'With so much talking she led him astray. Then she began to touch his hand and beard and neck . . . his mind seethed with evil thoughts as he calculated that the matter was already within his grasp, and that he had the opportunity and the freedom to fulfil his pleasure. He then consented inwardly and tried to unite himself with her sexually. He was frantic by now, like an excited stallion, eager to mount a mare. But suddenly she gave a loud cry and vanished from his clutches, slipping away like a shadow. And the air resounded with a great peal of laughter.'[37]

'Theon son of Origenes invites you to the wedding of his sister tomorrow, Tybi 9, at the eighth hour.'[38] The invitation is brief and formal but the feast provided for friends and relatives might be lavish and trouble might be taken to make the occasion a colourful one:

'You filled us with joy by announcing the wedding of the excellent Sarapion . . . There are not many roses here yet; on the contrary, they are in short supply, and from all the estates and from all the garland-weavers we could hardly get together the thousand that we sent you with Sarapas, even by picking the ones that ought to have been picked tomorrow. We had as much narcissus as you wanted, so instead of the 2,000 you wrote we sent 4,000.'[39]

As for the forms of matrimony, the range runs from full marriage with contractual agreement down to simple cohabitation, and illegitimacy of any offspring carried no special stigma. Marriages were certainly often arranged; the religious element is of little significance and practical considerations of wealth and property are much more important. The need to counteract fragmentation of family property through inheritance might explain the commonness of marriage between full brother and sister, though the example set in this respect by the Ptolemies must have played a part too. The general acceptability of this practice was presumably due to the fact that it did more to preserve important social and economic structures than to destroy them and this must have been a strong enough factor to overcome any revulsion against it.

Women brought to marriage dowries in the form of land or other property and a bottom drawer of personal possessions over which they, or their fathers or legal guardians, exerted control in the event of divorce. One contract specifies a dowry consisting of one hundred drachmas in silver, a pair of gold earrings, a gold crescent, two gold rings, a pair of silver armlets, two bracelets, two robes, five mantles, copper vessels and a basin, two minae of tin and ten-and-three-quarter arourae of land as a gift from the wife's father.[40] In the event of divorce, the land would revert to the father (or the wife if he were dead), the rest to the wife.

Divorce was a procedure as relatively straightforward as marriage:

'Zois and Antipater agree that they have separated from each other . . . and Zois acknowledges that she has received from Antipater by hand from his house the material which he received for dowry, clothes to the value of 120 drachmae and a pair of gold earrings. The agreement of marriage shall henceforth be null, and neither Zois nor other person acting for her shall take proceedings against Antipater for restitution of dowry, nor shall either party take proceedings against the other about cohabitation or any other matter whatsoever up to the present day, and hereafter it shall be lawful for Zois to marry another man and for

Antipater to marry another woman without either of them being answerable.'[41]

Finally, at the end of the road, death, often accepted by the bereaved with a calm and philosophical practicality: 'I was very distressed when I heard about his death. Well, that is mortality. We too are going the same way. I spoke a lot to Marcus also, to console him, since he is much grieved, whether because of his death or because you yourself are grieved,' or more starkly: 'Do not grieve over the departed. They were expecting to be killed.'[42] Christianity, of course, brings a different spiritual framework:

'But let us glorify God because it was He who gave and He who took away; but pray that the Lord may give them rest and may vouchsafe to behold you among them in Paradise when the souls of men are judged; for they are gone to the bosom of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob. But I exhort you, my lord, not to put grief into your soul and ruin your fortunes, but pray that the Lord may send you his blessing.'[43]

There were also more practical concerns and responsibilities, which some tried to avoid:

'Melas . . . to Sarapion and Silvanus . . . greetings. I have sent you by the grave-digger the body of your brother Phibion and have paid him the fee for transporting the body, being 340 drachmae of the old coinage. And I am much surprised that you departed for no good reason without taking the body of your brother, but collected all that he possessed and so departed. And from this I see that you did not come up for the sake of the dead, but for the sake of his effects. Now take care to have ready the sum spent. The expenses are: cost of preservatives 60 old drachmae; cost of wine on the first day, two choes 32 old drachmae; for expenditure on loaves and relishes 16 drachmae; to the grave-digger for the desert journey, besides the above-mentioned fee, one chous of wine 20 drachmae, two choes of oil 12 drachmae, one artaba of barley 20 drachmae; cost of linen 20 drachmae; and fee as aforesaid of 340 drachmae . . . You will therefore make every effort to serve the person who will bring the body by providing loaves and wine and oil and whatever you can, which he may testify to me.'[44]

Alternatively, for some, both Greeks and Egyptians, arrangements and expenses of burial might be met by the funds of a guild or religious association to which they belonged.

