

of vegetables. An account of the early Roman period which includes food eaten by artisans and children includes pickled turnips, salt, bread, beer, leeks, pigeon, asparagus, cabbage, relish, milk, barley-water, pomegranates, flour and chick-peas.<sup>72</sup>

Even if there was enough food to provide most people with the necessary daily intake of calories, there were other factors which militated against good health, particularly the spread of contagious disease and the many dangers in the contact with river-water. Diseases of the eyes and feet were particularly common and there was, for most people, little possibility of real medical attention. There were 'public doctors' in towns, but they appear mostly in the context of reports of accidents or death.<sup>73</sup> Traditional Egyptian medicine, which had a long history and was heavily tied in with religious institutions, can have borne little resemblance to anything approaching a public medical service. The Greeks brought their own medical practices and advances in medical science made in Alexandria might have made some impact amongst the urban elite but hardly in the villages. The Roman presence made little difference, except for the army medical services, which were, of course, not available to the civilian populace. Concern for the care of the sick which is evident in Christian sources led to the creation of new institutions but these were probably more like hospices than hospitals. Nevertheless, there are some indications that treatment could be had, as, for instance, in a letter of the late third century, probably written in Alexandria:

'I have been moved to write and tell you of my plight, how I was afflicted with illness for a long time so that I could not even stir. When the illness abated my eyes began to suppurate and I had granulations and suffered greatly, and other parts of my body were also affected, so that I nearly had to submit to surgery.'<sup>74</sup>

Elsewhere nostrums and folk-remedies were often the best that could be managed, as the prescriptions in medical handbooks show:

'For quartan fever: juice of silphium one obol, myrrh one obol. Another dose: hemlock three drachmae, henbane three drachmae, opium two drachmae, castor one drachma, black hellebore one drachma. Pound and work them up separately with water and make pastilles the size of an Egyptian bean, then dry in the shade and give them to the patient to drink, fasting, rubbing them in half a *cotyle* of raisin wine, having previously given him a bath two hours before taking; apply a warm bottle to the feet and cover him up with blankets.'<sup>75</sup>

As for material possessions, since it is difficult to establish any kind of a norm, we can merely indicate range and variety. A relatively wealthy man like Zenon, estate manager of Apollonius the finance minister in the third century BC, possessed an extensive wardrobe: one linen wrap, four winter cloaks, two summer cloaks, six winter tunics, five summer tunics, one outer garment for winter, one coarse mantle, two summer garments, one pair of pillow-cases, four pairs of socks, two girdles (or belts).<sup>76</sup> Lower down the scale, the contents of the trousseau described above<sup>77</sup> will represent the best and most treasured clothing and jewellery. A brief list of stolen property from a peasant of the first century might contain a large proportion of his worldly goods:

120 silver drachmae . . . which I kept in a casket, a preparation of woof and warp for a cloak worth eighteen silver drachmae, a small wooden box in which were four silver drachmae, two tin drinking cups, a shovel, an axe, a mattock, a belt in which were four drachmae in copper, a flask in which was a half-chous of oil, a cook's kneading-trough, a basket of fifty loaves.<sup>78</sup>

Along with the evidence for the range of trades and crafts practised in the towns and villages,<sup>79</sup> the objects of daily use found in the houses at Karanis and elsewhere give a good idea of the range of hardware in circulation and use. There are children's wooden toys, dice and other games, household furniture of wood – tables and writing desks, bedsteads and chests – baskets made of reed or palm leaves, cooking pots and bronze cauldrons, iron and wooden tools of all kinds, glass bottles and decanters (many of quite good quality), oil-burning terracotta lamps in profusion, combs and mirrors. The notion which we can obtain of the bric-a-brac of the Egyptian household is largely due to the sombre fact that when houses were abandoned or blocked up and built over, at least in Karanis, the inhabitants left much of it behind them.

This may show a healthy lack of emotional attachment to objects, the more startling when a human being turns out to be an object, as in a letter of condolence on the death of a relative: 'I too have had a loss, a young houseborn slave worth two



90 Selection of children's toys and games. Roman period, from the Fayum.



talents.<sup>80</sup> But favourite animals attract some attention: 'Send warm greetings to your good wife and Julia and the horse' writes one correspondent, 'Send Soteris the puppy, since she now spends her time by herself in the country,' another.<sup>81</sup> And the wealthier, the more ostentatious, as is revealed by the verse epitaph inscribed by Zenon for his favourite Indian hunting-dog:

