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A Journey Through the Multilingual Landscape of Greco-Roman and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus

Abstract: This paper aims to provide an insight into the multicultural and -lingual panorama of Oxyrhynchus (modern el-Bahnasa), integrating textual and archaeological evidence. The present study combines the examination of papyrological and epigraphic sources with the analysis of the results of over thirty years of archaeological investigations carried out by the archaeological mission of the University of Barcelona. Despite the wealth of Greek papyri published so far, whose significance remains indisputable for understanding the society inhabiting this ancient site, new discoveries highlight the importance of the Egyptian language and culture up until the late antique phase and beyond, as well as the existence of foreign communities (Romans, Jews, Nabataeans) who have introduced their own culture into Oxyrhynchus and shaped the local social and religious panorama. Furthermore, through the lens of the documentation discussed, the linguistic transformations which occurred in the Christian period and particularly the essential importance of the Coptic language in the local society will be highlighted.

1 Introduction

Oxyrhynchus represents an interesting case study for having a glimpse into the variety of linguistic interactions which might have existed in many Egyptian settlements during the Greco-Roman and late antique periods. This site, laying on the western bank of the Bahr Yusuf River, *c.* 190 km from the city of Cairo, is known predominantly in light of the extraordinary corpus of Greek papyri discovered here by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt more than one hundred years ago. However, the essential role played by these Greek papyri in the understanding of Oxyrhynchite society and beyond has inevitably overshadowed a wide range of papyrological and epigraphic evidence attesting to a variety of other languages.

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Combining the research conducted in museums and other research institutions with the results of over thirty years of archaeological investigations at the site carried out by the mission of the University of Barcelona,[1] this paper aims to provide an insight into the different degrees of linguistic interaction traceable in the multicultural panorama of Oxyrhynchus between the Greco-Roman and the late antique phases. This complex intertwining between languages and scripts in this ancient city will be observed from two distinct perspectives. On the one hand, analysing the coexistence of writings in different languages and scripts in the same spatial contexts and/or cultural settings. On the other, observing how different languages and scripts were mixed in the production of a variety of written sources, from inscribed portable objects made of papyrus, wood, clay and stone to texts inscribed or painted on the walls of various buildings discovered at the site. It remains essential, when possible, to consider these sources in their original archaeological context for understanding how this linguistic compresence shaped the cultural landscape of this city, marking phenomena of continuity and transformation throughout the centuries. For this reason, as much as the sources available allow, this paper will discuss the collected documentation in its original archaeological settings or try to recontextualise them according to their specific function. However, major limits of contextualisation cannot be overlooked dealing with other inscribed materials discovered in the past which were predominantly unearthed in the rubbish dumps surrounding the ruins of this site. Their nature as discarded material poses numerous questions regarding their provenance and function. In this regard, their discussion according to the cultural and/or social settings to which they could have originally belonged is meant to provide an overview of the surviving evidence rather than offering a comprehensive solution to these issues.

2 A brief introduction to bilingual practices in the administration of Greco-Roman Oxyrhynchus

Before examining the contexts and social settings in which we can trace multilingual practices in Oxyrhynchus, a side note must be devoted to the admin-

1 My deepest gratitude goes to the directors of the mission of the University of Barcelona, Esther Pons Mellado and Maite Mascort Roca, for having welcomed me into the team since 2020 and for their constant support in studying the unpublished Oxyrhynchite epigraphic and papyrological material.

istration of this settlement in the Greco-Roman phase and what we can reconstruct according to the evidence offered by the papyrological documentation.

Papyri dating before the Ptolemaic period are virtually absent due to the rising underground water level in the entire archaeological area, a phenomenon already begun in the early twentieth century with the expansion of the agricultural landscape.[2] Nevertheless, documents especially in Demotic are occasionally found,[3] and various pieces of evidence seems to remark that aside from Greek, which had become the administrative language of the country after the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great, Egyptian played a key role in the Oxyrhynchite administrative settings during the Ptolemaic period.[4]

The native language seems to have been largely abandoned in administrative settings after the Roman conquest, substantially replaced, as in most Egyptian settlements, by the Greek language. Despite this apparent predominant switch from Egyptian to Greek, especially in the administrative sphere, a small corpus of Demotic documents dating between the late Ptolemaic and early Roman periods has been recently identified. The Oxyrhynchite Egyptian administrative collection includes, among others, annuity contracts and documents about real estate.[5] Within the scope of this paper, is interesting to note that many of them included a Greek translation,[6] which perhaps was also meant to make these documents comprehensible to the imperial officers, unable to read the Egyptian version.

2 The corpus of papyrological evidence dating even to the Ptolemaic phase is very limited.

3 Several ostraca inscribed in Demotic, for instance, were found during the investigations of a series of rubbish dumps surrounding the area of the so-called High Necropolis of Oxyrhynchus in the excavation campaign held between November and December 2022. For a brief overview of this unpublished material, see Mascia 2023b.

4 A corpus of *c.* 1800 Demotic ostraca, for instance, dated mainly between 170 and 116 BCE, is housed in the collection of the universities of Pisa and Cologne. Most of these documents dealt with the provision of a desert outpost between Oxyrhynchus and the Bahariya Oasis in the Western Desert; see Thissen 2013.

5 Among the latest might be one document preserving the name of Emperor Trajan; see Quack 2016b, 107–108. However, Edward Love also reports the existence of a document dating to the nineteenth year of Hadrian (135/136 CE); see Love 2021, 177. In addition, the presence of several Demotic accounts, probably dating from the first century CE, should be mentioned; see Quack 2016b, 108.

6 Quack 2016b, 108.

3 Multilingualism in the Egyptian temples of Oxyrhynchus and beyond

The papyrological documentation offers a glimpse into the religious panorama of this city between the Roman and late antique phases. Despite the existence of sanctuaries devoted to the cult of a variety of Greco-Roman and Near Eastern deities, Egyptian temples still played a central role in the lives of the local inhabitants. Since the Ptolemaic phase, the Great Thoereion was beyond doubt the major religious centre of this settlement. This sanctuary hosted the cult of Thoeris,[7] the goddess patroness of the city, here worshipped together with Isis, Serapis and all the associated gods (i.e. *synnaoi theoi*). The central importance of this religious organisation is underlined by the administrative documentation dating predominantly to the early Roman period, which seems to demonstrate that this temple and its priesthood had a chief function in the administration of the other religious institutions of this city and the temples of the villages of the Oxyrhynchite nomos.[8] It is often in association with this sanctuary that we find the name of the local highest priestly ranks[9] and the personnel traditionally in charge of the production of ritual texts essential for the endurance of the activities of the temples and their personnel.[10] Considering this evidence, it might be hypothesised that the Great Thoereion hosted a 'house of life' (*per-ankh*), 'The institution of an ancient Egyptian temple in which the priests formed, transformed and transmitted the religious traditions of their country', as defined by Andreas Stadler.[11]

7 On the cult of this deity at Oxyrhynchus from the Late Dynastic to the Greco-Roman phase, see Mascort Roca and Pons Mellado 2019.

8 For an introduction to the role of the Great Thoereion and its priesthood, as well as other institutions associated with this deity, in the religious panorama of Oxyrhynchus, see Mascia 2023a.

9 Like the *prophetes* Harthonis (SB X 10256, 55–67 CE). Another priest named Aurelius Osorapis, holding the titles of *archiprophetes* and *protostolistes* (PSI IX 1039, third century CE), and who was probably also associated with this sanctuary is the most important religious authority of Roman Oxyrhynchus known so far. On these religious offices in Greco-Roman Egypt, see Clarysse 2010, 288.

10 The papyrological documentation records only one priest holding this service in the Roman phase; Thoonis in service at the temple of Athena-Thoeris and the divine Augustus Caesar in the second century CE (P.Mich. XVIII 788). He bears the title of *pteraphoros*, the lector priest with a key role in conveying and translating temple knowledge. On this religious office in Greco-Roman Egypt, see Clarysse 2010, 288.