The archaeological remains of burials give us a vivid picture of the ways in which the identity of the individual was reflected in death.[45] How was it claimed in life? Did people show that they regarded themselves as more than mere cogs in the wheels of the social machinery which we have described?

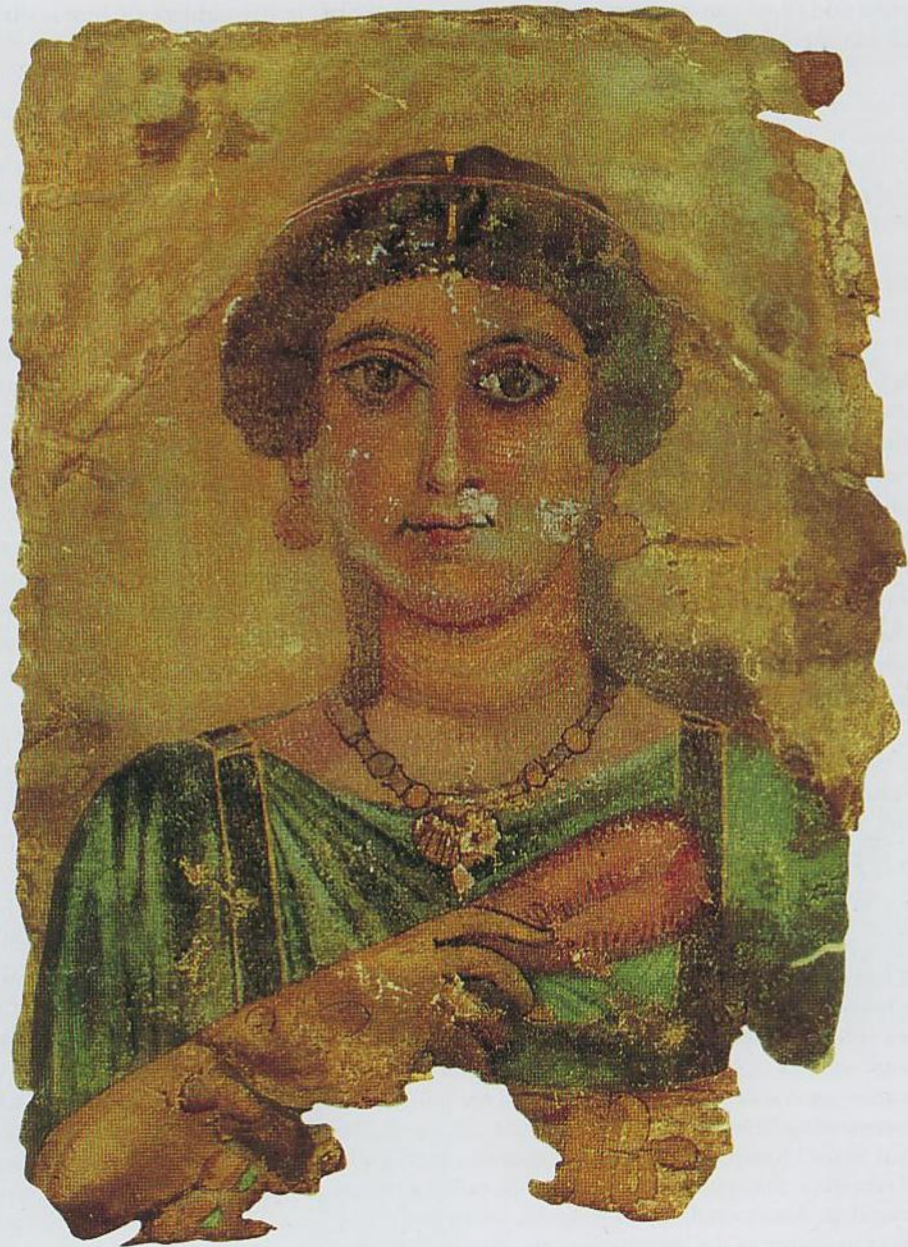
The patterns of personal and social identification in a literate society emerge from the ways in which people responded to the need to designate themselves in official documents, most commonly with reference to status groups of various kinds: the ethnic (Macedonian), rank (Of the First Friends, or later 'illustrious', 'excellency'), bureaucratic or magisterial position (royal scribe, village elder, gymnasiarch, councillor), membership of a social or religious organisation (President of the Guild of Glass-workers, Priest of the first tribe of the twice-great god Socnopaios),

