor 1951).

²²Condition of the peasantry: *Byzantine Egypt: Economic Studies* 29-31.

²³A. Segrè, *Byzantion* 21 (1951) 210-11, is the most prominent exception.

²⁴Most reviewers tended to value *Byzantine Egypt: Economic Studies* as an important collection of evidence, but questioned its optimistic outlook. See above all (besides Bell's reviews cited in the next note) E. R. Hardy, *AJP* 71 (1950) 202-04, cf. N. Lewis, *CW* 43 (1950) 125-26. Some reviewers admired its collection of evidence, acknowledging the optimistic outlook without specific criticism, e.g., P. Lemerle, *Rev.Phil.* 25 (1951) 103-04. Against the general views expressed in *Egypt and the Roman Empire*, see esp. E.G. Turner, *CR* n.s. 3 (1953) 184-86 (in strong affirmation of Bell's positions), and N. Lewis, *AJP* 74 (1953) 214-15; cf. the gentle chiding of V. Martin, *Gnomon* 24 (1952) 214-18, and the cautions expressed by L. Casson, *CJ* 48 (1952-53) 187-88.

himself in a testy review,²⁵ rather out of character for this shy, modest and, by all accounts, naturally saintly man. Johnson's was the only scholarly work, I am told, that Bell read "with some irritation."²⁶

The results were that, after more than thirty years' evaluation of Egypt's Byzantine period, and despite occasional novelties,²⁷ the scholarly attitudes first established remained unshaken. The situation was little helped by the abatement, after about 1930, in the publication of Byzantine documentary papyri in large, unified volumes. But this drought ended in the 1960s and 1970s and was attended by efforts to put the sum of the evidence, new and old, to fresh use. A leader in this was not a papyrologist, but Cambridge ancient historian A. H. M. Jones. One of Jones's important achievements from the papyrologist's standpoint, an achievement most fully demonstrated in his volumes on *The Later Roman Empire*,²⁸ was to have brought Egypt and its evidence into the mainstream of late Roman and Byzantine historical discussion. Jones's work also questioned the long-held and often repeated views on the stratification and rigid immobility of late Roman imperial society. And if Jones's questioning seemed important for consideration of the Empire at large, and if the Empire at large needed reassessment, so also did the particular case of Egypt. The mid-1970s at last saw publication of articles by papyrologists calling for just such a reassessment.²⁹ Since then the revising of the old views on the character of Byzantine Egypt has been proceeding apace. I devote the balance of this article to sketching three highlights:

1. First, Bell's impressions of Byzantine Egypt were to some extent based on what we might today call a "feudal model" drawn from medieval European history. That "model" was picked up (in milder form) and further popularized by E. R. Hardy in a Columbia University dissertation that came in 1931 to be published as *The Large Estates of Byzantine Egypt*. It is one of the most delightful books in the papyrological panoply, a pleasure to read, descriptive rather than synthetic; and though written under William Linn Westermann's direction, the influence of Bell is most apparent and duly acknowledged. The success of the feudal model depends in some measure on the possibility of joining to the papyrological evidence the evi-

²⁵JRS 40 (1950) 123-28. Bell also reviewed *Byzantine Egypt: Economic Studies* in CR 64 (1950) 137-39. He reviewed *Egypt and the Roman Empire* in JRS 43 (1953) 205-06.

²⁶B. R. Rees, letter of July 16, 1992.

²⁷As in R. Rémondon's sophisticated, though still somewhat pessimistic paper "Papyrologie et histoire byzantine," *Annales Universitatis Saraviensis*, Philos.Fak. 8 (1959) 87-103, especially good on Egypt's connections with the rest of the Empire.

²⁸*The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, 3 vols. (Oxford 1964).

²⁹R. Rémondon, "Les contradictions de la société égyptienne à l'époque byzantine," *JJurPap* 18 (1974) 17-32; J.G. Keenan, "On Law and Society in Late Roman Egypt," *ZPE* 17 (1975) 237-50.

dence of the late imperial law codes. Some scholars remain confident in this possibility; others, following Jones, doubt that "the bits and patches of the papyri" can easily be meshed with "the tangled skein of the Codes and Novels."³⁰ And even if they can, one must come to grips with the commonly remarked difficulty of making the leap from laws into life, from theory into practice. In any case, the feudal model survives, but not with its old universal acceptance, and not without modification. The modification responds to the earlier view that Byzantine Egypt had its own feudal overlords with their great estates and high-sounding titles, and that these overlords were locked in a power struggle with the imperial government. In effect, the Egyptian grandees were capitalizing on the weaknesses of the central administration. The government tried through legislation to control them—but failed. The newer view is that there was no struggle between the two, but rather a pragmatic and mutually acceptable cooperation. Egyptian magnates were privatizing some earlier public functions and stepping into a power vacuum left by the central government's weakness—but doing so with the government's connivance and even blessing. This at any rate and in very rough terms is my understanding of what has come to be known as "the Gascou thesis."³¹

2. The feudal model is also by necessity for Egypt an "Oxyrhynchus model." This is because the mass of evidence for large Egyptian estates and great landowners in the sixth century has Oxyrhynchus as its provenance; and much of that concerns one family, the high-ranking family of the Apiones. I have long been convinced that one reason³² for the dominance of the Oxyrhynchus model hinges on the editorial skills of Grenfell and Hunt and on the format adopted in Egypt Exploration Society editions: succinct, but fully informative introductions to each document; articulated texts; short but complete commentaries; useful translations. Contrast this (say) with Maspero's Cairo editions with their brief introductions, accurate but unarticulated texts (some enormously long, damaged, and difficult), incomplete commentary notes, and lack of translations. In a field where the writing of history is strewn with mines, it's no wonder that evidence made available by Grenfell and Hunt to a wider audience (with a view toward present and potential Egypt Exploration Society subscribers) prevailed over

³⁰A. H. M. Jones, in a review of *Byzantine Egypt: Economic Studies*, in *JHS* 71 (1951) 271-72.