11 Stadler 2015, 190.

Some of the Egyptian documentary, literary and paraliterary texts recently attributed to this settlement, being located in the Great Thoereion or another sanctuary, should be linked to the production of the 'house of life' of Oxyrhynchus, presumably active at least until the late second century CE. Indeed, while research on the 'Egyptophone' history of Oxyrhynchus is still in its infancy, the in-depth studies carried out over the last few years by Joachim Quack in the Egyptian Exploration Society papyrus collection in Oxford[12] have provided a first idea of the essential importance of the Egyptian textual sources for understanding the religious panorama of this city.[13]

The corpus of Egyptian texts identified by Quack counts around forty hieratic, seven hieroglyphic and ninety Demotic papyri;[14] other evidence recently discussed by Edward Love[15] and some specimens spread in museum collections should be added to this number.[16] The majority of these texts seem to date from the second century CE, with a minor number of exemplars dating from the first century CE and, less likely, to the third century CE.[17] A similar chronology can be attributed to a large part of the administrative texts recording the activities of the Egyptian temples and the priesthood of Oxyrhynchus.[18] To some extent,

12 For an introduction to this corpus, see Quack 2016b.

13 While many of these texts might be attributed to the Egyptian temples of Oxyrhynchus, it should be remarked that all of them were found scattered in the rubbish dumps surrounding the ancient settlement. In particular, Kahle MS 2/3 belongs to the discoveries of the excavation campaign 1897–1898; Love 2021, 187–188. P.EES Oxyrhynchus 3b 4/9 was found in the 1903–1904 excavation campaign; Love 2021, 185. P.EES Oxyrhynchus 29 4B.42/H (13) and P.BM EA 10808 were discovered in the 1904–1905 excavation campaign; Love 2021, 184, 191. And Clackson MSS 8.2.5 in the 1905–1906 investigations; Love 2021, 198.

14 Quack 2016b, 106.

15 Kahle MS 2/3 and Clackson MSS 8.2.5; see Love 2021, 187–189, 198–199.

16 Several unpublished Demotic and hieratic ostraca are now kept in the collection of Columbia University; they formerly belonged to the findings donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the early twentieth century. I owe my gratitude to Niv Allon for providing this information on the de-accessed materials transferred in the early 1950s. In addition, numerous unpublished inscribed objects in the Egyptian language have been discovered in the course of the last years of investigations carried out by the mission of the University of Barcelona.

17 On the problems behind the dating of the aforementioned fragments, see Quack 2016b, 107; Love 2021, 176, 183. PSI III 177Ro, probably dating between the second and third century CE, is a hieratic text containing an offering liturgy, i.e. a water libation, destined to a private beneficiary. For a preliminary description of this text, see Pintaudi 2011–2012 [2013], 161; Quack has provided a more precise interpretation of the text; Quack 2016b, 109.

18 Although it must be noted that the number of administrative texts associates with the Egyptian priesthood dating from the third century CE is also substantial. For a discussion of this documentation, see Mascia 2023a.

some of these testimonies, in particular the hieratic ritual texts, finds parallels among textual sources predominantly from Tebtynis, but no extensive comparisons from contemporary Egyptian settlements renowned for the discovery of textual corpora associated with temple activities.[19] Comprehensively, the Oxyrhynchite corpus encompasses features which remark on the unique peculiarities of this textual production epitomised by the attestation of distinctive phenomena of script-shifting in the composition of texts belonging to the ritual domain.[20]

An introduction to the bilingual textual production in large part presumably associated with these sanctuaries is deemed necessary before examining written artefacts in which we can trace a direct combination between different languages and scripts.[21] While no 'mixing' phenomenon occur in these compositions, they, nonetheless, hold essential importance in understanding how the long interaction between indigenous and foreign communities had irremediably influenced many aspects of the organisation and, therefore, the textual production of the Egyptian temples. The multicultural setting in which these texts were produced is remarked by the variety of solutions adopted to answer different liturgical and administrative needs.

Egyptian temples in the Roman period were still organised according to a system of rules which had been established since the Pharaonic period. Texts of central importance in the traditional cult administration continued to be produced in Greek and Egyptian until the Roman period. *The Book of the Temple*,[22] a manual that provides insight into the laws regulating the native religious organisations and describes the appearance, as well as the functioning of the ideal Egyptian temples is illustrative in this sense.[23] While this composition was only witnessed for decades in Oxyrhynchus by two Greek fragments dating from the

19 Like also Soknopaiou Nesos and Narmouthis, see Love 2021, 183.

20 Love 2021, 200–204.

21 Among others, the following discussion comprehends both texts found in Egyptian and Greek versions at Oxyrhynchus (i.e. *The Book of the Temple*), as well as compositions attested in the two languages, but with only one version identified among the Oxyrhynchite papyri (i.e. P.Oxy. XLVI 3285).

22 For an introduction to this handbook, see Quack 2000 and 2003.

23 The study conducted by Quack on numerous fragments of this handbook found at Tebtynis has made it possible to reconstruct the content of this ancient manual. The manuscript contained a treatise on the ideal temple and a detailed list of rights and duties that all the members of the temple personnel must follow. See Quack 2000.

second century CE,[24] recent studies have led to the discovery of a discrete number of copies in the hieratic script from this site.[25] Although probably following an older archetype, the manual is known from manuscripts dating exclusively from the Roman period.[26] It is important to note that some of the hieratic fragments, such as those transmitted in Greek, might date to the second century CE;[27] thus, suggesting a possible coexistence of the Greek and Egyptian versions.

While the reasons behind the choice of Greek may reside in the bilingual nature of the local community[28] and decrease of temple personnel having a strong command of the Egyptian writing systems, it is likely that this change also reflects the control exercised on the Egyptian temples and the ritual activities of these institutions by the imperial authorities.[29] The verso side of the same papyrus roll preserving *The Book of the Temple* contains a collection of laws regulating the conduct of the priestly class and listing the punishments destined for transgressors of temple law.[30] This collection of rules could also have been translated into Greek to provide the necessary information to the Roman authorities, who partially controlled the Egyptian temples' administration from the time of Augustus.[31]

Another interesting testimony although not necessarily directly linked to the temples' domain is P.Oxy. XLVI 3285, dating to the second half of the second century CE.[32] The papyrus preserves a Greek translation of a legal code known as *The Legal Manual of Hermopolis*,[33] which was identified for the first time in a

24 P.Washington University inv. 138 + P.Oslo 2; both fragments have been the object of several studies, although Quack was the first to provide a reliable interpretation of the texts preserved in these fragments recently. For an introduction to the various interpretations proposed over the last century, see Quack 2016a, 268–271.

25 Quack 2016b, 109.

26 Quack 2016a, 268.

27 Quack 2016b, 107.

28 Quack 2016b, 116.

29 Mascia 2023a.

30 For an overview on the recent identification of this text, see Quack 2016a, 277–278.

31 Some of the regulations present in this manuscript find parallels in the *Gnomon of the Idios Logos* (regulations of the emperor's private account), which was a handbook containing a list of legal rulings pertinent to the duties of the *idios logos*. In particular, it seems that the sections of this manual dedicated to the rights and duties of the Egyptian priesthood were composed following the traditional temple law. For an introduction to this handbook, see Speidel 2013.

32 See Rea 1978, 30–38.

33 For an overview of this manual, see Mattha 1975.

papyrus roll written in Demotic dating from around the third century BCE.[34] The existence of a Greek translation of this manual concerning mainly Egyptian civil law, as remarked by Edda Bresciani, was probably meant to allow its consultation by the Ptolemaic and later Roman authorities.[35] The Greek version found at Oxyrhynchus seems to have been a compendium rather than a literal translation of this Demotic manual.

A coexistence between texts written in both Egyptian and Greek languages is also attested in divination practices, which combined elements peculiar to both foreign and native oracular traditions. Aside from the numerous Greek oracle tickets published over the last century,[36] and a Greek fragment of a dream book,[37] several divinatory compositions written in Demotic have been identified recently.[38] At least some of these textual sources seems to be contemporary,[39] underlining how the temple personnel of the Sarapeion,[40] the Thoereion[41] and perhaps other sanctuaries[42] performed oracular services in both languages throughout the early Roman phase. The coexistence between Egyptian and

34 This handbook found during the investigations of the ancient site of Hermopolis in the winter between 1938 and 1939 is a collection of rules concerning civil law, including instructions for the redaction of contracts and other documents. On the story of the transmission of this text, see Pestman 1983.

35 'Non sorprende che il νόμος τῆς χώρας esistesse in traduzione greca, a disposizione e per la comprensione dei funzionari e degli amministratori di lingua greca, in età tolemaica e poi in quella romana'; see Bresciani 1981, 202.