place of origin (of the glorious and most glorious city of the Oxyrhynchites) or occupation (linen-weaver, egg-seller). One or more of these might occur depending on what was appropriate to the context. Many documents include a physical description which would enable a person to be certified visually as party to a transaction: 'Achilleus, aged about twenty years, of medium height, with fair complexion, long face and a scar in the middle of his forehead'.[46] It is difficult to believe that he could be so vague about his age but there are examples which show that, although many people might very well know when to celebrate their birthday, they did not know how old they were. A classic case is that of Aurelius Isidorus, an illiterate farmer of Karanis, who recorded his age in various dated documents as follows: thirty-five in 297; thirty-seven in 308; forty in 308; forty-five in 309; forty in 309![47] Evidently, it did not much matter to him and he follows a common tendency to round off to fives or tens.

All this perhaps rightly suggests a society in which the identity of the individual was not, for most people of low status, as psychologically important in life as in death. Some could not even choose to identify themselves by association with institutions of the kind listed above. Slaves, of course, are the most obvious case in point. They were never very numerous in Egypt, but were certainly there at all times in our period, employed far more (generally in small numbers) in the domestic setting than in agriculture where they hardly appear at all. Slavery bore no respect for race, creed or origin: we hear of the elders of a Jewish community at Oxyrhynchus in 291 buying the freedom of a female Jewish slave and her two children, of a fifteen year-old Christian girl who had been sold into slavery when her father fell upon hard times.[48]

Slaves could not claim legal standing as persons and were sold simply as goods, but there were alleviations. Frequently, exposed infants were picked up and reared as foundling slaves, put out to wet-nurses and then taught a respectable skill, weaving or shorthand. Again, slaves might be freed, on the death of their owner by will, or by purchase of their freedom in their own person or by another (e.g. an ex-slave 'spouse'). This was advantageous to the owner in that it relieved him of the cost of upkeep and went some way towards paying for a replacement for an elderly slave. Slave marriages, although entirely without legal standing, were unofficially countenanced and in periods of peace provided the only effective means of keeping up the slave population. Under the most humane conditions, slaves might well be treated as a real part of the family, the only identity, apart from their economic function, available to them and those slaves who bought their freedom often entered a contractual obligation to remain in employment with their former owner.

For the free man who was oppressed or constrained by his social or economic circumstances there were alternatives, apart from simply moving to another set of institutions, a similar place or means of livelihood. For those who embraced complete rejection of social values, one means of expression lay in running away (*anachōrēsis*) to become a brigand, living in desert caves and plundering the nearby settlements. Sometimes they rejoined society, as did the brigand chief bested by Saint Apollo, who finally joined a monastery, or another, sought out by the monk Paphnutius, who was on his own confession 'a sinner, a drunkard and a fornicator, who not long ago had abandoned the life of a brigand for that of a flute-player.'[49]



81 **Mummy portrait.** A painting in tempera on canvas, from Hawara. The subject wears earrings, bracelet and tunic fashionable in the first century AD and the hairstyle is Neronian. She holds a garland of roses in her right hand (see also Plate 9).

Or, more respectably, in these Christian centuries, a man might turn to the ascetic purity of life of the anchorite, the austerity of which is the subject of much vivid and exaggerated detail in our homiletic sources:

> 'In this desert . . . there is a brother of ours called John. It is not easy for anyone to find him because he is always moving from place to place in the desert. He began by standing under a rock for three years in uninterrupted prayer, not sitting at all or lying down to sleep, but simply snatching some sleep while standing. His only food was the Communion which the priest brought him on Sundays.'[50]

Often, after long periods of such privation, these hermits came back to civilisation and the protection of a monastic community.

