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Dorothy J. Thompson

FROM MODEL TOOLS TO WRITTEN TABLETS: THE PTOLEMIES IN EGYPT

As a papyrologist and epigraphist, Zbigniew Borkowski was interested both in the capital and the *chora* of Graeco-Roman Egypt. It is one aspect of the relationship of Alexandria to the Egyptian countryside under the Ptolemies that forms the subject of this short tribute to his memory.

My starting point is the excavations of the Alexandrian Serapeum and the discovery there by the team of Alan Rowe in 1943-44 of foundation deposits of dedicatory plaques made up from a variety of materials.¹ In both the south-east and south-west corners of the outer wall of the Serapeum, buried in sand in cuttings made into the rock, were discovered ten dedicatory foundation plaques, one each of gold, silver, bronze, Nile mud and faience, together with five of glass (two originally of a dark red glass, one now of a violet/brown tint and two of them green). These plaques come in roughly four sizes, around 17.3 x 5.8 cm for the gold, silver, bronze and the two green glass tablets, 16.0 x 5.0 cm for the Nile mud, 6.3 x 5.7 cm for the other glass pieces and 6.9 x 1.4 cm for the faience. The *temenos* wall which enclosed the sanctuary on its longer side measured 173.7 metres, just 1,000 times the length of the gold and silver tablets.²

On the plaques stood a dedication, either written or inscribed in both Greek and hieroglyphs. In Greek the dedication was punched onto the metal plaques from the front and, as far as may be known from where it survives, written in ink on the other surfaces. It reads as follows:

¹ A. B. WACE, *Recent Ptolemaic finds in Egypt*, JHS 65 (1945) 106-09; A. ROWE, *Discovery of the famous temple and enclosure of Sarapis at Alexandria*, ASAE Supplement 2 (Cairo 1946); discussion and further bibliography in P. M. FRASER, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford 1972) I 268-71.

² ROWE, *Discovery* 19-20; the breadth does not correspond.

'King Ptolemy (III), son of Ptolemy and of Arsinoe, the Brother-Sister Gods, (dedicates) the temple (*naos*) and enclosure (*temenos*) to Sarapis'.

In hieroglyphs, written in black ink, the dedication is a more traditional one:

'The king of the South and the North, Heir of the Brother-Sister Gods, chosen of Amon, powerful is the life of Re; the son of Re; Ptolemy (III), living for ever, beloved of Ptah. He made the temple and the sacred enclosure for Sarapis.'

The king's name stands in a cartouche and the first line consists always of the royal name.³ From both the Greek and hieroglyphic texts it is clear that Ptolemy III Euergetes dedicates this temple in his role as an Egyptian pharaoh.

The relative positions of the two language inscriptions is also of interest. On the metal dedications, those of gold, silver and bronze, the Greek text is centred and clearly the prime text, whilst the hieroglyphs are painted vertically to the left side on the gold, silver, bronze and two large glass tablets; on the remaining glass plaques the Greek and demotic are, where visible, painted one on each side, and on the box-like faience example there is Greek on two of the four long sides and hieroglyphic on the other two. The silver and bronze plaques are described as having once been enclosed in plaster.⁴ Presumably similar caches of dedicatory plaques were made in the north-west and north-east corners of the enclosure but these, unfortunately, now lie beneath the local cemetery and have never been excavated.⁵

These plaques of Ptolemy III were not alone on the Serapeum hill. Two further sets of ten plaques were discovered from the north-east and south-east angles of a small shrine attached to the east side of the large rectangular building to the north of the site within the main enclosure. These plaques were again made of the same materials — gold, silver, bronze, faience and Nile mud, with five of opaque glass — and traces survived, including cuttings in the rock and small pieces of glass, from the further two angles, thus indicating that originally a set was buried at each corner of this shrine. That this was a shrine of Harpokrates is shown by the plaques, which in Greek record the dedication to Harpokrates by Ptolemy IV Philopator according to a command (*kata prostagma*) of Sarapis and Isis. The habit of depositing sets of dedicatory plaques would seem to have become a royal practice on this site. And although the hieroglyphic record comes below (this time punched

³ ROWE, *Discovery* 5-10 with fig. 2 and plates II and X.