36 Like P.Oxy. IX 1213, P.Oxy. VIII 1149, P.Oxy. XLII 3078, P.Oxy. XXXI 2613, P.Oxy. LXXIV 5018 and P.Köln. IV 202 date from the second century CE. P.Oxy. LV 3799, P.Oxy. L 3590, P.Mich. inv. 1258, P.Oxy. LXV 4470 and P.Oxy. VI 923 date between the second and third century CE. A Demotic oracular question addressed to Osiris and Serapis, possibly dating to the Roman period, has probably been identified among the papyri kept in Oxford, Quack 2016b, 108.

37 P.Oxy. XXXI 2607 (third century CE). For a re-examination of this text and a possible interpretation of this composition as a treatise of Egyptian origin, see Prada 2016.

38 Quack 2016b, 108.

39 Quack 2016b, 107.

40 Most of the oracular tickets from this city are addressed to the deity patron of this temple.

41 One oracle ticket associated with Thoeris PSI Congr. XVII 14, dating from the Ptolemaic phase (second–first century BCE), is known from Oxyrhynchus. Despite the absence of direct attestations ascribable to the Roman period, a document P.Oxy. XLI 2976 (second century CE) seems to attest the continuity of divinatory practices associated with this deity up to the second century CE.

42 One oracular question is addressed to the god Thonis (P.Köln. IV 202, second century CE), which might indicate the existence of a sanctuary associated with this deity. An alternative solution might be the presence of a chapel or an altar in another temple of this city. The wide attestation of priests bearing theophoric names associated with Thonis in the Great Thoereion might suggest the worshipping of this god in the major religious institution of this city.

Greek in the performance of these ritual practices might find various explanations. On the one hand, it could depend on the typology of divination practices performed, being oracle tickets predominantly attested in Greek, not only from this site, while divination handbooks continued to be produced to some extent still in Egyptian. On the other hand, the linguistic choice might have also been dictated by the necessary adaptation to the needs of an ever-growing multicultural clientele requesting divinatory services.

The production of such a variety of texts also implies the existence of an educational setting that, as has already been noted, must have been strictly linked to a local centre of textual production, perhaps the 'house of life'. Several are, indeed, compositions among the unpublished Oxyrhynchite material which might have pursued their function in an educational context.[43] Clackson MSS 8.2.5, an Old Coptic wordlist (second century CE), for instance, although barely intelligible, provides at least an idea of the typology of '*compendia* of lexical information' used by the local priests in the early Roman period.[44]

Aside from the coexistence between languages in the production of documentary, literary and paraliterary texts associated with the domain of the local Egyptian temples,[45] the site attests to the recurrent interaction between various scripts in the production of specific textual *genres*: compositions associated with the inner ritual domain of temples. The practice at Oxyrhynchus took shape especially in the combination of a linear text in hieratic script with glosses in Old Coptic.[46] These glosses were used to supply punctuation, transliteration and full vocal pronunciation, as testified by various findings offered by other contemporary Egyptian settlements. In other words, many were probably pronunciation notes for priests who needed to fully comprehend the text, as well as recite and perform the religious ritual in the most accurate way. Correct pronunciation was indeed mandatory for the procedure efficacy; therefore, we can imagine how these glosses played a key role, especially in a historical phase

43 Sections of a Demotic schoolbook, for instance, have been identified. As noted by Quack, the text includes, among others, a list of birds used for memorising the Late Egyptian alphabetic sequence; see Quack 2016b, 109.

44 Love 2021, 198–199. Old Coptic is based principally on the Greek alphabet with a collection of signs derived from the Demotic script used to write sounds absent in the Greek language to transliterate any stage of the Egyptian language. For an introduction to Old Coptic scripts and texts, see Quack 2017.

45 Although, as already discussed, we cannot be sure that some of the texts examined were produced outside temples' settings, like in the case of P.Oxy. XLVI 3285.

46 It is important to consider that 33% of the Oxyrhynchite hieratic texts known so far appear to have been glossed in Old Coptic; see Love 2021, 176.

in which high proficiency in the Egyptian language and scripts, especially hieratic, was probably restricted to a minority of temple personnel. In this sense, according to the evidence offered by Oxyrhynchus, a priest illiterate in hieratic but having certain knowledge of Old Coptic together with the pronunciation and intonation of Middle/Classical Egyptian would have been able to recite the text correctly.[47]

While glosses had, in principle, a similar function, especially in ritual texts, the system of glossing was adopted according to different solutions reflecting the phase of experimentation characterising the Egyptian temple *scriptoria* between the late Ptolemaic and early Roman phases. It is especially at Oxyrhynchus that the Egyptian glossed documentation, written mainly in hieratic but transmitting texts in Middle/Classical Egyptian, remarks the variety of employments of supralinear glossing in Old Coptic. As noted by Love:

> At Oxyrhynchus, script shift in the ritual domain was from hieratic to Old Coptic, but at one other it was from hieratic to demotic. What can only be stated is that (an) Egyptian priesthood(s) at Oxyrhynchus considered Old Coptic to have the highest utility in aiding decipherment, perhaps thereby coupled with ensuring correct pronunciation. This 'shift in priority', however, had the consequence that 'while the phonetic realisation becomes even easier', i.e., literacy in Old Coptic is considerably easier to acquire than literacy in hieratic due to orthographic depth, comprehension of the text's semantics became even harder.[48]

Among the hieratic texts attesting the presence of Old Coptic glosses, several are included in the corpus of sources classified by Love as texts showing 'subsequent selective supralinear glossing', namely, concerning only designated sections of the ritual composition.[49] Others attest to what is defined by Love as a 'subsequent comprehensive supralinear glossing', which seems part of a process generally posterior to the composition of the linear text.[50] Another group, in Love classification, consists of ritual texts characterised by the presence of a

47 As recently remarked by Love 2021, 190.

48 Love 2021, 197.

49 This group includes P.EES Oxyrhynchus 29 4B.42/H (13), comprising five fragments of a ritual for protection featuring no punctuation (second century CE). P.EES Oxyrhynchus 3b 4/9 counts one fragment of a ritual text of unclear content preserving partial glossing with linear punctuation (second century CE); see Love 2021, 184–187.

50 Kahle MS 2/3, a hieratic ritual text with Old Coptic glosses (early second century CE?) of uncertain content belongs to this category; see Love 2021, 187–189.

layout planned to leave space for the glossing of the text; therefore, allowing the inclusion of the glosses contemporary to the linear hieratic composition.[51]

Aside from hieratic texts, linear compositions in Old Coptic are also attested. The texts in this script could have found their origins in copies of Old Coptic glosses, which provided a transliteration of the original linear hieratic or perhaps even Demotic compositions.[52] P.BM EA 10808[53] is certainly the most well-known example of Old Coptic linear text from this settlement. The papyrus preserves a collection of magical texts in Egyptian probably dating to the second century CE, which production setting remains still debated.[54] The composition consists of a poorly preserved first column written in Demotic, Greek script and Old Coptic, and a second column in Old Coptic,[55] 'complemented by certain group-writings in Demotic', as described by Love.[56] The text comprises different spells interpreted by Quack as incantations to acquire favour and love.[57] Among them, one meant to obtain a πάρεδρος, an 'assistant in ritual practices'; another possibly interpreted as a dream-sending invocation, probably calls for the assistance of a deceased, a 'ghost' from the necropolis, followed by three spells in which a deity is invoked. It is important to notice that the title and indication for the actions are written mainly, as noted by Quack, in Late Demotic. The use of Demotic was doubtless aimed at clarifying the content of the ritual instructions to the user of the spell. On the other hand, the spell itself, written in Old Coptic, probably remained mostly unintelligible to the reader. The interaction between scripts in this context shows the dual component peculiar to the Greco-Egyptian ritual production. As observed by Quack:

51 P.EES Oxyrhynchus 25 3B.58 M(a), which consists of three fragments of a composition comprising a ritual for protection involving body parts; see Love 2021, 189–191.

52 On the possible origins of Old Coptic linear texts, see Love 2021, 191.

53 A first interpretation of this composition has been provided, among others, by Dieleman 2004. For further studies in light of the identification of another fragment among the Oxyrhynchus papyri kept in the Sackler Library, see Quack 2010, 83; Quack 2017, 64. The presence of a reference to Nephthys seems to justify its association with a ritual or temple setting, which, as we will discuss in the following pages, might be proposed for other texts recently discovered in the necropolis of Oxyrhynchus.

