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The epigraphy of Ptolemaic Egypt

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Originally presented at an Oxford conference in April 2016, the papers published in this volume showcase some of the many research paths opened by the project *Corpus of Ptolemaic Inscriptions from Egypt (CPI)*. The rationale and history of the project are discussed in Chapter 1 (Introduction) by Alan Bowman (CPI principal investigator) and Charles Crowther. The project traces its origin to an unpublished manuscript by P.M. Fraser containing 346 text editions of Greek inscriptions together with an invaluable treasure of palaeographic and historical insights collected from a long first-hand acquaintance with the epigraphy of Hellenistic Egypt. Fraser's editions have been updated and completed by an interdisciplinary team integrating philological, historical, and digital methods, and the corpus has been enlarged up to 650 entries (Greek and Greco-Egyptian) divided in three volumes.[\[1\]](#)

Chapter 2 (Jane Masségia) exemplifies how the combination of archival work, state-of-the-art technology and epigraphic expertise can contribute to the better decipherment and understanding of a known text. The digital scanning of the bilingual Philae obelisk (now at Kingston Lacy, UK), containing the reply of Ptolemy VIII and Kleopatra III to a priestly petition (CPI III 424), has confirmed the reading of hieroglyphs, improved some passages of the Greek text, and revealed precious details about the technical execution of the inscriptions. Chapter 3 (Rachel Mairs) reflects on the difficulty of matching archive information, public and private collections' catalogues, and first-hand work on stones. The selected cases tell the engaging stories of various bilingual texts that might have played a role comparable to that of the Rosetta stone in the decipherment of hieroglyphs and the understanding of Ptolemaic Egypt, had they not been dispersed on the market or made unavailable for consultation to scholars by 19th-cent. collectors.

Chapter 4 (Willy Clarysse) focuses on objects with an Egyptian structure, iconography, and/or script displaying Greek inscriptions. Discussion is arranged by support (stelae, statues, door lintels, ritual furniture, mummies and sarcophagi), text type (official and private texts) and date. With the help of some case studies, Clarysse advocates a fresh reassessment of these texts in their Egyptian social context: this can considerably improve our understandings and lead to a more nuanced appreciation of the processes of Hellenization of Ptolemaic Egypt. Clarysse's second contribution (Chapter 10) shares with the previous one the use of the Trismegistos database (TM)[\[2\]](#) and an approach combining types of evidence that are usually studied separately: in this case, inscriptions and papyri. After a quantitative overview accompanied by useful tables illustrating the chronological and geographical spread of both types of documents across Egypt, Clarysse combines epigraphic and papyrological data to clarify the career, initiatives and family stemmata of some high-ranking members of Ptolemaic society.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Bowman and Kyriakos Savvopoulos place the focus on Greek cities. Bowman offers an overview of the administrative and cultural life of the three *poleis* of Ptolemaic Egypt (Naukratis, Alexandria, Ptolemais). He persuasively underscores the similarities these cities share with other *poleis* outside Egypt in both their political life and its epigraphic footprint: the production of inscribed public documents is fully comparable to that of other Hellenistic cities and the evidence sheds light on governmental institutions, the life of the elites, and occasionally on internal political conflict. On the other hand, the inhabitants of these *poleis* enjoyed some specific advantages: the right of intermarriage with non-citizens and of owning properties outside the city's *chora* is attested in Ptolemais.^[3] This policy can be seen as an effective strategy to promote the new cities as well as the integration of their populations in the surrounding regions.

Savvopoulos provides a nuanced assessment of the different actors (kings, court members, other individuals) and various cultural contexts (Greek, Egyptian, Jewish) involved in the creation of the dynamic and multicultural religious life of Alexandria. Particular attention is paid to the profile of the promoters of cults for the so-called 'Alexandrian Divine Triad' (Sarapis, Isis, Harpokrates, p. 77): private dedications made by upper-class agents under the first two Ptolemies were followed by a new phase of royal support, resulting in the construction of Ptolemy III's Sarapeion and in Philopator's promotion of the divine couple Sarapis-Isis as the *Theoi Soteres*. Among the other deities, a prominent place is accorded to the cult of the Egyptian goddess Boubastis (CPI 13) and to those associated with honours for the Ptolemies. When commenting on the royal dedications made by Ptolemy III, Berenike II, and Ptolemy IV in the Sarapeion, Savvopoulos observes that these inscriptions do not display royal epicleses; he concludes that the cult title was not necessary because the rulers stressed their 'royal-human nature – not the divine' (p. 80), while acting as ritual agents. This point is in fact not limited to Alexandria: in no attested document before the reign of Ptolemy V (cf. I.Philae I 8 = CPI III 431) do the living Ptolemies use their cult epithets in the nominative in texts

portraying them as agents. Similarly, a consolidated epigraphic *habitus* (which, of course, was also ideologically meaningful) explains why the formula '*hyper* King Ptolemy' is not completed by the epithet Euergetes in Berenike II's dedication of the Boubasteion (CPI 13): the use of an epithet for the king or the queen alone became common practice only under Ptolemy IV, whereas Ptolemy III and Berenike II were referred to as Theoi Euergetai in texts mentioning them as a couple, following the example of their predecessors, the Theoi Adelphoi.^[4]

Other aspects of the religious life of Ptolemaic Egypt are discussed in Chapters 7 (Dorothy J. Thompson) and 8 (Supratik Baralay). Thompson offers the first complete study of the small inscribed plaques buried in foundation deposits under Ptolemaic temples. All the preserved specimens are related to sanctuaries founded under the reigns of Ptolemy III and IV and almost exclusively come from Alexandria and the western Delta.^[5] Thompson sets the Ptolemaic evidence within an old hieroglyphic tradition, which was continued from pharaonic times down to the Hellenistic period. However, continuities are accompanied by innovations: the use of specific objects and materials, the introduction of bilingualism, and new formulae also mentioning members of the royal family constitute a 'striking product of early Ptolemaic rule' (p. 104). In our opinion, it is tempting to see the chronological and geographical concentration of these foundation plaques as related to the beginning of the annual gatherings of Egyptian priests, the first of which was held in Alexandria in 243/2 BC.