'A dog is buried beneath this tomb, Tauron, who did not despair in conflict with a killer. When he met a boar in battle, face to face, the latter, unapproachable, puffed out its jaws and, white with froth, ploughed a furrow in his breast. The other placed two feet about its back and fastened upon the bristling monster from the middle of its breast and wrapped him in the earth. He gave the murderer to Hades and died, as a good Indian should. He rescued Zenon, the hunter whom he followed and here in this light dust he is laid to rest.'<sup>82</sup>

It would be misleading to overemphasise the degree of self-containment and self-sufficiency in these households, villages and towns. We must ask to what extent the horizons of these people, from poor village peasants to wealthy town magnates, were bounded by the walls of the town or the limits of the village. The question has been answered in part by considering the geographical range of their economic relationships.<sup>83</sup> To complete the picture, attention may be given to the simple issue of movement – how far, why and by what means did people move about? But caution is needed here, for we can say nothing about those, probably the vast majority, who always remained within close range of their homes.

That said, however, it is obvious that movement within Egypt, in comparison to other parts of the ancient Mediterranean, was relatively simple – the major artery of communication offered cheap and easy transport and one could reach Alexandria by boat from Philadelphia in the Fayum, for instance, in four days.<sup>84</sup> There were, too, tributaries and canals which could also be utilised. In default of these the traveller had to fall back on slow and wearisome progress on foot or on the back of the ubiquitous donkey, or less commonly, by camel. But major roads, perhaps military in origin, developed to connect some of the main towns and there were local paths which might not be usable during and just after the time of the inundation: 'If the roads are firm I shall go off immediately to your farmer and ask him for your rents, if indeed he will give them to me,' writes an anxious woman from Oxyrhynchus around the year 200.<sup>85</sup> The hazards and frustrations of modern travel also have their counterpart:

'I have not been able to find a means of coming to you since the camel-drivers were not willing to go to the Oxyrhynchite Nome. Not only that but I came up to Antinoopolis to find a boat and I was unable to do so. So now I have made plans for my baggage to be sent to Antinoopolis and I'll stay there until I find a boat and then I'll sail.'<sup>86</sup>

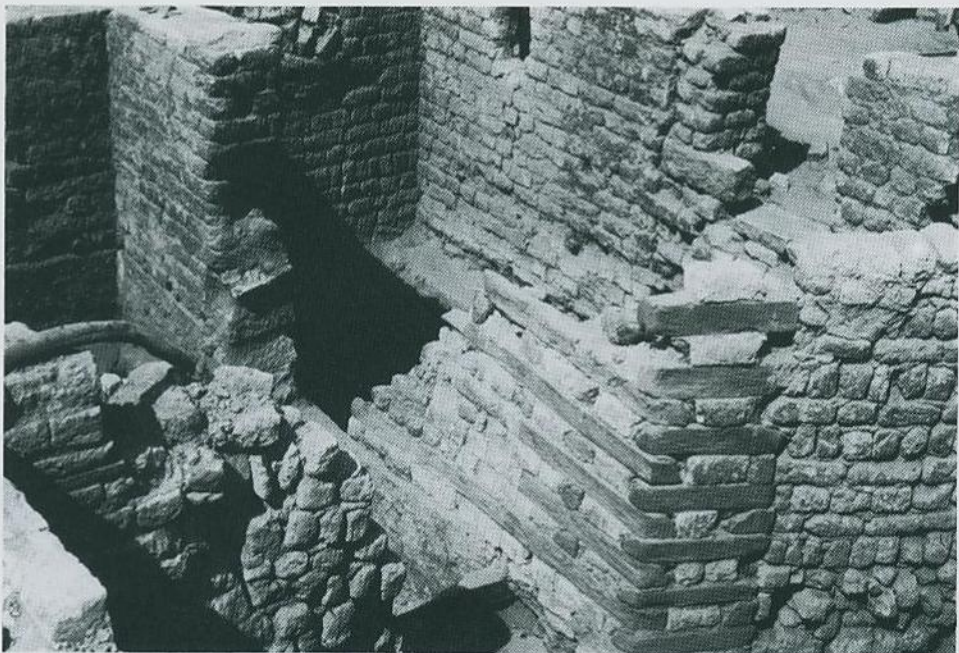
Still more hair-raising experiences could be in store for the unwary: 'When we were in sight of home again, we fell into a brigand ambush . . . and some of our party were killed . . . Thanks be to the gods, I escaped, stripped naked.'<sup>87</sup>

One pattern of movement implied in our documents is from the metropolis into the rural areas of the nome and its scale naturally follows from the clear and plentiful



evidence for town residents who owned land and other property in and around the villages of the nome. But it also follows from the variety of goods and services, social and economic, which the towns exported, like the entertainers of Arsinoe, described above, the delivery of agricultural machinery or weavers' implements from the metropolis to a village, or the reciprocity implied by the apprenticeship contract binding a child from the town to a weaver in a village.