54 For instance, Love (2021, 198), while stating that the text 'is safely ascribable to either to the ritual or temple domain' rejects Renate Dekker's interpretation (Dekker 2013, 64) of the text as belonging to an Egyptian temple library considering the lack of evidence at our disposal; see Love 2021, 191, n. 55.

55 The copying from an Old Coptic *Vorlage* seems suggested, according to Love, by 'the fluent copying of the hand and precise layout of the manuscript'; see Love 2021, 197.

56 Love 2021, 191.

57 Further bibliography in Love 2021, 194.

> Ritual texts have two different components. The one is the indication of the aims achieved by it as well as performance guidelines. For both, semantic clarity is imperative, and in this manuscript, this is guaranteed by the use of the contemporary vernacular. The second one is the spell, and that functions by the power of its sound, not by its meaning.[58]

Alongside the ritual domain, some texts also help us to gain more information about the use of Egyptian and the intertwining between distinguished writing systems in a private setting, although most likely restricted to the Egyptian temples personnel.[59] Several letters have been identified as largely written in hieratic, but with the addition of a few Demotic signs, even though the language appears as being quite certainly Demotic.[60]

4 Scripts interactions in context: The Osireion of Oxyrhynchus

As we have seen, the evidence offered by materials kept in museums' collections and other research institutions already provide essential information on the multicultural context characterising the religious institutions of Roman Oxyrhynchus and the activities of various ritual specialists, which might have been linked, at least to some extent, to these organisations.[61] However, the absence of any information regarding their provenance inevitably limits our knowledge of the settings in which these ritual texts were produced and used. It is in this sense that the investigations of the temple-catacomb of Osiris, carried out by the mission of the University of Barcelona in the early 2000s, play an essential role in concretely observing how different scripts physically coexisted in an Egyptian temple between the Ptolemaic and Roman phases. The compresence of hieroglyphic, hieratic and Demotic inscriptions in an Egyptian sanctuary certainly does not come as a surprise since each script traditionally answered specific functions in the fulfilment of both administrative and ritual

58 Quack 2016b, 118–119.

59 Quack (2016b, 108) reflected on the peculiar use of the writing system and proposed to identify priests 'equally at home in both writing systems' as the authors of these documents. In particular, a reference to 'The Scribe of the Book of Per-Medja', namely, Oxyrhynchus, is present on the recto side of one of these documents; see Love 2021, 177, n. 4.

60 See Quack 2016b, 108; Love 2021, 177.

61 See, in particular, the problems in establishing the authorship and production setting of P.BM EA 10808 discussed in the previous section.

activities. Nonetheless, the Osireion of Oxyrhynchus offers us the rare occasion to imagine how these different scripts interacted spatially and examine a variety of inscribed objects in their original context.

The underground building complex, constructed in the early Ptolemaic phase[62] and enlarged in the Roman period, comprised two halls and two galleries meant to host the daily offerings to Osiris and the rituals performed during the Khoiak festival.[63] The investigations conducted over the last few decades have allowed the identification of a rich repertoire of inscribed materials, which comprise texts in hieroglyphic, hieratic and Demotic scripts.

The hieroglyphic script was used by the priesthood of Osiris to scribble short inscriptions on the walls of the underground structure. We might imagine one of these priests carving a short prayer in honour of Osiris[64] in the main hall, hosting the colossal statue of this deity, perhaps during a break from the daily religious services. Ritual formulae in hieroglyphic script were painted on the back of a group of Osirian figurines made of clay associated with the liturgical activities performed inside the building.[65]

While the latter evidence helps us in visualising the temple-catacomb of Osiris as an inscribed space, it is only by entering the galleries of this sanctuary that we would have seen a clear physical interaction between scripts in the production of single ritual texts.

Gallery 1A, built at the beginning of the Ptolemaic phase, hosts thirty niches progressively erected, or at least inscribed, under the reign of several Lagid rulers.[66] The gallery had a precise function in daily cultic activities and specific annual festivities. The last stages of the Khoiak festival, which was celebrated on the thirtieth day of the month of Khoiak, the fourth month of the season of flood, were performed in this area. On this occasion, the priests carried out the

62 Although some evidence seems to suggest that the Ptolemaic structure had been built upon the ruins of another religious complex, perhaps associated with a temple known as the *Pr Khf* dating back to the Late Dynastic phase; see Mascort Roca 2018, vol. 1, 25–26.

63 For an introduction to the evidence for this religious celebration in the New Kingdom, see Eaton 2006.

64 The various graffiti identified preserve invocations or brief prayers addressed to the main deity of the sanctuary. An inscription left on the door-jamb on the south-east wall at the 2C and D halls entrance is the best preserved of these. The text recites a religious formula alternatively interpreted as 'The life belongs to the god Osiris' or 'The divine life of Osiris', see Mascort Roca 2018, vol. 1, 48.

65 See Mascort Roca 2018, vol. 1, 92–93.

66 The last recorded are Berenice IV (*c.* 79–55 BCE) and Cleopatra V–VI Tryphaena (*c.* 95–57 BCE); see Coulon 2018, 187.

burial of mud figurines of Osiris, which had been crafted in the previous year, probably using the silt of the sacred lake located in the precinct of this sanctuary.[67] This ritual is described in the *Mysteries of Osiris*, which offers detailed instructions on how the ritual was performed.[68] As theorised by Laurent Coulon, the thirtieth day of the month of Khoiak marked the end of a monthly cycle, which echoed the cycle symbolised by the thirty niches of the galleries. The temple-catacomb of Oxyrhynchus functioned as the Osirian necropolis of Karnak, the niches being inscribed in the staging of the cyclical rebirth of the god of the dead.[69] Texts are painted in black on the lintels of the thirty niches placed at the beginning of the gallery and indicate the date of burial of the Osirian figurines.[70] The use of a standard chronological system, based on the year of the reign of the ruling Lagid king, also marked the assimilation between Osiris and the ruling pharaoh. The ritual texts are written in hieratic script, but the date of the deposition of the Osirian figurines is occasionally rendered in Demotic.[71] Dates are also recorded in hieratic script in the latest niches, where only the formula *ḥꜣt-sp* is expressed in Demotic.[72]

Plaques sealing the niches were destined to close the burials of the Osirian figurines;[73] the texts, which also record the statuettes deposition, are traced in black ink and combine hieratic, hieroglyphic and Demotic scripts.[74] The date is generally expressed in cursive hieroglyphs; however, it is sometimes associated with a version rendered in Demotic. The switching to Demotic might depend on the specific function that this script assumed since its creation. As indicated by the same Greek term Demotic ('popular'), this script was originally employed for writing administrative texts, while hieratic and hieroglyphic scripts remained tied to the production of literary and paraliterary compositions. Although already in the Ptolemaic phase, Demotic was often used in the production of ritual

67 For a description of the sacred lake of the Osireion of Oxyrhynchus and associated evidence, see Mascort Roca 2018, vol. 1, 34–36.

68 For an introduction to this religious celebration, see Chassinat 1966 and 1968.

69 Coulon 2018, 187 and Coulon 2015.

70 For an in-depth study of these inscriptions, see Coulon 2018.

71 Coulon 2018, 171–172.

72 As noted by Coulon 2018, 172, the joint use of the hieratic and Demotic scripts in the production of the ritual texts traced in this gallery is quite remarkable, although attested by evidence from other settlements. For a detailed bibliography see Coulon 2018, 172, n. 8.

73 For a discussion of these testimonies, see Coulon 2018, 182–187.

74 As remarked by Coulon 2018, 183, 'le hiératique est progressivement concurrencé par l'emploi des hiéroglyphes cursifs. La date, donnée une première fois en hiéroglyphes cursifs, peut être doublée par une ligne de démotique'.

texts,[75] this script switching might reflect the adherence to a more archaic scribal habit.

The small funerary furniture buried inside these niches provides additional evidence.[76] The objects are predominantly small limestone boxes, which preserved a magical *bulla* inside[77] and limestone cones featuring representations of the goddess Neith.