For the more worldly and ambitious the way up might be the way out. Preferment might be sought in official employment, leading to the great offices at the imperial court, as it was by members of the Apion family of Oxyrhynchus.[51] Intellectual achievement might lead men like the Neo-platonist philosopher Plotinus away from his native town of Lycopolis, first to study in Alexandria and then to Antioch and Rome, where 'he would never talk about his race or his parents or his native place.'[52] Or Olympiodorus of Thebes, poet, historian and diplomat, who went on an imperial embassy to the Huns in about 412, was in Athens in about 415 helping a friend to obtain the Chair of Rhetoric, and in Rome about 425. He did maintain links with his native land, journeying up to Syene and the territory of the Blemmyes in the company of his pet parrot, a constant companion for twenty years, which could dance and sing and call its owner by name.

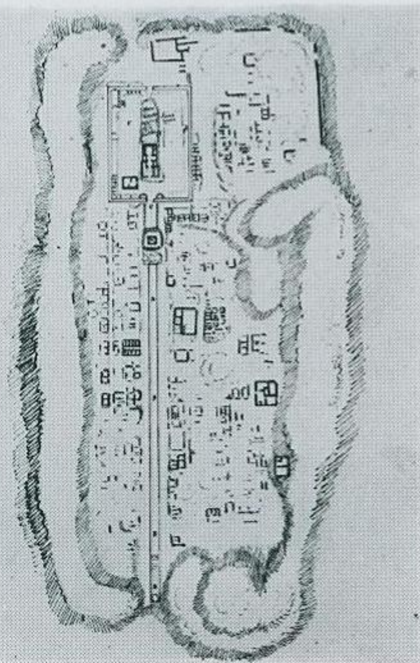
These intellectual superstars, as in more modern times, were perhaps outdone by the great athletes and artists who are the only real counterparts in the ancient world of an 'international jet-set', earning fame and wealth for themselves and reflected glory for their home town. The membership certificate of a guild of artists, from the year 289, speaks for itself:

> 'Know that there has been appointed as high priest of the holy, artistic, travelling world-wide, grand society, under the patronage of Diocletian and Maximian, Aurelius Hatres . . . of Oxyrhynchus and that he has paid the entrance-fee prescribed by imperial law . . . We wrote so that you might know. Farewell. Executed in the noble and most renowned and most reverend city of the Panopolites in the seventh Pythiad, during the presentation of the sacred, triumphal, international, Pythian, scenic and athletic games of Perseus of the Sky, at the great festival of Pan in the presence of the following officers of the society. First officer: the astounding Marcus Aurelius Heracleius Comodus, citizen of Antinoopolis and Panopolis, victor in the Olympic, Pythian and Capitoline games, victor of many games. Second officer and secretary: the astounding Agathocles, called Asterius, singer and lyre-player, citizen of Alexandria, Antinoopolis and Lycopolis, victor in the Pythian games, victor of many games. Officer in charge of the constitution: the astounding Aurelius Casyllus, citizen of Panopolis and Antinoopolis, trumpeter, victor in the Olympic and Pythian games, victor of many games.'[53]

## The Physical Setting

The population of Egypt in the Nile delta and valley was concentrated in a small number of largish towns and a very large number of small villages. A general picture of the physical characteristics of these settlements which is broadly plausible can be sketched, with the proviso that a great deal of what is known applies particularly to the Roman period, during which they reached their highest point of urban development. The stages which preceded and followed it, steady growth in the Ptolemaic period and steady decline, at least in some areas, in the Byzantine period are largely matters of speculation.

There were, then, between thirty and forty towns of considerable size which developed as nome-capitals, and some few besides. The best-known of these, Oxyrhynchus and Hermopolis may have had, at their height, populations in the region of 30,000 or more. A fourth-century Christian source claims that there were 5,000 monks within the city walls of Oxyrhynchus;[54] this must surely be a gross exaggeration but it suggests that the population at large should be numbered in tens of thousands. A better guide is the fact that in the later third century 4,000 adult male citizens at Oxyrhynchus, a figure which is unlikely to represent much less than one sixth of the total population, were eligible for free grain distributions. At Hermopolis, an estimated number of about 4,300 houses in the southern part of the town might suggest a larger total population, but the topography shows that the northern part was less densely residential. If the estimate of an average of 30,000 per nome-capital were multiplied by a factor of forty it would still account for only 1.2 million of Egypt's people.



**82 Plan of Socnopaiou Nesos.** Gardner Wilkinson's sketch of the ruins of the village in the north Fayum. A notable feature of the layout is the enormous causeway leading up to the temple. Housing is modest; the ground plans generally reveal three small rooms on each storey.