⁴ Cf. the foundation deposit of tablets of copper, alabaster and glazed ware enclosed in white-washed mud-bricks, W. M. FLINDERS PETRIE, *Abydos* II (London 1903) 20.

⁵ ROWE, *Discovery* plates VII and IX.

into the metal from the front in the same way as is the Greek),⁶ it is clear that the dedicatory practice itself is a good Egyptian one.

Outside Alexandria the Egyptian character of the practice is clearly evident in both visual and written form in the contemporary decoration of the great Ptolemaic temple at Edfou. Here, in the second hypostyle hall, a series of scenes record the foundation and dedication of the temple. First, on the west wall in the first register, Ptolemy IV pours out the sand and then, in the second scene along, he is depicted wearing an Osiris crown and bearing in his hands what appears to be a tray on which are piled seventeen small tablets or model bricks for the temple; he is offering these to the god Horos who stands facing him to the right. The hieroglyphic legend records the placing of tablets of gold in the stone at the corners of the temple.⁷ It is hard to imagine a clearer depiction of the role of the pharaoh in dedicating a temple, a dedication which would also be recorded on the tablets making up the foundation-deposits buried at the corners of the building. So, at Edfou Ptolemy offered his temple to the local god and in Alexandria the temples of Sarapis and Harpokrates were marked by similar dedications.

There are other Ptolemaic examples of comparable deposits, though nothing as complete as the sets of plaques from the Serapeum hill. Rowe listed the examples known to date; later discoveries or identifications add nothing of significance.⁸ Most of these deposits are represented by only a few tablets; the companion tablets, assuming they once existed, have not survived discovery or have been separated off and not recorded.

There are other aspects of these examples that call for comment. Besides the contents of the deposits, there is the number of tablets buried, the material of which they were made and, yet further, the written record that they carried. The foundation deposits of the Serapeum Hill at Alexandria contained ten tablets of different materials; in contrast, the scene of dedication depicted on the Edfou temple shows seventeen different plaques. The significance of these numbers escapes me, though significance there surely was. Rowe makes the suggestion that the number ten stood for ten gods, but which ten

⁶ WACE (1945) 107-08 with fig. 1; ROWE, *Discovery* 54-8, plates XVI-XVII and commentary on the texts by DRIOTON in Part II.

⁷ E. CHASSINAT, *Le temple d'Edfou II*. "Mémoires publiés par les membres de la mission archéologique française au Caire" 12 (Cairo 1897) with ed. 2, S. CAUVILLE and D. DEVAUCHELLE (Cairo 1987) 32, cf. 60 and 61; *Edfou XII*. "Mémoire" 29 (1934) plates 374-5; *Edfou VII*. "Mémoire" 24 (1932) 47, refers to 17 tablets. See ROWE, *Discovery* 65, with comments of H. W. FAIRMAN.

⁸ ROWE, *Discovery* 10-13, Canopus: 1 gold and 2 glass; Alexandrian Bourse: gold, silver, bronze and opaque glass; 16-17, Naukratis and Tanis; 65, Tûkh el Qarâmûs and Medamud. 9 plaques from a temple at Benha (Athribis) are on display in the Alexandria museum.