As noted by Jean-Claude Goyon, the interpretation of the script remains problematic:

> The cursive inscriptions are not hieratic of the classical type but have a ductus sometimes close to that of 'abnormal' hieratic, either 'old' demotic, or the range of demotic of the second and first centuries BCE.[78]

The poor state of conservation of most of these exemplars does not allow a clear interpretation of this ensemble of evidence. However, the *ductus* suggests the production of these texts between the beginning of the Ptolemaic and the early Roman period. According to the inscriptions preserved on the cones and the limestone boxes containing *bullae* and sealed by pyramidal lids, it appears that most of these objects were associated with the arrangement of the orientation of each *loculus* containing the Osirian figurines. They refer to the deities protectors of the four cardinal points, and others to Osiris as the guardian of the West.[79] Slabs preserving inscriptions mixing hieroglyphic, hieratic and Demotic scripts could have also sealed the three niches of the nearby Roman gallery (2E).[80] This area, built at the beginning of the imperial phase, was meant to host the continuation of the Khoiak rituals in the early Roman period. Inscribed limestone

75 On the use of Demotic for the production of ritual texts in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, see Quack 2012.

76 For a preliminary study of these objects, see Goyon 2018.

77 According to the *Mysteries of Osiris*, the *bullae* preserved inside these containers were meant to protect Osiris and served to keep away Seth and other malevolent entities, thus, promoting the completion of the ritual of the renaissance of the deity; see Chassinat 1966, 51–52.

78 Goyon 2018, 197: 'Les inscriptions cursives ne sont pas hiératiques de type classique mais ont un ductus parfois proche de celui du hiératique "anormal", soit démotique "ancien", soit du ressort du démotique des IIe/Ier siècles avant notre ère' (my translation).

79 Various deities associated with different cardinal points are mentioned in the inscriptions preserved on these portable written artefacts: to the south, Ammon and Montu; to the north, Shu and Tefnut; to the west, Neith and Wadjet; to the east, Sekhmet and Bastet; see Goyon 2018, 197.

80 However, given the poor state of preservation of this area, this hypothesis cannot be proven. A description of this temple area is in Mascort Roca 2018, vol. 1, 74–78.

boxes containing *bullae* of the same typology as those traced in the Ptolemaic gallery were also found inside one of these niches (no. 2).[81]

5 The multilingual funerary landscape of Roman Oxyrhynchus and beyond

The so-called High Necropolis of Oxyrhynchus offers a unique perspective on the complex interaction between languages and scripts in the same spatial context. We should begin looking at the appearance of the funerary landscape of this city after the Roman conquest to fully comprehend how foreign and native cultures were intricately intertwined in the Roman period.[82] Imagine walking through this cemetery in ancient times: we would have been struck by the heterogeneity of funerary monuments dotting the landscape. Barrel-vaulted tombs, platform tombs with pyramidal superstructures, hypogea and coffins inspired by Roman models reflected the multicultural panorama of this Egyptian settlement. The intermingling between different ethnic groups might have also been perceived by looking at the compresence of Greek,[83] Latin[84] and Egyptian[85] fu-

81 Mascort Roca 2018, vol. 1, 74–75.

82 The choice of concentrating the discourse to this period is dictated by the fact that the Roman phase of this cemetery is certainly archaeologically more well-preserved than the Ptolemaic phase. Nevertheless, it should be remarked that many tombs were probably in use already in the Ptolemaic period, and various Ptolemaic and Roman funerary complexes probably coexisted for centuries.

83 For an overview of the first funerary inscriptions discovered at the site by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, although probably quite late in date (fourth to fifth century CE?), see Parlasca 2007, 95, 100–101. An inscribed female statue on a pedestal found in Sector 2D of the necropolis is certainly earlier in date (second/third century CE), see Padró et al. 2012, 4. A date to the late second or early third century CE might be attributed to an unpublished funerary statue preserving a short epitaph painted in red discovered in the excavations carried out in 2020; a brief mention of this discovery is in Mascort Roca et al. 2020, 8. Another inscribed stela found at the entrance of the funerary chamber of Tomb 12 in memory of a child name Theon, probably dating between the third and fourth century CE, was discovered in 2009. On this discovery, see Padró et al. 2009, 12. A study of this inscribed stela has been published in Campillo and Piedrafita 2010. Further reflections on the inscribed funerary stelae discovered at Oxyrhynchus in Codina Reina 2015, 172–173.

84 Although only a few in number, several exemplars of funerary epitaphs written in Latin have been discovered during the investigations of this settlement. Fragments of Latin inscriptions, for instance, possibly funerary stelae although too fragmentary to identify their exact function, have been discovered in the High Necropolis (Sector 2D); see Mayer-Olivé 2015. A

nerary inscriptions standing in front of the tombs[86] or located inside the funerary chambers.[87] However, it was entering inside these burial spaces, in the inner funerary halls of these structures, where we would have perceived more closely how the long coexistence of Egyptians, Greeks and Romans and other ethnic communities have concurred in shaping the local funerary customs. This syncretic repertoire of beliefs is reflected in all the elements characterising the mortuary landscape of Roman Oxyrhynchus. Decorative programmes still betrayed the adherence to models finding their roots in the Pharaonic tradition, expressed in the broad attestation of offering scenes depicting the deceased standing in front of an enthroned Osiris surrounded by a court of Egyptian deities.[88] We would have often seen Greek graffiti witnessing the names of the deceased,[89] sometimes associated with brief invocations, on the walls of several of these tombs.[90] At least on one occasion, the owner (or owners) of the Roman Tomb 40 seems to have commissioned the production of a Latin inscription painted in red, which originally surrounded the walls of the main funerary chamber of this

stela representing the deceased dressed as a Roman citizen and preserving a Latin inscription painted in red was found in Sector 26; see Padró et al. 2014, 14–15. Another fragmentary Latin funerary inscription mentioning a *libertus* was discovered in the High Necropolis during the investigations carried out in March 2020. Other unpublished Latin inscriptions are currently kept in the archives of the Egyptian Antiquity Service in el-Bahnasa.

85 In truth, only a few inscriptions are known so far, which are predominantly dated to the Ptolemaic phase. The most well-preserved is a stela which was originally part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection and acquired in the early 1950s by Macquarie University (Sidney). I am grateful to Dr Marsha Hill and Dr Niv Allon for providing information on this artefact. Apart from these inscriptions, at least one fragmentary stela possibly originally preserving an Egyptian text has been discovered in a Roman tomb in Sector 26; see Pons Mellado 2016, 167.

86 A funerary statue representing the deceased reclined on a *triclinium* was found in front of a tomb structure in the course of Evaristo Breccia's investigations in the early 1930s. Photographic documentation of this discovery is now kept in the Archivio Breccia of the University of Pisa. I am grateful to Dr Flora Silvano for allowing me to examine the documentation collected during Breccia's investigations at Oxyrhynchus.

87 As in the case of the stela of the young Theon; see Campillo and Piedrafita 2010.

88 Similar to those in Tomb 3, Tomb 18 and Tomb 21; see Pons Mellado 2016, 163–168, 170–171.

89 Tomb 2, also known as 'Uraeus Tomb', preserved a charcoal graffito recording the name Demetrios on the northern wall of chamber no. 1. Two carved graffiti in chamber no. 2 preserved the name Didymas. A preliminary discussion of these graffiti is in Piedrafita 2011, 64–66. Two charcoal inscriptions preserving the name Pausanias were discovered at the eastern and western sides of the entrance to Tomb 11 in 2009; see Piedrafita 2011, 71–72. A description of this tomb preserving the mummified bodies of three individuals is in Padró et al. 2009, 7–11.

90 A graffito recording the formula 'Marcus, be brave' was individuated on the southern wall of the funerary chamber in Tomb 11. Further discussions on this inscription are in Piedrafita 2008, 136, 143–144.

structure.[91] However, as has already been mentioned, Egyptian traditional motifs were still privileged in the decoration of most of these tombs. A short inscription written in Demotic, painted on the margins of a scene depicting the deceased surrounded by Egyptian gods in Tomb 29,[92] represents the only evidence found in its original archaeological context of the use of this script in the funerary spaces of Roman Oxyrhynchus. Getting closer to the deceased and their funerary paraphernalia, we would have seen in the iconography of coffins and mummy cases the undeniable influence of both indigenous and Greco-Roman motifs. Aside from a few exceptions,[93] these funerary artefacts are mainly inscribed in Greek and preserve epitaphs in honour of the deceased having the same formulary of the funerary inscriptions attested on stelae.[94] Interestingly, these texts might have also been found scribbled on the leg[95] or foot[96] of some Oxyrhynchite mummy cases. Even votive objects deposited inside the tomb, from the traditional *wedjat* eyes[97] to terracotta figurines,[98] underline the overall inspiration to a broad multicultural repertoire of religious beliefs.

