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Roger S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. xvi + 110 pages. ISBN 978-0-691-14026-1.

The four chapters comprising Roger Bagnall's *Early Christian Books in Egypt* are based on four lectures delivered in May 2006 at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (5e section). Since the chapters preserve the general character and style of the lecture series, this book is a fairly straightforward and easy read that is readily accessible to the non-specialist. This does not imply, however, that it is of little or no value to the specialist, as Bagnall periodically challenges the *status quo* by inviting specialists in the field to rethink some of their assumptions about the early Christian literary remains from Egypt.

In Chapter One, "The Dating of the Earliest Christian Books in Egypt: General Considerations," Bagnall declares that as a result of the current state of scholarship, which he provocatively characterizes as "self-enclosed" and lacking in "self-awareness," he feels compelled to wade into this subject matter. In this chapter Bagnall is principally troubled with the assumption/conclusion allegedly pervasive in scholarship that the presence of early Christian fragments from various locations in the *chora* necessarily implies that already in the second century Christians had a significant presence throughout Egypt. He counters by pointing out that some of these "early" Christian fragments probably date to the third century. He also suggests that the proportional number of early Christian fragments can be potentially misleading since whenever such a fragment is found it tends to be published immediately whereas non-Christian literary fragments from the same period are not pursued and published with such urgency. Bagnall therefore argues that Christian texts could actually be proportionally overrepresented in the second century and thus give a misleading impression about the actual number of Christians in the *chora* at this time.

In the second chapter, "Two Case Studies," Bagnall seeks to highlight how there are sometimes hidden agendas at play in the palaeographically based dates assigned to early Christian documents. He therefore assesses the controversial dating of some early pieces by Carsten Thiede to underscore this point. He convincingly shows how Thiede's attempt to redate two fragments of Matthew (P⁶⁴ and P⁶⁷), first to the late first century, then to the mid first century, was based more on a theological agenda that sought to establish an early date for this Gospel than it was on a rigorous and sincere attempt to correctly date these two fragments. Bagnall then juxtaposes this episode with Nikolaos Gonis' judicious and impartial dating of certain early fragments belonging to the Shepherd of Hermas (P.Oxy. 69.4706) to demonstrate how paleographical dating should ideally be conducted. Bagnall concludes the chapter with a warning

that since paleographical dating is to some degree subjective it is always open to radical attack by those who wish to promote a particular agenda.

In Chapter Three, "The Economics of Book Production," Bagnall considers the relative cost of producing codices, both Christian and non-Christian, in the first few centuries. Starting with the handful of references that mention the costs of ancient books, Bagnall examines the economics behind book production from a number of perspectives and in great detail explains the various costs involved in the making of a codex. This assessment leads him to believe that for a person of "average income" (p. 63) the cost of purchasing a single book was prohibitive, and that when we think of early Christian books we should think of them as belonging primarily to wealthy individuals or members of the clergy for whom the church may have purchased such texts.

In the final chapter, "The Spread of the Codex," Bagnall weighs in on the early use of the codex by Christians. While he often reiterates and confirms observations made by previous scholars, his use of recent statistical data (derived principally from the LDAB) represents a welcome contribution as it brings his observations into sharper focus. In the second half of the chapter Bagnall considers why early Christians preferred the codex to the roll in such large proportions. After considering previous answers to this question he simply proposes that the early employment of the codex by Christians was largely a result of Romanization – the spread of Roman habits and technologies throughout the empire.

On a number of fronts this work has much to offer and Bagnall's pre-eminence as one of the foremost authorities in Greek papyrology is evident throughout, as he frequently makes astute observations about early Christian literary papyri and does an admirable job of situating and contextualizing these fragments within the matrix of Roman Egypt. For example, in Chapter Three Bagnall takes a masterful stab at explaining the various costs incurred in making a codex. He resists rendering a straightforward estimate for the cost of a typical New Testament Codex or a complete Christian Bible (OT & NT) by pointing out that such an estimate is made much more complex by a number of issues (materials, labor, binding, inflation, etc.). The discussion here is exceptionally thorough and elucidating.

Notwithstanding the strengths of this work, it does suffer from some shortcomings. Since it reads like a lecture series it sometimes glosses over controversial issues or makes sweeping generalizations. This is most apparent in Bagnall's presentation and depiction of New Testament/Early Christian scholarship as it pertains to the study of the early Christians literary remains from Egypt. To state, as Bagnall does at the start of Chapter One, that much of this scholarship is "self-enclosed" or lacks "self-awareness" is an oversimpli-

fication and belies both its breadth and diversity. Later, at the end of Chapter Four, this sweeping treatment of such scholarship is evident again. Here Bagnall argues that it was as a result of Romanization that Christians adopted the codex as the medium to transmit their sacred writings and remarks that scholars of early Christianity have been unwilling to make this “logical move” since the Christian church in this period is characterized in this scholarship as a counter-cultural movement unfriendly to the imperial power. However, in a number of recent studies, curiously none of which are cited by Bagnall in this context, various scholars of early Christianity have argued in one form or another that the use of the codex in early Christianity was the direct result of its wider use in Roman society and that therefore elements of “Romanization” were certainly at work in its adoption by Christians.

In sum, despite the minor shortcomings of this work that result primarily from its lecture-like presentation style, there is much to offer. Both the non-specialist and specialist alike will surely glean many useful insights from Bagnall’s lucid and often original treatment of the early Christian literary remains from Egypt.

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Lincoln Blumell

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