

# Greeks and Egyptians

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## Class and Status

The Egyptian social order before the coming of the Greeks appears to have been closely tied to function. Thus, the social identity of groups of administrators, priests and soldiers is clear; and further down the scale that of free artisans and traders, of serfs and slaves. But outside this functional classification there were also foreigners who were, of course, culturally and linguistically distinct from the native Egyptians. We can point to the existence of the Greek trading post at Naukratis, to Carian Greeks known in Memphis during the Persian occupation and, in the same period, to a Jewish military colony at Elephantine near the southern frontier, which has left records of its presence in the form of a number of Aramaic papyri. These documents reveal that the colonists firmly preserved their ancestral identity but at the same time were by no means isolated from contact with their Egyptian surroundings – some intermarried, Egyptian shrines are in evidence at Elephantine, they could swear oaths by the local native deity.<sup>1</sup>

The coming of the Greeks created, in effect, a social revolution, overlaying Egyptian society with a new dominant elite. Through the first century of Ptolemaic rule Greek immigration continued on a large scale – from mainland Greece, Macedonia, Thrace, the Aegean islands, the Greek cities of Asia Minor – a heavy concentration in Alexandria, but also penetrating all parts of the Nile valley. In their wake came others too, even the odd Roman, but most conspicuously, in the middle of the second century BC, great numbers of Jews. Numerically, of course, the Egyptians remained far superior to the aggregate of all these immigrants, but the political, economic and social dominance of the Greeks had far-reaching effects. It naturally tended to draw upwards the more ambitious Egyptians, and it did so without eradicating the Egyptian social and cultural patterns. It is sometimes difficult to catch more than a passing glimpse of these since our evidence is heavily skewed in favour of the Greek-speaking elite, but there can be no doubt of their importance amongst the native population. The truth of this for the whole of our period is guaranteed by their prominent re-emergence in Coptic Christianity at the end of it.

The clearest manifestations of the dominance of Hellenism – whose legacy stretched far beyond the Arab conquest, even into the nineteenth century – are cultural and linguistic. The impact of a more pervasive literacy was radical and profound. Access to privilege was provided through social and political institutions and economic distinctions were encouraged as well. But Egyptian society was not simply divided along economic lines between rich and poor – there were certainly some wealthy Egyptians and some poor Greeks. The Greek/Egyptian dichotomy might appear very stark in some spheres and some periods but in others boundaries are less rigid. We have seen that Dionysius son of Kephalas was an Egyptian who took a Greek name and could write both Greek and demotic; so could the Egyptian priest Ḥor of Sebennytos.<sup>2</sup> This was a society in which many people were bilingual, no less so seven hundred years later, when we find the poet and lawyer Dioscorus of Aphrodite writing amateurish poems in Greek, compiling a Greek/Coptic literary glossary and operating in his legal activities in both languages. Just as telling, in a different way and much earlier, is the example of a certain Dryton, son of Pamphilus,

a Greek of Ptolemais in the second century BC, married to a woman whose ancestry for three generations back carried both Greek and Egyptian names.<sup>3</sup> In the Ptolemaic period Egyptians who wanted to infiltrate the higher echelons of the bureaucracy, as they were able to do from the second century BC onwards, had to hellenise.

The Jewish population was also an important element in society. The trickle of Jewish immigrants in the third century BC swelled significantly in the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor both as a result of the 'philo-Semitism' of the king and of the efflux of various elements from Judaea after the revolt of Judas Maccabaeus. One of these exiles, Onias, was put in command of a Jewish military unit in the service of the king and given a grant of land in the Heliopolite Nome on which to settle the soldiers and build a temple. Other groups of Jewish immigrants settled in many of the towns and villages of the valley and the delta, from Elephantine to Alexandria, leaving evidence of their presence in the existence of synagogues, 'Jewish streets' and distinctive names. These are indications of the corporate identity and a letter from the first half of the first century BC carries a sinister recognition of the distinction in the phrase 'You know that they loathe the Jews'.<sup>4</sup> The coherence of the Jewish community will have been reinforced through the Ptolemaic and early Roman periods by the privilege which they enjoyed of practising their ancestral religion. This was considerably undermined after the Jewish revolt in Judaea (AD 66-73), when the emperor Vespasian diverted into the imperial coffers the half-shekel tax which every Jew had previously paid annually to the temple at Jerusalem.