91 Several inscribed plaster fragments preserving what seems to be a Latin inscription painted in red were discovered among the debris of Tomb 40 in the course of the excavations season 2020. A brief discussion on this funerary structure is in Mascort Roca et al. 2020, 9–11.

92 For a report on the discovery of this barrel-vaulted tomb in the High Necropolis of Oxyrhynchus, see Padró et al. 2010, 7–8.

93 Several painted wooden coffins preserving a rich decoration featuring short hieroglyphic inscriptions have been identified in the hypogeum (Tomb 17) of Sector 2A. However, their chronology remains still uncertain and might date no later than the late Ptolemaic or early Roman phase; for an introduction, see Castellano i Solé 2011–2012, 44–45.

94 The slab sealing the anthropoid coffin buried in Tomb 18 (Sector 26) identifies the deceased as Polydeukes. For a description of the tomb and discovery of the inscription, see Pons Mellado 2016, 163–167. For further discussions on this text, see Piedrafita 2011, 67–69. An embossed inscription on a plaster mummy case has been discovered in the course of the 2020 excavation campaign. For a preliminary description of this discovery, see Mascort Roca et al. 2020, 14–15. The text is currently under study by the writer.

95 As in the case of the plaster mummy case discovered in 2020, preserving a Greek inscription scribbled on the right leg of the deceased.

96 Similar to the mummy of Harpochratiaina; a short inscription recorded the name, patronymic, and age of death of the young woman is in the area of the cartonnage mummy case corresponding to the feet, see Piedrafita 2008, 136, 138.

97 A faience amulet of this type was discovered in a mudbrick structure sealing the entrance of Tomb 17 in Sector 2A. The building was reused as a burial space in the early Christian period (fourth to fifth century CE?), see Castellano i Solé 2011–2012, 43.

98 Several terracotta figurines have been discovered over the last years of the archaeological investigations carried out in the High Necropolis, most of which remain unpublished. Other terracotta figurines discovered during Grenfell and Hunt's excavations were distributed among various museums and research institutions.

Despite the poor evidence known to date, the Egyptian language seems to have been still employed in the early Roman period in the local funerary administration.[99] Aside from the numerous Greek mummy labels spread among various museum collections,[100] one wooden fragment preserving a bilingual text testifies to a practice well known in the Roman phase,[101] which foresaw the writing of prayers or specific sections of the text only in the Egyptian language.[102] It is for this reason that this 'mummy label'[103] records information essential for the identification of the deceased in Greek, but seems to abruptly switch to the use of Demotic in writing a closing formula.[104] These objects were traditionally attached to the body of the departed, and they seem to have been found partly in the area of the necropolis at Oxyrhynchus,[105] but mostly discarded in the rubbish dumps surrounding the ancient settlement.[106]

Defining the cultural and ethnic identity of the individuals buried inside these tombs remains extremely difficult. The wide attestation of Greek names recorded in graffiti, on mummy cases, labels and coffins, probably reflects the existence, aside from Greek settlers and their offspring, of a wealthy and influential group of native inhabitants who have partly embraced the customs and ways of living of the Greek and Roman conquerors. It is less difficult to identify Roman citizens, at least when we can trace names of Latin origin in funerary artefacts. The Romans largely adopted the Egyptian funerary habits; however,

99 On the use of mummy labels as identification tools see, for instance, Martín Hernández 2011.

100 Several are now kept in the Penn Museum, Philadelphia: Inv. no. E11734; Inv. no. E11735; Inv. no. E 11736; Inv. no. E 11737. An important corpus, soon to be published by the writer, is also preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Inv. no. 97.4.36; Inv. no. 97.4.37; Inv. no. 05.4.186; Inv. no. 05.4.187; Inv. no. 05.4.180; Inv. no. 05.4. 188. My gratitude goes to Dr Niv Allon for allowing me to study and publish the Oxyrhynchite mummy labels kept in the Metropolitan Museum collection. Another uninscribed mummy label (Inv. no. EA 50146) is now kept in the British Museum, in London.

101 Inv. no. 05.4.179; the artefact is currently under study by the writer.

102 However, it is important to stress that both the Greek and Demotic versions generally provided similar information on the deceased identity.

103 It still remains unclear whether the fragment belonged to a mummy label or a coffin.

104 Still, the interpretation of this last section remains tentative given the poor state of conservation of the text; further studies might lead to future revisions.

105 Inv. no. 97.4.36 and Inv. no. 97.4.37 were discovered at the beginning of the excavation campaign 1896–1897 when the investigations were concentrated in the area of a necropolis.

106 The Penn Museum corpus, for instance, was discovered in the excavation campaign of 1904–1905, which was concentrated in the investigation of several of these dumps. Inv. no. 05.4.179, Inv. no. 05.4.188, Inv. no. 05.4.180 and Inv. no. 05.4.186 were also discovered in the 1904–1905 excavation campaign and are among the artefacts kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

they did not miss the chance to occasionally reaffirm their identity, as testified by a 'mummy label' preserving a Latin epitaph[107] that still does not find parallels among the objects of the same typology published so far. If the interpretation of this object as a mummy label is proven to be correct, this artefact would represent an outstanding and unique example of the assimilation between the Roman and Egyptian traditions, which found its expression in a variety of declinations.

Mixing languages and scripts might have also taken the form of a strange combination of documentary, literary and paraliterary texts in Greek and Egyptian folded together and deposited on the chest, abdomen or pelvic area of several deceased identified in the Roman Tomb 42.[108] While this odd textual mélange might suggest, at first glance, their identification as cartonnage papyri, their discovery in small packages sealed by clay devices identified as embalmers seals, one of which preserves a hieroglyphic inscription,[109] suggests the performance of a practice mimicking the traditional deposition of funerary compositions.[110] Another inscribed clay embalmer seal was found in association with a papyrus, this time still found accurately sealed, preserving a Greek magical text.[111] Indeed, when speaking of the necropolises of Oxyrhynchus, particular attention should be devoted to the magical artefacts discovered in this area. The presence of these objects in the cemeteries of this city[112] is certainly not a surprise since magical practices are attested in funerary contexts across various

107 Inv. no. 05.4.188. The identification of the object as a mummy label, while suggested by both the shape of the object and the content of the inscription, is still uncertain. The artefact will be published soon by the writer.

108 However, several deceased were found in association with only one text, like Potamon (UE 36192) who was buried with a Greek sealed documentary text placed on his abdomen. For a similar discovery see Grenfell 1897. Among the deceased buried with papyri are 36181, 36182, 36186, 36192 and 36204.

109 36204.

110 A comprehensive study of this corpus of texts and their context of discovery will be published soon by the writer.

111 The papyrus (36345) was discovered in Tomb 52 (Sector 36) on 28 November 2021. The folded packet was found on the abdomen of the mummy of a child buried in the barrel-vaulted tomb sometime between the first and second century CE. The identification of the composition as a Greco-Egyptian magical text has been confirmed by studies carried out by the writer between November and December 2022 in the laboratory of the mission. Over 20 *charaktêres* visible through the folder fractures have been identified; the text is currently under study by the writer. For a short introduction on this discovery, see Mascort Roca et al. 2021, 11–12, 23.

112 For an overview of the inscribed objects associated with magical practices performed in the necropolis of this city, see Mascia 2023c.

provinces of the Roman Empire. The reason behind the choice of the mortuary landscape for the performance of magical procedures resides in the idea that necropolises represented a liminal space between the world of the living and the dead. Furthermore, being outside the borders of the urban space and the administrative centre of the city, they were probably seen as more conceivable places for the activities of ritualists.[113] Among the artefacts found in the archaeological investigations of this settlement[114] is the discovery in 2020 of a wooden amulet in Tomb 40 of the High Necropolis dating to the late antique phase.[115] The object can be interpreted as a so-called 'Bous' amulet, a type of protective device widely attested in Egypt from the late antique period onwards.[116] The Greek *voces magicae* are surrounded by a series of *charaktêres* and what seems, at first glance, to be the name of God written in the Coptic language.[117] Apart from these recent discoveries, at least one other written artefact found during Grenfell and Hunt's 1904–1905 excavation campaign could be associated with a mortuary context in light of the content of its text. The object, measuring 7.1 × 2 cm, is a wooden tablet,[118] which seems to preserve a small section of what was originally a much more complex and larger text of applied magic, possibly a binding spell used in an execration rite.[119] The coercive nature of the text and its use in a burial context is suggested by the adoption of a terminology recurrent in the production of such incantations. The most well-preserved section of the ritual text is written on the recto side in Coptic. Nonetheless, the composition presents several misspellings, which suggest that the writer, having a certain knowledge of Greek, mixed up the two languages.