Movement in the other direction was naturally necessitated by the role of the town as the social, economic and administrative centre of the nome. Taxes had to be taken there, surplus goods could be sold there, sometimes villagers are found residing in the metropolis, permanently or temporarily, occasionally they purchase or lease urban property. In addition, the nature of the agricultural economy dictated a certain amount of movement around the nome; villagers might be hired to labour in vineyards in a different village, those in charge of flocks of sheep might range over considerable areas to find pasturage. But such movement is casual and on a small scale. We might justifiably suppose that a predominant pattern of small-scale landownership and lease in the villages, together with the importance of the family unit and its patterns of inheritance, tended to render the majority of the village population static and this is reinforced by legal measures, increasingly frequent from the beginning of the second century, which tie the peasant to his place of origin, registration and tax-liability (*idia*).<sup>88</sup> So, for instance, the villagers of Theadelphia, complaining of their fiscal burdens in the early fourth century, pointed out that they



91 Detail of a house at Narmouthis (Medinet Madi). An unusual feature of construction; timber strengthening the angle of the walls.



knew of fellow-villagers who had run off to farm in other places and ought to be made to return.<sup>89</sup>

Movement also involved travel over greater distances. This is clearly implicit, for instance, in the seventh-century legal dispute discussed earlier.<sup>90</sup> Legal or economic relationships which extend over considerable distances might sometimes result from the permanent removal of a family from one area to another or from controlled instances of population movement. That this must have happened, for example, when the emperor Hadrian founded his new Greek city of Antinoopolis is indicated by the plentiful evidence for Antinoite citizens' connections with other towns and by the fact that they were granted specific exemption from compulsory public services outside Antinoopolis.<sup>91</sup> The possessor of a fragmentary letter announcing the accession to power of the usurper Avidius Cassius in the reign of Marcus Aurelius maintained households both in Antinoopolis and Oxyrhynchus.<sup>92</sup>

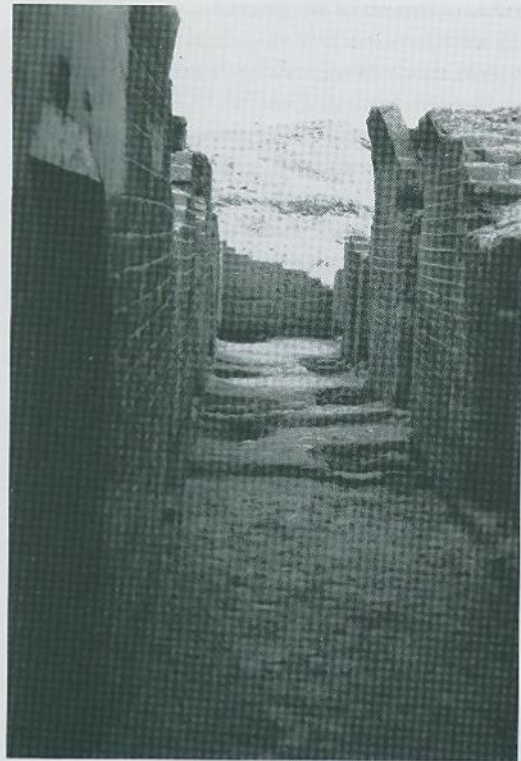
A similar phenomenon, common until the middle of the third century, is the ownership of land in the Nile valley by wealthy citizens of Alexandria. Some, no doubt, will have spent time at these estates. One way of explaining this absentee ownership is to suppose that Alexandrians bought land in up-river areas, another that these owners were wealthy townspeople of the valley who obtained Alexandrian citizenship and established a residence there. Undoubtedly both these things occurred, but the latter perhaps provides an easier explanation of the disappearance of the phenomenon after the third century – when Roman citizenship was universal there was no reason to seek Alexandrian citizenship as a stepping-stone to the higher status.