The Jews in the towns of the valley appear in all walks of life, as soldiers, farmers, artisans, labourers, traders and were thus necessarily in close and constant contact with their Greek and Egyptian neighbours. One sign of the social and economic interaction is the fact that there are numerous examples of Jews choosing

**73 The Antinoite charioteers.** This illustration from a codex, which is probably to be dated after the middle of the fifth century AD, is in a hellenistic style which contrasts sharply with 'Coptic' art of the Christian period. It is a very early example of book-decoration, though the text which it accompanies is lost but for a few letters. It shows five charioteers (and parts of a sixth), perhaps standing under an arcade. They may represent the rival factions in the hippodrome.



to use Greek law and Greek courts, despite the availability of their own independent and protected Jewish legal institutions.<sup>5</sup> The degree of cultural assimilation of individuals will have varied, much as it does in modern Europe and North America, but Greek or hellenised names are very common and the use of the Greek language was practically universal until the Byzantine period, even amongst the survivors of the unsuccessful revolt of AD 115-7.

There is less evidence for the penetration of Greek or Jewish elements into Egyptian society. Time and time again we are struck by the way in which our documents emphasise the dominant few and time and time again we need to remind ourselves of the many who make little impression at the higher social levels. The corporate social identity of the Egyptians as such tends to be expressed institutionally in the native religious cults, whose political and economic power was severely curtailed by the Ptolemies (and even more by the Romans). The Greeks created their own identifications of Egyptian gods, but there is a little evidence in the Ptolemaic period for Greek-named priests in Egyptian cult.<sup>6</sup>

On the more strictly secular side, there are numerous Ptolemaic contracts (marriage, division or sale of property and the like) in demotic, or a mixture of Greek and demotic which suggest adaptation of Egyptians to the use of Greek rather than the reverse.<sup>7</sup> But there are some striking counter-examples. A relieved mother writes to her son in the second century BC: 'I was delighted for you and myself when I heard that you are learning Egyptian writing, since now, at least, when you return to the city you will go to the purge-doctor to teach the apprentices and will have a means of support until your old age.'<sup>8</sup> Or again, one Greek to another: 'I decided to describe the dream to you so that you may know how the gods have knowledge of you; and I have written it below in Egyptian so that you may know the exact details. When I was about to go to bed I wrote two letters, one about Taychis, the daughter of Thermouthis and the other about Teteimouthis, the daughter of Taues and Ptolemaeus.'<sup>9</sup> It is notable that both medicine and dream-interpretations are common subjects in demotic writings but the second text also gives us a clue to one feature of intermarriage. Taues was clearly an Egyptian woman, married to a Greek, Ptolemaeus, but the name of the daughter is Egyptian, not Greek. A dedicatory inscription from the late third century BC reveals two Greek ladies from Cyrene, Eirene and Theoxena, daughters of Demetrius and an Egyptian mother, taking Egyptian names as well, Nephersouchos and Thaues.<sup>10</sup> In fact, such patterns of nomenclature are amongst the clearest signs of Egyptian influence on Greeks in the ordinary social milieu and the same effects can be also observed in the Egyptian names taken by Jews of the Nile valley in the Ptolemaic period.

Distinctions of status depended on, or were reinforced by, a whole array of legal and social institutions and the evolution of Egyptian society can be analysed in terms of their modification or breakdown and replacement. As far as Greek institutions are concerned, the most emphatic examples, outside Alexandria, are to be found in the so-called Greek cities: Naukratis, originally a seventh-century trading colony founded from Ionian Miletus, Ptolemais in Upper Egypt, founded under Ptolemy I Soter and later Antinoopolis, created by the emperor Hadrian in 130, are all corporate expressions of the civic prestige, status and privilege of the

Greeks and contrast sharply, especially in the Ptolemaic period, with the other substantial towns of the valley (whose populations also contained, of course, a very important Greek element).