113 On this aspect, see Wilburn 2012, 249.

114 In particular, a clay tablet preserving a drawing of the god Seth associated with Greek magical voices was discovered in 1993, see Piedrafita 2010. For the reinterpretation of the text as a sequence of magical voices, see Mascia 2023c, 1140. An ostracon preserving a Greek protective spell was discovered in Tomb 40 in the course of the excavation campaign held in 2020; the object is currently under study by the writer.

115 The artefact found on 26 February 2020 is currently under study by the writer; for a brief mention of this discovery, see Mascort Roca et al. 2020, 29.

116 For an introduction to this typology of objects, see Sijpesteijn 1981; Menci 2007.

117 Some doubts remain on the interpretation of the text given its poor state of conservation.

118 Inv. no. 05.4.182. As with the other aforementioned objects preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, my gratitude goes to Dr Niv Allon for allowing me to study this object. An edition of this text will be published soon by the writer; for a short introduction to this artefact, see Mascia 2023c, 1139.

119 To the best of my knowledge, only one wooden object preserving an aggressive spell meant to be deposited in a burial context has been published so far, see Boyaval 1974.

6 A brief note on the Jewish and Nabataean communities of Oxyrhynchus

Papyri, particularly documentary texts, offer significant evidence of the interaction between Greek and other foreign languages in this city.[120] This is the case of a receipt likely belonging to a Nabataean merchant living at Oxyrhynchus around the second century CE.[121] The presence of traces of Greek letters on the upper margin of the papyrus indicates that the fragment belongs to a bilingual contract, where the Nabataean text probably consisted of a subscription or a statement closing the document. A contract BL Or 9180D dating from the fourth century CE written in Greek preserving a note in Hebrew also comes from the same city.[122]

7 The multilingual landscape of Christian Oxyrhynchus

The integration of archaeological and textual evidence provides a new perspective on the multilingual panorama of this settlement at time of the rise of Christianity.

Despite the predominance of Greek sources published so far, which, nonetheless, offer essential information on the social and religious panorama of this settlement in the late antique phase, recent findings underline the importance that the Coptic language played in the local textual production. Sarah Clackson stressed the need to revise our understanding of the role played by the Egyptian language in Christian Oxyrhynchus in an essential contribution in the early

120 Despite the importance of Greco-Latin documentary texts for understanding the impact of the arrival of the Roman settlers in this city, these bilingual sources are excluded from the present discussion.

121 Healey 2004.

122 For a short description of this text see https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Or_9180_D (last accessed 12 March 2023). For an overview of the literary and paraliterary texts in the Hebrew language associated with the Jewish community of Oxyrhynchus, see Piotrkowski 2018.

2000s devoted to the Oxyrhynchite Coptic papyrological material.[123] This perspective can be now substantiated by the wealth of material discovered in over more than thirty years of archaeological investigations carried out at the site by the mission of the University of Barcelona.[124] These discoveries help us to understand how Coptic and Greek coexisted and interacted in the same environment.

As in other contexts and cultural settings discussed so far, we will speak predominantly in terms of spatial interaction; even though several testimonies will underline the recurrent linguistic intertwining in the production of single written testimonies. This phenomenon, attested throughout the Christian religious landscape of Oxyrhynchus, remarks how pilgrims visiting this cultic centre from various areas of the Egyptian lands, local inhabitants and members of the Oxyrhynchite religious institutions were frequently at home in using the two languages.

7.1 The funerary houses

A large building was identified in the High Necropolis of Oxyrhynchus in the early 2000s. The archaeological interventions conducted in this complex led to its interpretation as a structure associated with the cult of the dead dating between the early fifth and seventh century CE.[125] A pavilion might had the function of a *triclia* or *apparatorium*, i.e. funerary banquet hall. These structures were traditionally devoted to events held in honour of the deceased in the Roman culture, also attested in the Christian tradition.[126] While this type of building finds parallels across the Mediterranean area,[127] the Oxyrhynchite complex can be compared to only a few structures discovered in other Egyptian settlements.[128]

123 Clackson 2007. Over four hundred Coptic papyri have been identified by Clackson in the Sackler Library of Oxford and other institutions. The earliest evidence counting private letters, documents, and literary texts date to the fourth century CE.

124 A consistent number of unpublished Coptic papyrological and epigraphic evidence kept in the archives of the Egyptian Antiquity Service at el-Bahnasa should be added to the materials discussed in the following pages, currently under study by the writer.

125 For an introduction to this religious complex, see Subías Pascual 2008.

126 Subías Pascual 2008, 55. On this subject, also see Krautheimer 1965, 34, 36, 38.

127 For an introduction on the ritual practice of funerary banquets in early Christianity, see Jastrzębowska 2019.

128 In the necropolis of the nearby Antinoopolis (modern el-Sheikh Ibada), for instance, a building probably erected to answer similar religious needs, the so-called 'Peristylbaus', has

The discovery of the so-called Funerary Houses of Oxyrhynchus is not only archaeologically relevant since it offers a deeper understanding of the funerary practices peculiar to this historical phase, but it is also vital for the identification of an important corpus of graffiti (i.e. *dipinti*)[129] painted on the walls of this cultic space.[130] Most of them consist of votive inscriptions often enclosed in *tabulae ansatae* left by various devotees visiting the building and short epitaphs in memory of numerous deceased, which are presumably associated with the main function of this complex.[131] The corpus seems to include mainly Greek inscriptions; however, several graffiti appear to bear clear influences of the Coptic language.[132]

7.2 The basilica of St Philoxenos

The investigations of the mission of the University of Barcelona led to the discovery of another Christian building identified in the Sector 24 of the High Necropolis in 2009.[133] Further analyses of archaeological, papyrological and epigraphic evidence led to the identification of this complex as the basilica of St Philoxenos,[134] built around the fifth century CE,[135] presumably on the ruins of a pre-existing religious structure.[136] This religious institution, previously known

been identified over the last few years. For an introduction, see Grossmann 2008. Another building meant to answer similar functions, known as the 'Edificio Comunitario', has also been identified in the necropolis of el-Bagawat; see Grossmann 1982, 78–79; Cipriano 2008, 74–83.

129 This type of evidence is traditionally classified in classical epigraphic studies, as *dipinti*. However, the term graffiti, especially in Egyptological studies, is often employed for both scratched and painted inscriptions. While bearing in mind this traditional terminological distinction, I will here adopt the term graffiti to discuss painted, charcoal and scratched inscriptions.

130 See Piedrafita 2003.

131 Piedrafita 2003, Piedrafita 2008, 142–143.

132 Piedrafita 2003, 37–38.

133 Padró et al. 2009, 15–18.

134 Padró, Martínez and Piedrafita 2018. For further reflection on the identification of this religious building see Martínez García and Mascia 2023.

135 On the dating of this religious building see Martínez García and Mascia 2023.

136 A possible identification of this pre-existing building with the Sarapeion of Oxyrhynchus has been advanced in the past few years; see Padró, Martínez and Piedrafita 2018, 716–717. This hypothesis seems suggested by the presence of an oracular cult inside the Christian building that could have inherited the role played by the Sarapeion in the Greco-Roman period. However, the surviving archaeological evidence do not provide sufficient information to verify this interpretation.

only in light of several pieces of papyrological evidence,[137] was an important oracular centre attracting pilgrims from all over the Egyptian territory.[138] The existence of an oracular cult associated with this saint at Oxyrhynchus was suggested by the identification of several Greek oracular tickets.[139] The performance of divination practices in the recently discovered building, entitled to this saint, is suggested by the examination of the Coptic and Greek graffiti recorded in the crypt and annexed chambers. The presence of Coptic graffiti presumably witnessing the performance of divination practices in the basilica opens up a new perspective on the ritual procedures performed in this sanctuary, suggesting that divination services were not only conducted in Greek, but also in Egyptian.[140] This linguistic compresence and interaction is reflected in various practices, from graffiti recording the visit of devotees to this cultic space, to the production of funerary stelae.