There is abundant evidence for a steady traffic down-river to the capital, for business, study or pleasure.<sup>93</sup> Sometimes people might do business en route: 'On my voyage to Alexandria . . . I reached Memphis on the fifteenth of the present month and seized the above-mentioned slave Euporos, from whom the whole truth respecting the aforesaid matter will have to be learnt.'<sup>94</sup> Trips were often necessitated by the need to appear in person at the prefect's tribunal, which could be a time-consuming business, or to exert pressure on some official. In the third century a father writes about his soldier son who wanted to move from a legion to a cavalry unit:

'So after many entreaties from his mother and sister to transfer him to Coptos I went down to Alexandria and used many ways and means until at last he was transferred to the squadron at Coptos. Though I longed to pay you a visit on the way up we were limited by the leave granted to the boy by the most illustrious prefect, and for that reason I did not manage to visit you.'<sup>95</sup>

Travel beyond the confines of Egypt was, of course, a different matter. In the Ptolemaic period, many of the Greek immigrants revisited and retained connections with their places of origin. In addition, the possession of an overseas empire will have given Greek administrative officers and their staffs the opportunity, not available to native Egyptians, for regular tours of duty in these places. More extravagant expeditions were the preserve of the powerful. Apollonius the finance minister of Ptolemy II Philadelphus made an official journey to the border of Syria to accompany

92 A passageway at Karanis. A passage with an arched ceiling which ran between two parts of a large granary. The courses of the bricks are marked by a white lime wash.



the princess Berenike to her marriage with Antiochus II and his estate manager Zenon visited Palestine in 259 BC.<sup>96</sup>

Again, in the Byzantine period, the more intimate setting of the eastern empire allowed travel to Constantinople, for the lawyer Dioscorus of Aphrodite to appear at the imperial court in 551, for instance.<sup>97</sup> Patriarchs, bishops and their supporters might also go there, with or without the assistance of the grain fleet, or anywhere else on church business. The intimate details of such journeys are revealed by the papers of one Theophanes, a lawyer and native of Hermopolis, who occupied a post on the staff of the prefect of Egypt in the 320s. In this capacity he made a journey to Antioch in Syria, perhaps in connection with financial preparations for the impending civil war of 324 between Constantine and Licinius. The journey from Pelusium to Gaza and then to Antioch via Askalon, Caesarea, Tyre, Sidon, Berytus and Laodicea took about two weeks and the expenditure of the entourage on food, wine (and snow to keep it cool!), baths, soap, papyrus, provisions for slaves was meticulously recorded in daily accounts which show that the average outgoings were between 2,000 and 3,000 drachmas per day.<sup>98</sup>

It may be merely coincidental that we have no record of anything on this scale during the period of Roman rule. But for humbler folk, at all times, there was red tape: 'In Ptolemaic times it was not permitted to sail from Alexandria without a pass . . . no-one could have sailed out secretly, since the harbour and other exits were kept closed by a strong guard . . . though now, under Roman possession it is



much relaxed,' wrote the geographer Strabo in the reign of Augustus.<sup>99</sup> Application for a pass had to be made to the prefect: 'I wish, my lord, to sail out via Pharos. I request you to write to the procurator of Pharos to grant me clearance according to the usual practice.'<sup>100</sup> This writer was going home to Pamphylia. Others might seek to better themselves: 'Herminus went off to Rome and became a freedman of Caesar in order to take up official appointments,' but, unfortunately, no more details.<sup>101</sup> Pliny the Younger, in Italy, had an Egyptian therapist, a freedman named Harpocras.<sup>102</sup> Overseas posting on military service was more common. A letter home gives us a glimpse of the experience of a raw recruit of the second century AD, his pride in his new name and 'the emperor's shilling', the trouble he took to send back the ancient equivalent of a photograph for the mantelpiece:

'Apion to Epimachus, his father and lord, very many greetings. I thank the lord Sarapis that when I was in danger at sea he immediately saved me. On arriving at Misenum I received from Caesar three gold pieces for travelling expenses . . . I have sent you by the hand of Euctemon a portrait of myself . . . I pray for your health . . . My name is Antonius Maximus, my company the Athenonica.'<sup>103</sup>

In normal circumstances, Antonius Maximus would return home some twenty years later with an honorable discharge, a cash bonus which would allow him to buy a substantial plot of land, and Roman citizenship with its accompanying legal and tax privileges; in short, he would be a much bigger fish in his pond.

### Cultural Patterns

Finally, let us turn our attention to some of the less materialistic developments in Egyptian society. Here, no comprehensive attempt can be made to describe Graeco-Egyptian culture in all its aspects. Some, like popular entertainment, have already been discussed; others, like the development of art and architecture, can only be mentioned incidentally. More important, it should be emphatically asserted that no concept of the nature of this cultural amalgam can possibly ignore matters of religion; but this topic, although it touches on all other aspects in one way or another, requires separate discussion.<sup>104</sup> However, an analysis of some of the linguistic and literary elements may provide a useful background to it, and give a good picture of the cultural base in the towns and villages.