Citizenship of the Greek cities was carefully controlled and limited. The citizen body was divided along traditional Greek lines into tribes and local units (*demes*), with distinctively Greek names. They had citizen assemblies, councils, magistrates and other civic institutions such as *gymnasia*, although these did not betoken any real degree of democratic government. The general ambience in such places is well illustrated by a decree from Ptolemais in which the presidents of the council admit someone to citizenship, enroll him in a tribe and deme and grant him a crown and maintenance at the public expense, a fine example of the invariable practice of providing public welfare only for those who did not need it.<sup>11</sup> These Greek cities preserved their distinctiveness in the first two centuries of Roman rule. Citizens of Antinoopolis, amongst other privileges, were exempted from performing public services elsewhere but from the start they were allowed to intermarry with Egyptians, which citizens of Naukratis were not. The distinctions were gradually being eroded and by the beginning of the third century the nome-capitals too boasted their own versions of civic institutions of the Greek type.<sup>12</sup>

This process of change had accelerated under Augustus with a clearer definition of the Greeks in the nome-capitals, even though many will have been descendants of mixed Greek/Egyptian marriages in the Ptolemaic period. They were allowed magistracies and *gymnasia* (essentially private institutions, except in the Greek



74 **Antinoopolis.** Drawing of the triumphal arch by members of the Napolconic expedition to Egypt.

cities in the Ptolemaic period, but now made public); initiation procedures for the young men (ephebes); lower rates of poll-tax, a privilege enjoyed to a lesser degree by other citizens of the nome-capitals in comparison to villagers; Elders' Clubs (*gerousiai*) providing free maintenance as a pension, and associations of various kinds. All in all, a system of civic privilege and obligation tied to birth and wealth – a genuine and far-reaching innovation of the Roman period. The right to enter this order depended on the ability to show Greek ancestry on both maternal and paternal sides, based on lists of original members of this gymnasial class drawn up in AD 4/5. The metropolite citizens were already a privileged group in comparison to villagers, the gymnasial class was a more exclusive and even more privileged sub-group.

All this points to a greater degree of social direction and control in the Roman period and it was reinforced in all sorts of ways. Thus, the emperor Caracalla in 215:

‘All Egyptians in Alexandria, especially countryfolk who have fled from other parts and can easily be detected, are by all manner of means to be expelled, with the exception, however, of pig-dealers and riverboatmen and the men who bring down reeds for heating the baths. But expel all others, as by the numbers of their kind and their uselessness they are disturbing the city... For genuine Egyptians can easily be recognised among the linen-weavers by their speech, which proves them to have assumed the appearance and dress of another class; moreover in their mode of life, their far from civilised manners reveal them to be Egyptian countryfolk.’<sup>13</sup>

Such sentiments were shared by the more humble: ‘Perhaps you will think, brother,’ remarks a writer of the third century apologetically, ‘that I am some kind of a barbarian or an inhuman Egyptian,’<sup>14</sup> Distinctions will have been reinforced by the fact that there certainly were many Egyptians who remained unable to speak Greek. In a long and fascinating legal wrangle between a daughter and father in 186

**75 Statue from Karanis.** The black basalt sculpture, dating to c. AD 50, was found in an area to the west of the southern temple. It is a good example of the Egyptian style of statuary of this period and may be intended to represent a local priest or dignitary. There are indications that the piece is unfinished.



a precedent was cited in which, fifty years earlier, an official settled a disputed claim of the rights of a father in Egyptian law over his daughter quite simply: "In accordance with the decision of his highness Titianus (a prefect), they shall find out from the woman," and he ordered that she should be asked through an interpreter what was her choice."<sup>15</sup> It is very interesting to observe that although the Romans continued to maintain and reinforce social distinctions between Greeks, Egyptians and Jews, for instance, what they called 'Egyptian law' in circumstances like those described comprised the heterogeneous mass of pre-existing Greek, Jewish and Egyptian law and custom – in fact everything that was not Roman law.