The remainder lived in villages. Guesses at their size are rather less useful because there was evidently great variation. Karanis, one of the larger villages in the Fayum might have held 4,000 or more in about 150, when it occupied a maximum area of approximately 750 by 1050 metres; Kerkeosiris in the second century BC has been estimated at about 1,500. The smaller villages perhaps numbered only a few hundred and there are other settlements which may not be much more than tiny hamlets or the Egyptian equivalent of rustic villas. Fluctuations of population in individual villages can also be traced. By 200 the population of Karanis was down by about 40 per cent, probably an effect of the devastating and widespread plague in the 160s. By the fourth century it was perhaps as low as about 420. The once populous village of Theadelphia was reduced from perhaps 2,600 in the early second century to only about 100 by 312. The village of Socnopaiou Nesos disappears completely from our records after the second decade of the third century and must have been abandoned.

These Fayum villages might have been special cases, and excepting catastrophes like a plague, the cause is just as likely to be population movement as overall decline. Elsewhere, the bare record of names which survive through the Byzantine period indicates a great degree of continuity. A recent compilation of about 280 place-names in the Hermopolite Nome shows the very high proportion of eighty-nine attested over a chronological span of 400 years or more.[55] The nome-capitals, or metropoleis, were, as we would expect, the administrative, economic and social nuclei of their regions. The many villages in the nome, well over one hundred in the

83 **Bacchias.** The sand-blown remains of mud-brick houses of the Roman period in one of the smaller villages in the north-east Fayum.

Arsinoite and the Oxyrhynchite, for example, were all dependent in some way (if only for tax purposes) on the metropolis, but the model of a primate town with a number of directly dependent villages is too simple. The villages varied in size and importance and established interlocking central-place hierarchies of their own, the larger, with more facilities, serving as centres for the smaller in a microcosm of the relationship between the metropolis and the nome as a whole.

Life for the townspeople and villagers of Egypt, with its hot Mediterranean climate, revolved as much around public facilities as private, so the physical aspects of these places are of considerable importance. A guided tour of one of the populous metropoleis or the larger villages is hardly feasible since there is none which can be completely reconstructed, but a combination of archaeological remains and documentary evidence from a number of sites yields a composite picture which is reasonably representative.

The large town of Oxyrhynchus, lying on a branch of the Nile some 200 kilometres south of the apex of the delta, occupied a site about 2 kilometres long and 0.8 kilometres in breadth. It was enclosed by a substantial wall, with five gates which gave access to the town. The layout within the walls was not systematically planned around a central market and temple complex as in many foundations of the Hellenistic or Roman period such as Alexandria and Antinoopolis, but the public buildings, constructed of stone blocks and connected by the axes of colonnaded main streets, nevertheless dominated the townscape. Temples were numerous, the oldest those of the native Egyptian gods, followed by the Ptolemaic then the Roman foundations. First in size and importance was the Temple of Sarapis, not merely a shrine but a complex of great social and economic importance, including, as most temples did, a cluster of smaller buildings – workshops or ranges of small living units – connected with the cult, the centre of banking activity and the site of a public market for traders in a great range of commodities, who paid a tax for the privilege of selling there. The cult of Sarapis was common to all major towns, as were some of the widely popular Egyptian deities, cult of the Ptolemaic monarchs and, later, Roman cult of living and dead emperors and also perhaps of Jupiter Capitolinus. But over and above this there was a great deal of individual local variation. At Hermopolis, for instance, the great Temple of Hermes-Thoth, from whom the town took its Greek name, dominated the northern half of the town. In time, the pattern changed. By the late third century Oxyrhynchus had two churches. By the early fourth century, a Temple of Hadrian was being used as a prison. An evangelistic Christian source claims that in this period there were twelve churches and 'the temples and shrines of the Capitoline deities were bursting with monks.'[56] At Hermopolis a church was built over the earlier Temple of the Deified Ptolemies; elsewhere, pagan temples were simply converted to Christian use.