In his survey of religious dedications, Baralay focuses on two topics: the multicultural religious environment of Ptolemaic Egypt and the syntax of dedications made to (dative) or on behalf of (*hyper* + the genitive) the sovereigns. Baralay assumes a binary opposition between the two formulae: the *hyper*-dedications were made 'by individuals who accepted that the reigning couple were θεοί, but not quite the same as the traditional gods', whereas the dative formula served 'those who recognized the divinity of the reigning Ptolemaic couple and chose to honour them just as they would the traditional gods' (p. 120). While of course these two

syntactic patterns express a different positioning of the honoured rulers in relation to the divine sphere, it should be borne in mind that they could be used in the same cultural milieu, and sometimes even in the same text, thus revealing a multi-faceted and non-exclusive representation of the sovereigns' religious figure.^[6]

Chapters 9 and 11 (Christelle Fischer-Bovet and Mario C. D. Paganini) offer an overview of the epigraphic habits of two social groups: soldiers and private associations. Both chapters provide a treasure of observations about the social and religious life of the Egyptian *chora*. Fischer-Bovet convincingly draws attention to the 'reflexive' function of soldiers' dedications, which give large space to their ethnic, function, aulic rank, and their relationships within the local community as well as with the court. *Hyper*-dedications play a prominent role in this respect, since they express loyalty and display social proximity to the monarchs and to local superiors. Accordingly, we should not be surprised that dedications to gods on behalf of members of the royal house do not necessarily address deities of primary importance for the rulers, but rather shed light on the life and achievements of the donors, as in the case of a dedication to Ares *Nikephoros Euagrios* made by a group of soldiers employed for the elephant hunt in the eastern desert (CPI III 581). Paganini's contribution draws on the Copenhagen *Inventory of Ancient Associations* (CAPinv)^[7] to offer a precise analysis of the epigraphic footprint of private associations in the Egyptian *chora*: Egyptian associations unlike others in the Hellenistic world have not produced funerary inscriptions; conversely, one of their most common text types is the consecration of plots of land, whereas decrees are rare. These points significantly contrast the epigraphy of villages to that of cities. Private associations in Egypt often gathered in spaces related to local sanctuaries and their inscriptions show a high number of borrowings from the style and iconography of traditional Egyptian stelae.

In Chapter 12, Simon Hornblower expands Fraser's corpus with the addition of about 50 metrical texts (epitaphs, dedications, a few hymns), and presents some of the major interests of these

poems with regard to poetic techniques, prosopographic information and aspects of the cultural/religious life. The final Chapter 13 (Ch. Crowther) provides an invaluable introduction to Ptolemaic epigraphic palaeography that will greatly assist all specialists in the field. After presenting the three main styles of lapidary writing from Ptolemaic Egypt (cursive; Greek chancery and civic), Crowther offers a stylistic and diachronic discussion of letter forms^[8] followed by various case studies including a survey of priestly decrees.

The book is very well edited, with very few typos or errors,^[9] and is provided with a large number of tables and good quality pictures. Particularly remarkable is the effort to advocate for and exemplify the advantages of an interdisciplinary study of Ptolemaic Greek epigraphy. The reader is constantly reminded of the necessity to bridge the gap between Greek inscriptions and other types of media from contemporaneous Egypt as well as the rest of the Hellenistic world. Finally, a precious synopsis of the inscriptions to be published in the three *CPI* volumes is provided in the Appendix (p. 269-312). Each entry offers the following information: *CPI* number, reference edition, Trismegistos identifier, date, and a short description. No doubt this catalogue will prove a seminal reference for scholars in Ptolemaic Egypt for decades to come.

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Notes

[1] Vol. 1, *Alexandria and the Delta (Nos. 1-206)*, ed. by A. Bowman, Ch. Crowther, S. Hornblower, R. Mairs, and K. Savvopoulos, Oxford 2021, has recently been released.

[2] www.trismegistos.org.

[3] The same may be valid for Alexandria (Clarysse in this volume, p. 176).

[4] An inscription from Astypalaia (IG XII 3, 204) may provide a precedent for this trend, unless we interpret it as a posthumous dedication or as a reference to Ptolemy VIII.

[5] See tables at p. 99. The only geographical exception is the sanctuary of Hathor-Aphrodite Ourania in Koussai (CPI II 324).

[6] See S. Pfeiffer, 'Offerings and libations for the king and the question of ruler-cult in Egyptian temples', in S.G. Caneva (ed.), *The Materiality of Hellenistic Ruler Cults*, Liège 2020, 83-102, with the previous refs.

[7] [The Copenhagen Associations Project](#), University of Copenhagen.

[8] Cf. the diachronic table at p. 265-266. This section is based on the manuscript of Fraser's seminar course from the early 1980s.

[9] The point at the end of line 8 of CPI III 581 (p. 134) should be erased. At p. 78, Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II used the cult epithet *Theoi Adelphoi*, not *Philadelphoi*; conversely, Ptolemy XII's children were referred to as *Theoi Neoi Philadelphoi*, not as *Theoi Adelphoi* (p. 91).