The advent of the latter, predicated upon the spread of Roman citizenship, also profoundly affected Egyptian society. Citizenship was granted to the privileged group of veteran soldiers on discharge (but to their children only if both parents had the status), and to other Egyptians, though far from open-handedly, as Pliny the Younger attests in a letter to the emperor Trajan about a grant of citizenship for a therapist named Harpocras:

'I was advised by people more experienced than I am that, since he is an Egyptian, I should first have obtained for him Alexandrian citizenship, then Roman. Not realising that there was any difference between Egyptians and other aliens, I contented myself with writing to you only that he was a freedman of an alien woman and that his patron had died some time ago.'<sup>16</sup>

Once obtained, the Roman citizenship carried very considerable legal and fiscal privileges, gave its holder the right and obligation to follow Roman legal practices in contracts, wills, marriages, rights over property and practices of guardianship of those not fully empowered to act in law (women, unless exempted, and men under twenty-five). It did not, however, extinguish the rights and obligations of the new Roman citizen to the local community from which he originated.

The social, legal and fiscal implications of all these distinctions between Romans, Alexandrians, gymnasials, metropolitans and villagers are nowhere illustrated with more force than in parts of the Code of Regulations of the emperors' Special Account, as it existed in the middle of the second century – the clearest possible demonstration of the way in which law and practice shaped and controlled the social structure:

'If to a Roman will is added a clause saying "whatever bequests I make in Greek codicils shall be valid", it is not admissible, for a Roman is not permitted to make a Greek will.

The property of freed slaves of metropolitans who die childless and intestate is inherited by their former owners or the owners' sons, if there are any and they make legal claim, but not by their daughters or anyone else; over them the Special Account takes precedence.

A metropolitan cannot bequeath to his freed slaves more than five hundred drachmae or an allowance of five drachmae a month.

Inheritances left in trust by Greeks of the gymnasial class to Romans or by Romans to Greeks were confiscated by the deified Vespasian; nevertheless those acknowledging the trust have received half.

Romans are not permitted to marry their sisters or their aunts, but marriage with their

brothers' marriages had been allowed. Pardalas, indeed, when a brother married a sister, confiscated the property.

Children of a metropolite mother and an Egyptian father remain Egyptian, but they can inherit from both parents.

Children of a Roman man or woman married to a metropolite or an Egyptian assume the lower status.

Children of Egyptians falsely claiming Roman citizenship in writing for their deceased father forfeit a quarter of their property.<sup>17</sup>

As far as Roman citizenship was concerned such privileges were meaningful only until 212, when the emperor Caracalla granted this status to almost all the inhabitants of the empire. Individuals marked their newly acquired citizenship by adding the Roman element 'Aurelius', the imperial family name, to their nomenclature. The status distinctions already embedded in the social structure before the spread of Roman citizenship again became overtly prominent, along with another important phenomenon clearly implicit in principle in the Regulations of the Special Account and elsewhere. This was the rather vague notion of a division between upper and lower classes (*honestiores* and *humiliores*). They cannot be precisely and exhaustively catalogued, though it is obvious where one would put senators, equestrians or councillors on the one hand and peasants and artisans on the other. Philo noted the difference in treatment of Alexandrians and Egyptians when they were punished:

'There are differences between the scourges used in the city, and these differences are regulated by the social standing of the persons to be beaten. The Egyptians actually are scourged with a different kind of lash and by a different set of people, the Alexandrians with a flat blade, and the persons who wield them are also Alexandrians.'<sup>18</sup>

The prominence of the distinction throughout the later Roman and the Byzantine period makes explicit the fundamental principle of according greater social and legal privilege to those of higher status and, in general, defining that status in terms of birth and wealth.

However, the erosion of civic prestige in the later third century and the consequent decline of the local magisterial classes does have important effects on the

**76 Papyrus letter.** This papyrus of the first century AD from Oxyrhynchus contains an indecent proposal from two men named Apion and Epimas to a boy called Epaphroditus. A crude drawing in the margin makes their intentions explicit.





social structure in the Byzantine period. Social status is more overtly tied to functions of a rather different kind, sharpened by the more emphatic gulf between rich and poor. Administrators and bureaucrats, soldiers, clergy, great landowners and local magnates, tenant-farmers all seem more coherently defined as status groups. Tendencies towards enforced inheritance of function and status are more explicit. But this does not necessarily mean that the social structure was immobile and ossified; there is much evidence of movement which suggests that the restrictive measures in the law codes do not truly represent the reality on the ground.