³¹See esp. J. Gascou, "Les grands domaines, la cité et l'état en Égypte byzantine," *Trav. et Mém.* 9 (1985) 1-90. Of course, it is also possible, as my friend I. F. Fikhman advises me in a long letter of June 21, 1993 (in response to the earlier appearance of this article in the Szemler Festschrift, above, n. 1), that the state, in attempting to arrange a *modus vivendi*, coopted the magnates because the magnates' growing power left little choice in the matter.

³²One among several; the richness and chronological scope of the Oxyrhynchus evidence are other factors, as I. F. Fikhman reminds me (see preceding note).

that presented in more antiquated, less congenial formats. Nevertheless, for the past fifteen years or so, despite obstacles, there has been a turning toward the evidence of Aphrodito, giving it equal time with that of Oxyrhynchus. Much there runs counter to the Oxyrhynchus model. In its place, or, better, side-by-side with it, the Aphrodito papyri present a picture of a vibrant agricultural community of small landholders, farmers, craftsmen, priests, monks and shepherds, a town where rural entrepreneurs are busily at work, where big landowners may be present but do not rule.³³ And if there are now two models, competing or complementary, why not more?

3. Finally, today's work on Byzantine Egypt can be said to be characterized by what can only be called a "new attitude." Bell was not only by his own accounting a reluctant Byzantinist without knowledge of Coptic or Arabic; he also in some of his writings exhibited an apparent disdain, typical perhaps of colonialist or residual Victorian sentiments, for things "Oriental."³⁴ As far as I can tell, he only visited Egypt once. That was in the winter of 1926-27, as part of his work for the papyrus consortium whose purpose was to evaluate and oversee the purchases of papyri that were coming in batches onto the antiquities market in the 1920s and 1930's. It was apparently on that visit that he gathered impressions later used in the opening page of his brilliantly written 1944 article, "An Egyptian Village in the Age of Justinian."³⁵ It happened that while driving south from Assiut, Bell had the opportunity to visit Kom Ischkaw, the provenance of the Aphrodito papyri he had edited in *Greek Papyri in the British Museum*, vol. V.³⁶ But the roads were "vile" (I use or adapt Bell's vocabulary), the dogs ferocious, the human inhabitants "surly and hostile." The mudbrick villages, with their obligatory mosque and palm trees, were "charming" and "pleasant" from a distance, but if you were to approach a village like Kom Ischkaw, Bell has no doubt that it will differ in no way "from scores of similar villages" and "no doubt that a nearer acquaintance would prove it as dirty as any." So Bell and his companions drive on.

Today's spirit is different and is put in most good-natured terms in Deborah Hobson's essay, "Towards a Broader Context for the Study of Greco-Roman Egypt."³⁷ Hobson does not imply, nor do I, that, by contrast

³³Cf. J. G. Keenan, "The Aphrodite Papyri and Village Life in Byzantine Egypt," *BSAC* 26 (1984) 51-63.

³⁴See, of course, Edward W. Said's much-cited *Orientalism* (New York 1978); or Andrew Wheatcroft's recent and beautifully illustrated book, *The Ottomans* (New York 1993).

³⁵*JHS* 64 (1944) 21-36.

³⁶And also of the papyri Bell edited in the massive volume IV in the same series, from an earlier find: the eighth-century correspondence of a district officer (pagarch), Flavius Basilius, and the Arab emir, Korrah ibn Sharik.

³⁷*Échos du monde classique* 32, n.s. 7 (1988) 353-63. A partial rebuttal, partial extension of Hobson's paper, sometimes on target, elsewhere (I think) misdirected and overstated, will be found in L. S. B. MacCoull, "Towards an Appropriate Context for the Study of Late Antique Egypt," *Anc.Hist.Bull.* 6 (1992) 73-79 (= *Coptic Perspectives on Late Antiquity*, chapter XXIX).

with Bell, today's papyrologists are in any sense "old Egypt hands"; but given the opportunity to visit and examine the sites whose papyri they had edited or whose histories they had tried to write, they would, I'm convinced, make the necessary detours. And the new attitude has its own enthusiasms on yet another level, perhaps best represented in Leslie MacCoull's work. For it is a far cry, in fact for some, too far a cry, from Bell's appallingly dull servile state to MacCoull's 1988 portrayal of a Byzantine Egypt that "coruscated with every fashionable development, every trendy novelty in literary and religious life . . . where town life went on, where classical and Christian elements were blended into a civilized whole . . .".³⁸ It is nonetheless true that there is now a renaissance in the study of Byzantine Egypt that owes much to the re-evaluation accomplished in the last generation's work. Now that a new course has been set, some real excitement lies ahead.³⁹

Loyola University of Chicago

James G. Keenan

³⁸*Dioscorus of Aphrodito, His Work and His World* (Berkeley-Los Angeles 1988). (The quote is from p. 47.)

³⁹For obituaries on Sir Harold Bell (b. 1879), who, despite apparently frail health throughout life, died in advanced years in 1967, see E. G. Turner, T. C. Skeat, and J. David Thomas, *JEA* 53 (1967) 131-40; J. David Thomas, *Aegyptus* 46 (1966) 97-99; C. H. Roberts, *Proc. Brit. Acad.* 53 (1967) 409-22.