The major languages in use in this millennium in Egypt were Greek, Egyptian in the form of demotic, hieroglyphic, hieratic and Coptic, and Latin. Greek was in predominant use as a written language during the whole period. Demotic is extensively in evidence during the Ptolemaic and early Roman periods but gradually fades after the first century AD, finally to disappear in the middle of the fifth century. Hieroglyphic, which is used only in religious and ceremonial contexts, can without embarrassment (until the end of the third century) commemorate a Roman emperor as comfortably as a Pharaoh or a Ptolemy. A papyrus of 107 reveals the existence of five professional hieroglyph-cutters at Oxyrhynchus.<sup>105</sup> The latest known hieroglyphic inscription dates to 394.<sup>106</sup> Hieratic, likewise, remains in use in temple texts for the same period. Coptic, which is basically Egyptian written in the Greek alphabet with the addition of a few characters, begins to appear regularly towards

the end of the third century, as the response of the Christian church to the need for a medium of communication with the Egyptian-speaking masses, and strengthens through the next three and a half centuries. Latin, on the other hand, was little used, although it became rather more current after the reign of Diocletian than it had been earlier.

These languages, except for hieroglyphic and hieratic, are all represented in business documents, in private correspondence and in literature. Greek is dominant in all three categories. Latin official documents, at least in the first three centuries AD, overwhelmingly tend to originate in the military administration and, in most cases, the writers of letters in Latin evidently learned it as a result of military service. A serving soldier from Karanis named Terentianus wrote to his father, a veteran soldier, sometimes in Greek, sometimes in Latin, and there are rare examples



93 **Papyrus codex.** This fragment of a miniature codex of first class quality from Antinoopolis dates to the fourth century and contains part of the Acts of St Paul and St Thekla, referring to Paul's arrival at Iconium. The material is thin and translucent and the script is of exceptionally fine quality.

of bilingual letters in Latin and Greek.<sup>107</sup> The use of demotic in official and private documents of the Ptolemaic period is very common. Its real importance has for too long been undermined by the tendency of scholars to concentrate their attention on Greek material and is perhaps only now beginning to be recognised. Its later counterpart, Coptic, also has this documentary role, but its main importance shows in the dissemination of Christian doctrine and in homiletic literature.

But all of these languages mainly existed where we cannot see them, at the spoken level. Many Egyptians clearly did not know Greek; many others, who operated mainly in demotic, learned it. Some Greeks learned to write Egyptian, but often for access to some specific skill or domain, as we have seen; perhaps more could understand a little of it. The same must have applied to Latin, though for far fewer people, as the letters of Terentianus seem to show. Coptic/Greek bilingualism is also very common, knowledge of Latin, Greek and Coptic less so, but a fourth-century monk is recorded as knowing all three languages and there is one example on papyrus of a trilingual glossary.<sup>108</sup>

When we come to consider the ability to read and write, we are, of necessity, dealing with a very much smaller number of people. The question of literacy in this culturally mixed society can be looked at from two points of view. First, what proportion of the population could read and write one or more of these languages



and at what level of proficiency? Second, what kind of literature circulated amongst those who could read and write?

It is impossible to reach any firm quantitative conclusion about the numbers of the literate and any estimate as to whether it is likely to be a very small percentage or quite a large one is mere guesswork. There are obviously likely to have been more literate people in the towns than in the villages. Declarations in official Greek documents frequently state that 'X has written on my behalf because I do not know how to write.' This clearly refers to literacy in Greek and there are cases in which people who are manifestly able to write Egyptian are declared to be illiterate.<sup>109</sup> A small sample (about 1 per cent) of applications for the 4,000 available places on the roster of those entitled to free corn-distributions at Oxyrhynchus in the 260s and 270s shows that over two thirds of the applicants were illiterate in Greek.<sup>110</sup> It was apparently even possible for an illiterate to become a member of the town council.