Public buildings of other kinds are ubiquitous in the towns. The gymnasium, the public baths, the record-office, the civic treasury, the council-chamber, the theatre, sometimes a hippodrome as well – all are prominent. The gymnasium was the cultural focus for the Greeks of the town. Always a conspicuous object of expenditure until its decline and disappearance in the Byzantine period, it provided educational facilities, both mental and physical, for those of the town's youth who would enter the gymnasial class – lecture halls and classrooms, ball-courts, a gym-

nasium (in the modern sense) and baths. The splendour of the circular example at Antinoopolis in the mid-third century is indicated by the use of gold-leaf in the repair of the roof of the colonnade and entrances.[57]

Public baths were also common and filled a real need for all sectors of the populace, since domestic supplies of water could only have been available for the wealthy or for large institutions like the monasteries. Oxyrhynchus had at least three sets of public baths in the Roman period and we hear of the construction of a new one in the fifth century.[58] In this setting social conventions were relaxed, drama, misdemeanour or tragedy common:

> 'To King Ptolemy, greeting from Philista . . . I am wronged by Petechon. For as I was bathing in the baths of the village . . . and had stepped out to soap myself, he being bathman in the women's rotunda and having brought in the jugs of hot water emptied one over me and scalded my belly and my left thigh down to the knee, so that my life was in danger.'[59]

The provision of water for these and other public facilities was expensive and labour-consuming as an account of the early second century from the town of Arsinoe shows: water was supplied to the baths, two public fountains, a brewery, the synagogue of the 'Theban Jews' and a 'house of prayer' from reservoirs which were equipped with an Archimedean screw, sixteen shadufs and two sakkiyehs worked for a total of over 1,300 night- and day-shifts in one month![60]

There were other facilities of a functional kind. Oxyrhynchus was not directly on the Nile, but on the left bank of a distributary channel, the Bahr Yusuf (Joseph's Canal). It had two small harbours, as well as a Nilometer and there will have been warehouses and storage buildings in this region and granaries in other parts of the town. Several towns, including Oxyrhynchus, had military garrisons at some point during the Roman and Byzantine periods and this will have entailed the construction of barracks to house them.

Public entertainment was also enormously important. The theatre at Oxyrhynchus had a capacity of about 11,000 and might be the scene of the occasional mass public meeting, if an emperor or a prefect arrived to be proclaimed, or the terminal point of a procession marking a religious festival and public holiday. More routinely, it would present spectacles of various kinds. Gymnastic displays by the ephebic youths,

84 **Head from a statue.** This Alexandrian head, from the first century BC, shows a mixture of Greek and Egyptian elements in the smooth face and unpolished curls.

athletic and artistic performances by the stars of the world-wide, travelling guilds or musical and dramatic performances of a more modest kind – mime artists performing a type of music-hall comedy, recitations of Homeric poems, singing and dancing, amateur chariot-races of the Greek type, for which prizes, as in modern horse-racing, were awarded to the owners of the teams.

By the sixth century Oxyrhynchus also had a hippodrome, supported by public tax, where Roman-style chariot races took place. The charismatic professional charioteers raced for rival teams, the Blues and the Greens, with local, religious and occasionally political associations and often incited their partisans to public violence. A circus programme of the sixth century shows that, between the races, the crowd was entertained by a procession, singing tightrope dancers, a gazelle and a pack of hounds, mimes and a troupe of athletes.[61] The prominence of this new and very popular form of entertainment says much about the diminished role of traditional Greek culture in the Byzantine period.

The villages show a much lesser degree of development and complexity in their public buildings, which naturally varied according to the size of the place. In the sizeable villages, like Karanis and Socnopaiou Nesos, the temple precincts were impressive and dominant and here the native Egyptian cults remained strongest, Socnopaios at Socnopaiou Nesos, Pnepheros and Petesouchos at Karanis, Socnobraisis at Bacchias (all versions of the crocodile god). The village of Dionysias in the Fayum shows, in the fourth century, a very impressive set of baths as well as a large barracks which makes it easy to see how the presence of a military unit dominated the social and economic life of the village. As the nuclei of the surrounding agricultural regions, the villages needed storage facilities for produce and the numerous large granaries at Karanis provide impressive testimony to the size, complexity and importance of such structures, which received and accounted for tax-payments in kind, as well as offering rented storage space to private individuals.