Over two hundred figural and textual graffiti have been recorded in the area surrounding the basilica superstructure[141] and the underground area.[142] The current study carried out on this broad corpus of sources seems to demonstrate how the walls of the basilica superstructure were originally covered by charcoal, painted and scratched graffiti made by pilgrims in the course of their visit to this religious complex. Apart from a few Greek testimonies, the use of Coptic seems to prevail in this area, although it was occasionally used to transliterate anthroponyms in other languages.[143] On the other hand, Greek and Coptic graffi-

137 P.Oxy. LXVII 4617 (400–499 CE); P.Oxy. LXVII 4620 (475–550 CE); P.Oxy. XVI 1950 (487 CE); PSI VII 791 (500–599 CE); P.Oxy. XI 1357 (535–536 CE); P.Oxy. XVI 2041 = P.Cairo 10122 (500–699 CE); P.Lond. V 1762 (500–699 CE).

138 For an introduction on the oracular cult of St Philoxenos, see Papaconstantinou 2001, 336–338. The presence of pilgrims arriving from various areas of the Egypt is indicated, among others, by the attestation of various Coptic dialects.

139 P.Oxy. VIII 1150 (sixth century CE); P.Oxy. XVI 1926 (sixth century CE); P.Rendel Harris 54 (sixth century CE).

140 A Coptic divinatory composition from Oxyrhynchus has been recently identified. The editor has proposed a possible association of this ritual text with the local oracular cult of St Philoxenos; see Kocar 2019.

141 The stone blocks pertaining to the main building were predominantly reused to fill the underground area after its destruction. For an introduction to the graffiti (*dipinti*) identified on these stone slabs see Martínez García and Mascia 2023.

142 Graffiti have been recorded in the crypt (Espacio I), the hallway (Espacio II) and two of the four annexed chambers (Espacio III and IV). The other two annexes were completely destroyed and only a few graffiti, predominantly pertaining to the pre-existing Greco-Roman building, have been recorded.

143 Coptic was used to transliterate an Arabic name, for instance, on the stone slab inv. no. 470.

ti in the inner chambers of the basilica appear to testify to the coexistence of the two languages in the production of graffiti in the earliest stages of the life of this religious institution. In this sense, graffiti in both languages could have been made at the same moment by individuals simply choosing to write in different languages.

The area of the crypt where the balance is, nevertheless, still in favour of Coptic sources seems to have been a privileged space for graffitiing practices. It is in this area that we find the most consistent number of pieces of figural and textual evidence. The variety of writing skills of the individuals engaging in graffitiing practices seems to indicate the authorship of members of this religious institution and lay people. This relationship is overturned in the annexed chambers, where Greek seems to prevail over Coptic sources. The partial chronological overlap between Greek and Coptic graffiti is also indicated by the attestation of writings in which elements of Coptic and Greek are combined. The intertwining between the two languages is attested, among others, in the inclusion of closing formulae in which a switch into another script occurs. A Greek graffito scratched on the wall of one of the annexed chambers of the underground gallery of the basilica is a votive inscription in which Biktor, Doxia and Phaustine ask for St Philoxenos's protection.[144] While the text is written in Greek, the graffitist uses the Coptic letter ϩ to write the word 'amen', which is used here as a closing formula.[145] Tracing the influence of the Greek language in text written in Coptic is more common, reflected in misspellings and the inclusion of elements alien to Coptic. The frequent occurrence of this phenomenon seems to demonstrate that many of the authors of these graffiti were at home using both Greek and Coptic, and even the more experienced writers[146] occasionally mixed up the two languages when writing these ephemeral texts.

A compresence between Greek and Coptic would have also been probably perceived visiting the necropolis built in proximity to the basilica of St Philoxenos. Indeed, apart from the Greek evidence published so far,[147] the corpus counts a considerable number of Coptic epitaphs. Seven Coptic funerary stelae have been identified in this area, several of which seems to date between the

144 For a first mention of this graffito, see Padró, Martinez and Piedrafita 2018, 710. An edition of the text has been provided in Delattre, Dijkstra and van der Vliet 2020, 401.

145 As noted in the re-edition, commenting on the script-switching choice of our scribe, 'He shows himself to be only moderately familiar with Greek orthography'; see Delattre, Dijkstra and van der Vliet 2020, 401.

146 This phenomenon is also recurrent in graffiti allegedly written by trained writers.

147 Mascia and Martínez García 2021.

sixth and the seventh century CE.[148] According to the palaeographic analyses carried out to date, at least some Greek and Coptic inscriptions are probably contemporary, a consideration that might be extended, as we have seen, to the written evidence provided by the main religious building.

7.3 The so-called Byzantine Fortress

At the end of this overview of the multilingual panorama of Oxyrhynchus between the Greco-Roman and late antique phases, I will briefly examine another archaeological context which provides additional evidence of the spatial coexistence between languages in the Oxyrhynchite religious institutions. This religious complex[149] was identified in the early 2000s in the suburban area of this site. The so-called Byzantine Fortress (i.e. Fortaleza Bizantina) was then the object of extensive investigations between 2005 and 2010.[150] Despite its original interpretation, the area preserves the remains of a cemeterial and reliquary church located at the centre of the fortress, two chapels alongside its eastern façade, and the residence of a monastic community.[151] In addition to the discovery of several funerary inscriptions in the Greek language[152] and Arabic graffiti, the latter certainly later in date,[153] the area preserves an important corpus of Coptic graffiti (*dipinti*).[154] Seventeen textual graffiti were discovered in the area of the apse during the 2010 excavation campaign. However, the religious complex certainly counts a broader collection of figural and textual graffiti, which only future investigations will lead to a comprehensive evaluation.[155]

148 This epigraphic material is currently under study by the writer, in collaboration with José Javier Martínez García, who is overseeing the examination of the archaeological context.

149 On the date of this religious structure, see Subías Pascual 2020.

150 For a preliminary report, see Subías Pascual 2012.

151 Subías Pascual 2020, 77.

152 One of which carries a date in the 14th indiction and the year 402 of the era of Diocletian (i.e. 686 CE). For a first publication of this stone slab, see Piedrafita 2015. For a further discussion on the inscribed materials from this archaeological context, see Subías Pascual 2020, 77–78.

153 On one of the Cufic texts discovered in the area of the chapel, see Subías Pascual 2020, 88.

154 Probably dated to the mid-fifth century CE; for a comprehensive edition of this corpus, see Bosson 2015.

155 Recent surveys of the area, particularly the monastic cells, remark the presence of numerous figural and textual graffiti, which still await publication.

8 Conclusion

This paper aimed to provide a new and comprehensive perspective of the multicultural and -lingual society of Oxyrhynchus between the Greco-Roman and the late antique phase. The comparative examination of textual and archaeological evidence allows us to integrate and widen the perspective offered so far by the Greek papyrological documentation. The heterogeneous corpus of written testimonies found or attributed to this city helps us to perceive how the interaction between languages and scripts could take different forms. From no more than their simple coexistence in the same physical space narrating the transformation of this city's cultural landscape throughout the centuries to their intertwining in the production of specific written artefacts. This latter phenomenon especially marks the existence of a considerable part of society at home in using different languages, although how each individual could master them varied greatly. The Egyptian language maintained a central importance in a social panorama subject to continuous transformations, especially in the production of ritual texts up until the early Roman period, latterly regaining its role in religious settings soon after the affirmation of the Christian religion. Through the bilingual documentation combining Hebrew or Nabataean to the Greek language, we gain a closer look at other communities inhabiting this city, which have unfortunately left almost no traces in archaeological records. Observing the compresence of different languages (Greek, Egyptian, Latin) in this city's funerary landscape, we can grasp a glimpse of how the coexistence and constant interaction between the native and foreign inhabitants shaped the cultural panorama of this settlement. Beyond doubt, in a city such as Oxyrhynchus, standing out for the richness and variety of the surviving material evidence, it is possible to trace the distinguishing features of the multilingual landscape of an Egyptian town in the long transition to Christianity.

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