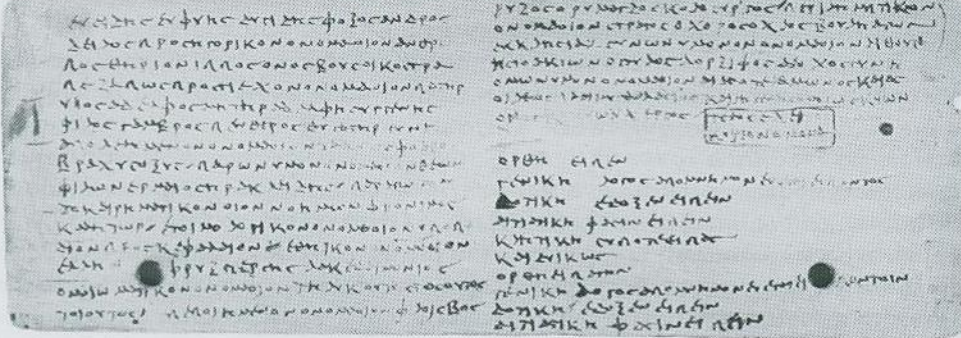
If this proportion truly reflects the literacy rate of the male adult citizens of a metropolis at this period, the overall proportion will have been smaller. Women in traditional societies are less literate than men and Egypt was no exception; a woman petitioning for the right to exemption from legal guardianship uses the legitimate qualification of having three children and adds, to reinforce it unofficially, that she is also literate.<sup>111</sup> In the villages, the proportion will be smaller still. A man who held the bureaucratic office of village-scribe at Ptolemais Hormou in the Fayum in the second century was actually unable to write his own documents and the archive of over a hundred documents belonging to a farmer of Karanis, Aurelius Isidorus, in the early fourth century, shows clearly that he too was unable to write Greek; and his ignorance about his own age illustrates the high correlation between an illiterate population and one which tends to round off ages in fives and tens.<sup>112</sup>

It emerges, then, that no simple calculation is possible, especially when our Greek material defines literacy simply in its own terms. And a further complication is added by those whom we might call semi-literate, who describe themselves as 'slow writers'.<sup>113</sup> They could write a simple endorsement and signature at the end of a Greek document, in crude and laboriously formed letters, could possibly just about read the document, but were incapable of anything more difficult. For these people, and for the total illiterates, the means of coping with any necessary documentation lay in the existence of professional scribes, who would prepare written material for a fee, or in recourse to a literate relative or colleague who would write for them. But their illiteracy must have rendered them easy prey to exploitation or deception.

Even if the vast mass of the population was illiterate (which can only be a matter of speculation), it is still legitimate to consider the cultural level reached by the minority as an important facet of the society, a significant contribution to its development and evolution. And the particular fascination of Egypt lies in the distinctive characteristics of the different cultural threads, as well as their interaction.

The survival of hellenism in Egypt from the Ptolemaic period onwards owed a very great deal to Alexandria.<sup>114</sup> One aspect of this is its contribution to the diffusion and maintenance of Greek culture in the towns of the delta and the valley. Students could go, as to a great university centre, to sit at the feet of the most renowned teachers, but their education will have begun in the home town at about the age of





94 **School exercise.** One of a set of eight tablets fastened together by cords which belonged to a schoolboy named Epaphroditus. It contains a list of verbs, a phonetic classification of the letters of the alphabet, a series of gnomic questions and answers and notes on grammatical usages, including the nominative, genitive, dative, accusative and vocative cases for the singular and the dual.

ten. Sons, and occasionally daughters, of metropolitans would generally be taught in schools which were essentially private, and the fruits of their early labours survive in examples of writing exercises on papyri or wooden tablets, through which they struggled to learn grammar, arithmetic, the principles of rhetoric and the works of the great authors.<sup>115</sup> A school textbook of the third century BC includes syllabaries, a list of the Macedonian month-names, numbers up to 25, names of divinities and rivers, proper names, a verse anthology, quotations from Euripides and Homer and two comic monologues.<sup>116</sup> An eleven-page student's notebook of the fourth century concludes with a maxim: 'Good luck to the owner and reader and even more to him who understands!'<sup>117</sup>

It is interesting to note, however, that when, in the third century, the nome-capitals acquired some of the traditional Greek civic institutions, Oxyrhynchus, at least, in its aspiration to rival the great Greek cities, went so far as to appoint a 'public teacher' whose salary was paid by the town council. In theory at least, for his letter covering a petition to the emperors shows that all was not well: 'For though I was elected public teacher here by the city council, it is not at all the case that I receive the usual salary; on the contrary, if at all, it is paid in sour wine and worm-eaten grain; you yourself know how things are with us.'<sup>118</sup>

Primary education was not entirely confined to the Greek class; for practical ends, even a slave might be apprenticed to a writer of shorthand to learn the skill and qualify as a copyist. But with the decline of Greek civic institutions and the advance of Christianity, education with a different emphasis became an important feature of the Church and its teachers gave instruction in Coptic as well as Greek. By the late fourth century there are isolated examples of writing exercises which utilise biblical texts like the psalms.<sup>119</sup>