Entertainment facilities in the villages will have been limited. For major festivals or events villagers might go to the metropolis. Locally, the temple might come into use, or one of the larger private houses be made available. A letter of 245 BC requests the presence of a musician with Phrygian flutes and a character named Zenobius, who seems to be a drag-artist, with drum, cymbals and castanets who 'is wanted by the women for the sacrifice'![62] Documents of the Roman period show villagers hiring expensive entertainers from the metropolis:

'I wish to engage you with two other castanet dancers to perform at my house for six days . . . receiving between you for wages thirty-six drachmae a day and for the whole six days four artabae of barley and twenty pairs of loaves . . . and we will provide two donkeys for you when you come down and the same when you return.'[63]

No doubt, all this generated excitement in the otherwise toilsome routine of village life, but sometimes tragedy marred the fun. A report from the Oxyrhynchite village of Senepta:

'At a late hour yesterday, the sixth, while the festival was going on and the castanet dancers were giving their customary performance at the house of my son-in-law Ploution,

Epaphroditus his slave, aged eight, desiring to lean out from the roof of the same house and see the castanet dancers, fell and was killed.'[64]

As with public buildings, the gradual and haphazard growth of most such towns militated against systematic planning of residential areas. Towns were divided into districts, sometimes with particular ethnic or trade associations – at Oxyrhynchus, for example, there were quarters named after the Cretans, Jews, Gooseherds, Shepherds, Cobblers; streets took their names from prominent public buildings or the houses of individuals. The practical difficulties of finding one's way in such places which lacked maps, public transport and any sort of a postal system are illustrated by the following instructions for delivery of a letter in Hermopolis:

'Directions for letters to Rufus. From the Moon Gate walk as towards the granaries . . . turn left at the first street behind the Hot Baths . . . and go westwards. Go down the steps and up . . . and after the precinct of the temple on the right there is a seven-storey house and on top of the gatehouse a statue of Fortune and opposite a basket-weaving shop. Inquire there or from the concierge and you will be informed. And shout yourself.'[65]

As for the nature of the houses themselves, again, our information for the Roman period is far more comprehensive than for either the Byzantine or the Ptolemaic and, as in the case of public buildings, it shows signs of the highest level of prosperity

**85 A house at Narmouthis (Medinet Madi).** A very palatial stone-built house of the Ptolemaic period in one of the villages in the Fayum. Occupation lasted several centuries but in the later period the accommodation was subdivided by mud-brick partition walls.

attained in this millennium. In many places the small and fairly rudimentary houses of the lower social levels of the Ptolemaic period were replaced by structures of greater complexity, organised in more symmetrical blocks. But even then there are signs, at Philadelphia in the Fayum, for instance, of the Greeks of the Ptolemaic period introducing a chequerboard street layout and distinctive features of domestic architecture such as a double courtyard arrangement serving dining-room and apartment complexes, respectively. The wealthier Greeks might spend money on providing elaborate mosaics for the floor of a bath, or hire expert painters from Alexandria to decorate their houses. But much of what survives archaeologically from the villages of Roman period may rather reflect the native Egyptian tradition of housing, with a central open space providing light for rooms facing on to it. Many of these houses will have survived in adapted form into the Byzantine period but new building became much less substantial, more crowded, less symmetrically laid out with extensive re-use of materials from earlier constructions.

The vast majority of the population in the towns and villages spent the greater part of their lives in very modest accommodation. It is clear that most housing complexes were shared by a number of households and the bewildering pattern of fragmentation of ownership has already been noted. From this it naturally follows that many people did not live in all the houses, or all the parts of houses, which they owned. An owner might be able to rent out part of his property or he might capitalise on a vacant residence by giving the use of it to a creditor in lieu of interest on a loan, for example; otherwise it might be left empty or blocked up. One might suppose that hard times in a particular town, village or area would induce families to concentrate themselves (perhaps only temporarily from a long-term perspective) and to adopt a denser, more crowded and more economical pattern of residence. A partially preserved survey of one of the districts of Oxyrhynchus in the year 235 reveals an astonishingly high proportion of unoccupied dwellings, over 40 per cent.[66]

In periods of growth and prosperity, houses might spread upwards rather than outwards. A walled town would naturally encourage this; difficulty of communication would make for compactness, as would unwillingness to encroach on precious agricultural land. Very little is known about houses in the towns at any period. The seven-storey house in Hermopolis, mentioned above, was probably a tenement building of a type which suggests a comparison with the apartment blocks of imperial Rome. One would still expect to find a considerable range, from the grander urban villas down to the humble dwellings of small traders and artisans, which also served them as workshops. A glimpse of a luxurious residence is offered in a letter of the second century:

'The entrance and exit for all the work-people is at the side. But when we reach a fortunate completion the roof also will be made secure. A balustrade has been made for the stairway and another will be made for the porch and for the small dining hall. The beams of the windows in the great dining-hall have today been partly fixed. The second water-cooler is to be roofed over tomorrow.'[67]