Many of these elements can be traced in embryo in the earlier Roman period. But one influence which was emphatically new and important was the emergence of the Church and Christianity as a social force. Its effects can be seen in several interconnected developments. The increasing use of the Coptic language – basically demotic Egyptian written in Greek characters with a few additions – from about 300 can be ascribed to the Church's need to reach the non-hellenised Egyptian population and it had the effect of re-emphasising the cultural divide and the antipathy between Greek and Egyptian, giving a new medium of expression to a stratum which had always existed and always been numerically superior. Partially co-extensive with this process is the rift between pagan and Christian and, on the whole, paganism survived longer and more vigorously among the Greeks. It also re-emphasised the identity, by antithesis, of the reviving Jewish element which turned again to using Hebrew in everyday communication. Hellenism had attracted it to a greater cosmopolitanism, but that was fading and to the Christian Church there could be nothing but indifference or hostility. Another new element is the Church's paternalism which found an outlet in a concern for the welfare of the poor, strikingly absent in earlier times, and thus a new concept of social obligation. Witness a village dignitary describing his own virtues to the monk Paphnutius:

'I have not ceased to practice hospitality to this day. No one in the village can claim to be more prompt in offering shelter to a stranger. No poor man or stranger has gone away from my courtyard empty-handed without first having been supplied with suitable victuals. I have never come across anyone destitute without giving him ample relief.'<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the Christian Church gave rise to new social units – the monasteries, large numbers of communal settlements, sometimes alleged to hold as many as five hundred or a thousand monks, which dominated many parts of the countryside from about the middle of the fourth century onwards, offering not only spiritual sanctuary, but also physical security and economic self-sufficiency for those who heeded the call. They were self-contained, but not by any means isolated from the villages in their vicinity, as an episode in the life of the monk Apollo shows:

'Not long afterwards two villages came into armed conflict with each other in a dispute concerning the ownership of land. When Apollo was informed of this, he went down to them at once to restore peace among them.'

Dealing with the chief protagonist, a brigand,

'Apollo said to him, "If you obey me my friend, I shall ask my master to forgive you your sins." When the brigand heard this he did not hesitate. He threw down his arms and clasped the saint's knees. Then Apollo, having become a mediator of peace, restored to each person his property.'<sup>20</sup>

One of the fundamental principles of monastic life was the rejection of marriage and procreation and thus, however populous the monasteries were, they stood firmly outside what was and always remained the most important cellular unit in society, the family. It is hardly surprising that their growth failed to undermine it.

The extended family was at all times in Graeco-roman Egypt a cohesive entity. Census returns show heads of households often recording parents, children, brothers and sisters and their children as living in the same house, or part of a house. The archaeological evidence for housing in the villages suggests that the occupancy and ownership of blocks of houses of modest size would be shared by a number of households living in conditions of great proximity and intimacy, probably without strict correspondence between the house-unit and the individual household. It is probably misleading to suggest a typical size since households evidently varied from as many as fifteen or twenty down to a nuclear family of two or three. The average may be about seven or eight. A declaration of 117-8 may show a household of larger than average size, but it is certainly not unusual in the structure it reveals: declarant, his wife and one son, another son of the wife, perhaps from a previous marriage, two brothers of the declarant and their wives, their two daughters and three slaves.<sup>21</sup> Other examples show that it was not uncommon for adults to remain living with their parents at least until the birth of their own children. Supplementation of the workforce in the domestic situation by small



77 **Stela of a family group.** Once considered to be a representation of the family of the emperor Antoninus Pius, c. AD 150, this is now regarded as a private family group, the men in which seem to be priests of Sarapis.

numbers of slaves is common, especially where a husband is no longer present.