gods he is unsure,⁹ and seventeen does not, to the best of my knowledge, carry any particular divine significance. The materials used perhaps contain the clue to the number ten. The metals employed for these plaques were the three most standard metals — gold, silver and bronze — and Nile mud is the archetypal building material. Forms of Nile mud, are found in foundation-deposits from the earliest times.¹⁰ As the original building material for temples and other constructions, Nile mud has a natural place in any symbolic record of building materials. For both the pictorial record of Edfou and the contents of the foundation-deposits themselves suggest that the tablets laid in deposit in some way represented the materials used in the construction of the temple. The three chief metals and Nile mud are joined by a piece of faience and five tablets of glass, the largest two of which are green in colour. Green was the favoured Egyptian colour, representing the Nile valley and all that augured well for the country.¹¹ It is probably no mere coincidence that there were five Egyptian stones that were particularly valued and regularly recorded together, especially in the Graeco-Roman period. These were lapis lazuli, turquoise, red jasper, carnelian and green feldspar together often with *thnt*, or faience.¹² In the five pieces of glass of the Serapeum deposits we find, I suggest, the representation of these stones and faience. For in Egypt one substance might represent another, and the use of coloured glass to take the place of minerals was a very common practice.¹³ We may also note the recorded colours of the Serapeum glass. The green of the two large pieces may represent the turquoise and green feldspar, the original red of two of the pieces of glass, carnelian perhaps and red jasper. For red again was a lucky colour. If this explanation for the ten different materials of the plaques is accepted, the number of tablets is determined by a representation of the most precious metals and gems.

For the Edfou depiction seven further materials must be imagined, the different building-stones perhaps of which examples may be found elsewhere.¹⁴ For the main building materials of Egypt were six — limestone, sandstone, granite, quartzite, alabaster and *bhn* — which together with basalt might form the extra seven materials which Ptolemy IV offered to Horos

⁹ ROWE, *Discovery* 59, Sarapis, Isis, Harpokrates, Anubis and six others.

¹⁰ See footnote 16 below.

¹¹ J. R. HARRIS, *Lexicographical studies in ancient Egyptian minerals*. "Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Institut für Orientforschung" 54 (Berlin 1961) 225, also with a Hathor connection.

¹² HARRIS, *Minerals* 140.

¹³ HARRIS, *Minerals* 16, 115.

¹⁴ Eg. MOND and MYERS, *Armant* I 17 and II plate XXIII, Tuthmosis III.

for his temple.¹⁵ The Ptolemy who built and dedicated these temples was a pharaoh endowed with all the treasures of his kingdom. In this respect he stood in a long line of rulers of the land of Egypt.

The practice of foundation-deposits is an Egyptian one going back to the earliest recorded temples. Excavations from all periods regularly record the discovery of deposits buried beneath the foundations. As in the Serapeum, such deposits are often placed in a bed of clean river-sand.¹⁶ The contents, however, of such deposits differed greatly over time. Earlier foundation deposits are more varied in content. Stone and clay vases might be deposited, food (ox-heads, quails), scarabs and samples of mud and stone.¹⁷ One of the most common forms of earlier deposit, especially from the New Kingdom onwards, is the cache of miniature tools of bronze, of chisels, hammers, adzes, saws and all the tools a skilled craftsman might employ in the building of a temple or any other work.¹⁸ In burying such miniature tools beneath the god's temple, those who worked for the pharaoh on the temple recorded the importance of the tools of their trade, the tools they needed to practice their skills. The pharaoh, in whose name such dedications were made, was identified by a simple cartouche;¹⁹ dedications generally were not ascribed in written form.

With the Ptolemies the situation changed. The simple cartouche, like that of the Macedonian monarch Philip Arrhidaeus on a green glazed tablet from Tûkh el Qarâmûs,²⁰ contains a royal record, the identifying name of the pharaoh who dedicates the temple. With the Serapeum texts and other Ptolemaic examples it is not just the identity of the dedicant that is recorded but also that of the structure itself and the gods to whom it belongs. The message of these Alexandrian plaques is thus both different and more complex. The use of the written dedication makes possible the recording of much more information. In the tablets from the Serapeum or the dedication by Ptolemy III

¹⁵ HARRIS, *Minerals* 69, 6 stones; 82, basalt's name unknown.