A ground plan of a spacious house at Oxyrhynchus in the Roman period shows

**86 A private house at Karanis**. A view into a substantial mud-brick house of the Roman period, showing the interior walls with unusually regular brick courses. The niches beneath the windows are surmounted by wooden lintels and will have served as storage cupboards. The wall at the left contains a shrine niche which has fluted columns, capitals decorated with scrolls and a shell-shaped top.

three courtyards, one of which is labelled as an *atrium*, a vestibule of distinctively Roman type.[68]

As for housing in the villages, the excavations carried out at Socnopaiou Nesos and Karanis in the 1920s and 1930s by American archaeologists afford a very clear picture of the development of domestic houses from the late Ptolemaic period through to the middle of the fourth century AD. Here, as in many ancient sites, rebuilding took place not after demolition of what was there, but on top of it, so that an archaeological section reveals the nature of several continuous periods of occupation, as well as modifications to individual buildings in those periods.[69]

The modest houses which predominate in the villages were generally built of mud-brick, easily made from clay and straw, and were frequently extended, modified or partitioned. In the smaller villages, two-storey houses seem to have been the norm, though examples of three-storey dwellings are known.[70] Multiple dwellings were often organised in *insulae* of up to a dozen units, but the individual houses were of very modest proportions. The commonest arrangement consists of a floor space of about sixty square metres, occupied by three rooms, one of which offers an

87 **A courtyard at Karanis.** Access from the house to the courtyard is by a short flight of stone-covered steps. In the yard there is a tall stone mortar and a storage jar sunk in the floor and covered with a stone.

exit to the street, and a courtyard of about a quarter of the total floor area. Use of stone blocks in domestic buildings is sparing and expensive, naturally more common in the grander houses. Glazing is very rare indeed, but the use of wood in rafters, floor-supports, stair-treads, cupboards, doorways, lintels and windows was very common and, incidentally added greatly to the fire risk in these crowded residential areas with very narrow streets and alleys.

The more substantial houses, which remained in use over a long period of time had underground rooms with vaulted ceilings, a ground floor and a second, and often a third, storey above, reached by staircases. The basement areas are often divided into storage bins, which would hold the family's cereal stocks or other foodstuffs, and the living accommodation on the other floors consisted of two or three rooms of substantial size with mud floors, plastered walls which might be decorated with paintings and niches used as cupboards or to hold small statuettes.

Just as important as the indoor facilities were those outside. Most houses had courtyards and it was around these that much important domestic activity revolved. They often contained animal pens, feeding troughs and mangers for livestock kept

by villagers – pigs, goats, chickens, geese. Sometimes large storage jars for water or grain are half-buried in the courtyard floor. Almost always there are clay ovens where bread would be baked and, with them, millstones for grinding the grain into flour, sometimes oil-presses as well. Also worth noting are the large communal dovecotes at Karanis – pigeons were an important source of both food and fertiliser. Altogether, these modest residences show a high level of domestic self-sufficiency, as is to be expected in villages which lacked the diversity of market and commercial facilities to be found in the larger towns.

Not that these villagers were unable to obtain a considerable variety of foodstuffs. For the very poor, we cannot doubt that the staple food was cereal, made into loaves. The historian Diodorus of Sicily marvelled at the economy with which the Egyptian peasants raised their children feeding them 'with plenty of boiled vegetables which are in ready and cheap supply; they give them those papyrus stalks which can be baked in the fire and the roots and stems of the marsh plants, sometimes raw, sometimes boiled and sometimes roasted.'[71] But beans and lentils were grown in considerable quantities in all areas and must have provided some variation in diet. As we move up the economic scale, the evidence for more variety becomes evident in the consumption of meat, fish, cheese, milk, wine, beer and a great range

**88 The temple of Sobek and Horus, Ombos (Kom Ombo).** The temple was constructed in the Ptolemaic and early Roman periods and was a popular resort of supplicants in search of healing, many of whom have left their mark in the numerous Greek graffiti scrawled on the walls of the temple. This unique relief, dating to the second century AD, illustrates a set of medical instruments of Roman type.

**89 Miscellaneous objects from Karanis.** A group of household objects photographed *in situ* in one of the private houses: a palm-wood door, a reed basket on top of a pot, a palm leaf basket resting on the pot, three smaller pots.