The arrival of the Greeks did not eradicate the existing patterns of demotic



literacy and culture. We might expect to find them surviving most vigorously in the traditional Egyptian capital, Memphis, and in other centres of religious importance. But the publication of an increasing quantity of routine documentation and private correspondence in demotic, especially from the Ptolemaic period, shows that it did not merely survive in the hands of a few groups of professional scribes for use in special texts of a religious or medical nature. The existence of writing exercises, the numerous tax receipts and contracts, tend to suggest that written demotic was accessible to Egyptians in the same way, if not on the same scale, as Greek documents were to the Greeks.<sup>120</sup> And the common phenomenon of the demotic tax-receipt or contract with a Greek docket, or *vice versa*, shows how bureaucratic and social needs created an area of overlap within which both language groups could function.<sup>121</sup>

By the third century written demotic was evidently much less current and the fact that the Church found it desirable to transfer the Egyptian language into a medium which was visually akin to Greek is perhaps an important indication of what people were by that time accustomed to see, and evangelistic Christians were working with a body of theological and doctrinal material which was originally written in Greek.

The closest we can come to appreciating how education in Greek was reflected in routine matters is through the private correspondence of the literate, however unrepresentative they might be of the population at large. Many of them are inelegant, far from literary compositions, linguistically vulgar and syntactically imprecise. The content is frequently brief, banal and practical. Rare are the references to public events, or reflections on matters outside the daily routine. This has led some to conclude what might seem obvious, that most people in fact thought and wrote in clichés. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that much of the content, outside the banal and polite formula, is often obscure to the modern reader and in a society where, although writing material was cheap and easy to obtain, delivery of missives was a chancy business, the paramount purpose of these letters was often a practical one. Reflection on the events of the time or moralising on the part of the writer was perhaps a luxury over which few would take trouble: 'Courage! Carry through what remains like a man! Let not wealth distract you, nor beauty, nor anything else of the same kind; for there is no good in them if virtue does not join her presence, no, they are vanishing and worthless.'<sup>122</sup> Expressions of such sentiments are relatively rare.

Another area in which such letters do sometimes transcend the banal is in their references to literature and books. Witness two postscripts to a letter of the Roman period from Oxyrhynchus: 'Make and send me copies of books 6 and 7 of Hypsicrates' *Characters in Comedy*. For Harpocraton says they are amongst Polion's books. But it is likely that others too have got them. He also has epitomes of Thersagoras' work on the myths of tragedy,' and then, 'According to Harpocraton, Demetrius the bookseller has got them. I have instructed Apollonides to send me certain of my own books which you will hear of in good time from Seleucus himself. Should you find any, apart from those which I possess, make copies and send them to me. Diodorus and his friend also have some which I haven't got.'<sup>123</sup> These items will certainly have come from Alexandria to a highly literate group of people, but there is some evidence for copyists and booksellers working in Oxyrhynchus and even



for traders, perhaps peripatetic, turning up in second century Karanis.<sup>124</sup> There, in the second century, an obscure and anonymous clerk, copying out a long list of tax-payers translated an Egyptian name in the list by an extremely rare Greek word which he can only have known from having read the hellenistic poet of Alexandria, Callimachus; he must have understood the etymology of the Egyptian name as well.<sup>125</sup>

The range of Greek authors whose works turn up on the papyri excavated in the towns of the Nile valley (especially Oxyrhynchus) is immense and spread throughout the millennium.<sup>126</sup> Homer is by far the most popular, and he was not only read, as we can judge from the fee of 448 drachmas recorded in a second-century account from Oxyrhynchus as payment to a Homeric reciter who would perform in the theatre.<sup>127</sup> The classical tragedians, writers of New Comedy like Menander, orators, philosophers, elegiac and lyric poets, historians and medical writers are all represented. Then, too, there is a host of novels, prose romances, poems and treatises (like the work of the female writer Philaenis on the art of love, only preserved in tantalising fragments, one of which is headed 'On the Art of Making Passes').<sup>128</sup> Many of these were unknown in the classical tradition before their discovery in the sands of Egypt, many cannot be attributed even now to an author we can name, all had their span of glory when Greek culture flourished in the Nile valley.