This kind of structure has an important bearing on the devolution of property and laws which affect the family are very much concerned with rules of inheritance and control of property in the relations between parents and children, husbands and wives. A characteristic feature of Egyptian practice was the custom of dividing property between all children with little regard to sex or age. One natural result of this was a large proportion (for the ancient world) of female property-owners, another was the astonishing degree of fragmentation, which probably bore little relation to the actual patterns of residence in blocks of houses shared by a number of households. A property declaration of the year 184 records paternal inheritances of  $\frac{1}{12}$  of an empty lot,  $\frac{1}{12}$  of another,  $\frac{4}{24}$  of a house and courtyard,  $\frac{1}{8}$  of a house and courtyard,  $\frac{5}{12}$  of an aroura of land, another plot of  $\frac{1}{4}$  aroura, and maternal inheritances of  $\frac{1}{8}$  of a house and courtyard and  $1\frac{3}{8}$  arourae of land, all owned by one person!<sup>22</sup>

Innumerable letters testify to the strength of feeling within the family and the household in Egyptian society – the examples which follow require no elaborate comment.

A wife to her husband, involved in fighting the Jewish dissidents of 115–7:

‘I am terribly anxious about you because of what they say about what is happening and because of your sudden departure. I take no pleasure in food or drink but stay awake continually night and day with one worry, your safety. Only my father’s care revives me and, as I hope to see you safe, I would have lain without food on New Year’s Day, had not my father come and forced me to eat.’<sup>23</sup>

A penitent son to his mother in Karanis:

‘I was ashamed to come to Karanis because I go about in filth. I wrote to you that I am naked. I beg you, mother, be reconciled to me. Well, I know what I have brought on myself. I have received a fitting lesson. I know that I have sinned. I heard from . . . who found you in the Arsinoite Nome and he has told you everything correctly. Do you know that I would rather be maimed than feel that I still owe a man an obol?’<sup>24</sup>

A distraught husband to his wife:

‘I would have you know that ever since you left me I have been in mourning, weeping by night and lamenting by day. Since I bathed with you I have not bathed or anointed myself. You have sent me letters that could move a stone, so much have your words stirred me . . . apart from what you say and write, that “Kolobos has made me a prostitute.”’<sup>25</sup>

A reproachful student to his father:

‘Look, this is my fifth letter to you and you have not written to me except once, not even a word about your welfare, nor come to see me, though you promised me, saying “I am coming,” you have not come to find out whether the teacher is looking after me or not. He himself is inquiring about you almost every day, saying “Is he not coming yet?” And I just

say "Yes." . . . Come to us quickly, then, before he goes up country . . . Remember our pigeons.<sup>26</sup>

A respectable matron expresses disgust to her husband at the behaviour of their daughters:

'If you want to know . . . about the harlotries of your daughters ask the priests of the Church, not me, how they leaped out saying "We want men" and how Lucra was found with her lover, making a whore of herself.'<sup>27</sup>

Family loyalties, as we would expect, could be undermined. A certain Chaeremon tries to exercise control over his married daughter, Dionysia, in a dispute in 186:

'Since, my lord, she continues her outrageous behaviour and insulting conduct towards me, I claim to exercise the right given to me by the law . . . of taking her away against her will from her husband's house.'<sup>28</sup>

A maltreated Christian wife of the fourth century complains about her husband:

'He shut up his own slaves and mine with my foster-daughters and his agent and son for seven whole days in his cellars, having insulted his slaves and my slave Zoe and half-killed them with blows, and he applied fire to my foster-daughters, having stripped them quite naked, which is contrary to the laws . . . He swore in the presence of the bishops and his own brothers, "Henceforward I will not hide all my keys from her" (he trusted his slaves but would not trust me): "I will stop and not insult her." Whereupon a marriage deed was made and after this agreement and his oaths, he again hid the keys from me . . . he kept saying, "A month hence I will take a mistress." God knows this is true.'<sup>29</sup>

A father disowns his children in an extraordinary virulent declaration of 569:

'Proclamation of disownment and rejection, having my mind and understanding unaffected, with true and unerring judgement, without any guile or fear or violence or compulsion or deceit, in a public place of business. And this I transmit to my parricidal children, though children in name only . . . thinking to find you helpful in all things, a comfort to my old age, submissive and obedient, and on the contrary you in your prime have set yourselves against me like rancorous things, as I learned through experience of your heartless parricidal conduct and lawless disposition, seeing that I fell grievously ill through you . . . and it is no longer lawful for you in future to call me father, inasmuch as I reject and abhor you from now to the utter end of all succeeding time as outcasts and bastards and lower than slaves . . . for ravens to devour the flesh and peck out the eyes, in this manner I debar you from receiving or giving anything on my behalf whether I am alive or dead because I have rightly and justly thus resolved.'<sup>30</sup>