In this small but committed reading public one might expect to find those who made the leap from reader to writer and there are, indeed, a significant few about whom something is known, such as Athenaeus of Naukratis, the author of a compendious collection of after-dinner stories and memorabilia (the *Deipnosophistae*). The fame of those literary figures who retained connections with their places of origin was important for the cultural atmosphere and reputation of the towns. In the fourth and fifth centuries, when Christianity was dominant on all fronts, Panopolis, in Upper Egypt, was still the centre of a flourishing circle of pagan Greek poets – Triphiodorus, Pampremius, Nonnus, Cyrus – who travelled far and



wide in the eastern empire and achieved considerable reputation and sometimes high office. The tradition might well have been a long one, for Herodotus remarks on Panopolis' leaning to Greek culture in the fifth century BC.<sup>129</sup> There were others too from the same general area, Olympiodorus of Thebes, Christodorus of Coptos, Andronicus of Hermopolis. Later still, in the mid-sixth century, Dioscorus of Aphrodite, who was certainly a Christian, tried his hand at writing verses in Greek – with no great success in the judgement of posterity which has dubbed them 'wretched unmetrical effusions.'<sup>130</sup>

Latin literature is naturally much less in evidence in Egypt, though several of the literary men mentioned above show signs of familiarity with it. Of the well-known writers, Virgil is the most popular and a few papyri of works of Cicero, Juvenal, Livy, Lucan, Sallust and Terence just about complete the roster.

The Egyptian tradition in literature, most vigorous in the Ptolemaic period, is represented by a large number of works in demotic. The genre most commonly found is the romantic tale, exemplified by several story-cycles. These are always set in the native, Pharaonic milieu and typically involve the gods, kings and queens, princes and princesses and others of high status. Romance and magic, the gods and the underworld, the trials and combats of heroic figures all have their role in these tales. One of the best known involves Prince Khamwas, a son of Ramses II, and his attempt to gain possession of a book of magic written by the god Thoth which had been taken to the grave by an earlier prince, Naneferkaptah.<sup>131</sup> Another important genre is the Instruction Text, the best known that of Ankhsheshonq, a list of moralising maxims, composed, as the story goes, when the central character was languishing in prison for having failed to inform the Pharaoh of an assassination



**96 Excavations at Oxyrhynchus, c. 1900.** The rubbish tips of ancient towns were plundered for fertiliser (*sebaki*) by the modern inhabitants and the resulting casual finds of papyri eventually led to systematic excavation of such dumps at the turn of the century. The town of Oxyrhynchus has proved by far the most productive of such sites.

plot to which he was privy. The tone of the reflections is wry and practical: 'You may trip over your foot in the house of a great man; you should not trip over your tongue; do not open your heart to your wife, what you have said to her goes to the street', and so on.<sup>132</sup>

Almost all the texts of demotic literature were copied in the Ptolemaic or the early Roman period and many will have been composed then. From the second and third centuries AD there are examples of Greek translations or adaptations of Egyptian literary works which is an important clue to the existence of a Greek-speaking readership, perhaps one of which a part had some demotic ancestral memory.<sup>133</sup> This in itself does not quite constitute a merging of the Egyptian and Greek literary traditions, but it points the way forward to the role of Coptic literature, much of which uses the themes and substance of Christian material written in Greek. The important differences between Coptic and hellenised Greek Christianity must not be minimised, but the literature is one important area of fusion and overlap.

The existence of two distinct cultural traditions in the pre-Christian period is clear. What are we to make of their interaction? As we have seen, some people moved in both worlds. Even in the fourth century AD a Panopolite family which boasted 'Greek' orators and poets held religious offices in Egyptian cult.<sup>134</sup> From the Ptolemaic period onwards, the demotic literature shows signs of the influence of Greek literary themes and motifs. The reverse is much less obvious, despite the translation of demotic works into Greek. By way of comparison, we may point to the survival of the distinct Egyptian and Greek traditions of temple-building, or domestic architecture and contrast some works of art in which there are clear signs of fusion (strikingly so, again, in the Christian period). So the degree of interaction is diverse and uneven, not amenable to any rule of thumb. Historically speaking, the cultural development is layered and, in the Graeco-roman period, very mixed. Even in 1863 an English observer, Lucie Duff Gordon, could remark that: 'This country is a palimpsest in which the Bible is written over Herodotus and the Koran over that. In the towns the Koran is most visible, in the country Herodotus.'<sup>135</sup> As the quotation implies, the mixture is nowhere more clearly to be seen than in the multifarious aspects of religion, to which we now turn.

#### 97 The Temple of Horus, Apollinopolis Magna (Edfu).

This beautifully preserved temple is a Ptolemaic rebuilding of an older structure which was begun in 237 BC and completed in the mid-first century BC. The two most conspicuous elements in the Horus-myth are depicted in detail in the temple's interior reliefs – the victory of Horus over Seth, his uncle and destroyer of his father, and his companions.