But the inexorable litany of birth, marriage and death was, if relatively brief in span and straitened in circumstance, usually more tranquil. This is a population in which the rate of infant mortality was enormous, through disease or the dangers of childbirth (half of thirty-four infant skeletons found in a recent necropolis excavation were less than one year old);<sup>31</sup> in which females would normally marry at thirteen



**78 Mummies.** These mummies of the Roman period, complete with gilded masks, were discovered in 1911 in the cemetery at Aphroditopolis (Atfih), about 40 km south of Memphis.

or fourteen and males well before twenty; in which half the males and probably less than half the females who survived to adulthood (which can arbitrarily be set at fourteen, the age at which they became liable to pay taxes) could not expect to live beyond the age of thirty.

Contraception was unknown except for primitive and presumably ineffective prophylactics:

'Take some vetches, one for each year you wish to remain infertile, rub them in the menses when the woman is menstruating. Let her rub them in her own genitals. Take a frog and throw the vetches into its mouth that it may swallow them down, let the frog loose and let it go back to where you took it from. Take the seed of henbane, wet it in horse's milk, take the mucus of a frog and its excrements and throw them into the skin of a stag and tie it together outside with skin from a mule and bind it round you as an amulet when the moon is waning, is in a female sign of the zodiac, on the day of Saturn or Mercury.'<sup>32</sup>

Serial and multiple births were normal, stillbirth endemic and live birth often accounted for the mother:

'This is the grave of Arsinoe, wayfarer. Stand by and weep for her, unfortunate in all things, whose lot was hard and terrible. For I was bereaved of my mother when I was a little girl, and when the favour of my youth made me ready for a bridegroom my father married me to Phabeis and fate brought me to the end of my life in bearing my firstborn child. I had a small span of years, but great grace flowered in the beauty of my spirit. This grave hides in its bosom my chaste body but my soul has flown to the holy ones. Lament for Arsinoe.'<sup>33</sup>

Even live birth was no guarantee of survival for not infrequently, circumstances might dictate contraception after the event, so to speak:

'Hilarion to Alis, very many greetings . . . Know that we are still in Alexandria. Do not be anxious; if they really go home I will remain in Alexandria. I beg and entreat you, take care of the little one, and as soon as we receive our pay I will send it up to you. If by good fortune you bear a child, if it is a male, let it be, if it is a female, throw it out.'<sup>34</sup>

In a world in which such apparently harsh realities enforced more modest expectations than the modern reader can easily appreciate, the humdrum and the routine will have dominated personal relationships. Romance, love, sex are infrequently mentioned. The love-spell is not uncommon, but rather impersonal: exotic potions and obscure incantations are followed by the explicit request: 'make her to be sleepless to fly through the air, to love me with a most vehement love, hungry, thirsty and without sleep until she comes and joins her female member with my male member.'<sup>35</sup> The occasional indecent proposal in a letter is practical, not romantic. In the later period sex is conspicuous only in the Christian literature, where self-denial is proper to the chaste or celibate: a monk named Amoun 'was of noble birth and rich parents, who forced him to marry against his will . . . he persuaded the girl in the bridal chamber that they should both preserve their virginity in secret.'<sup>36</sup> Its temptations were an ever-present element in the battleground of the spiritual and the corporeal. A monk who had too much confidence in his own virtue is presented with an image of a beautiful woman lost in the desert, asking for shelter in his cave:



**79 Incantation.** From Hawara, second or third century AD. The spell, designed to attract a loved one, is rolled and tied to a crude figurine of a human. The author of the spell is Serapiacus, the son of a slave woman; the object of his love is one Ammonius.

80 Coffin of Soter. The Roman period coffin belongs to a man with Roman and Greek names. The lid of the coffin which the corpse would face is supposed to represent the vault of the sky and contains a picture of the goddess Nut in Graeco-egyptian style surrounded by the zodiacal signs.