¹⁶ Eg. MOND and MYERS, *Temples of Armant* (London 1940) I 29-30, a protodynastic foundation deposit (including mud squeezes); PETRIE, *Abydos* II (London 1903) 21, for temple of Tuthmosis III.

¹⁷ Eg. PETRIE, *Abydos* II, 20 and plate LXII; Mond and Myers, *Armant* I 17 and II plate XXIII, Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III.

¹⁸ Eg. W. M. FLINDERS PETRIE, *Six temples at Thebes* (London 1897) 14; *Abydos* II 20 (deposit 92); MOND and MYERS, *Armant* I 16-17, II plates XXIX-XXXI. Examples are too numerous to list.

¹⁹ An excellent example (Tuthmosis III) in W. C. HAYES, *The scepter of Egypt* II (Cambridge, Mass. 1959) 119-20 with fig. 61; cf. S. QUIRKE and J. SPENCER, *The British Museum book of ancient Egypt* (London 1992) 214, pl. 164, cartouches on metals and gemstones.

²⁰ F. LI. GRIFFITH, *The antiquities of Tell el Yahûdfyeh* (London 1890) 55 with plate XVII.8.

and Queen Berenike from the Osiris temple at Canopus it is the royal dedicants who are recorded; similar tablets preserve the names of other dedicants. So a bilingual gold plaque from a building beneath the Alexandrian Bourse records, in Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphs, a private dedication made to the king and queen (Ptolemy (IV) and Arsinoe) together with Sarapis and Isis, described as Saviour Gods.²¹

In some respects, then, the Ptolemies were new. They were Greek immigrants to the country, and the dedications that they made were first expressed in the new language of rule. They also had different gods, and in the Greek city of Alexandria a Greek population was somewhat removed from the religion of the country in which they lived. But not too far. Through Sarapis, the Greek form of the Memphite god Osiris-Apis, the Ptolemies might foster the cult of a Ptolemaic god; his cult statue had a human form unlike the bull of Memphis. And when Ptolemy III Euergetes and his successor Ptolemy IV built a new *temenos* and temple to this god, with other central Egyptian gods associated with him in his shrine, then the foundation was conducted in a traditional Egyptian way.

The final context into which I wish to place these Alexandrian dedications is the growth of literacy, which followed the new regime. The adoption of Greek and development of literate practices went hand in hand, following, after a time-lag, the establishment of the Ptolemaic pharaohs. In the beginning Egyptian demotic was the language used by those in post and by the new administrators recruited by the Ptolemies. But in the course of the third century B.C. Greek gained ground as the language of government and official documentation, increasingly also of private and legal matters. By the reign of Ptolemy III Euergetes in the last third of that century, Greek was the language in which, at some level, land surveys, crop reports and taxation returns were made for central government. Egyptian of course continued as the spoken language of the countryside, but in the towns, and especially those where soldiers settled along with other immigrants, Greek, it seems, was on the increase.²² Greek was the language taught in the schools in both the towns and villages.

The most striking feature of this development was the overall increase in documentation. The number of papyri from the reign of Ptolemy I is very small and most of what survives is in demotic. Under Ptolemy II the rise in the number of surviving papyri is striking, and from the third century on-

²¹ ROWE, *Discovery* 10-13.

²² D. J. THOMPSON, *Literacy in early Ptolemaic Egypt*, [in:] *Proceedings of the XIXth international congress of papyrology, Cairo 2-9 September 1989* (Cairo 1992) II 77-90; *Literacy and power* in A. K. BOWMAN and G. D. WOOLF, *Literacy and power in the ancient world* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

wards documentation in both demotic and, increasingly, in Greek, is a feature of the papyri. While it may be thought that this striking increase simply reflects a change in survival patterns — the use that is of recycled papyri to form the cartonnage used for Ptolemaic mummy masks and pectorals — nevertheless, that the trend continues into the Roman period may serve to counteract this objection. A new language did, I would argue, result in a significant change in the degree to which writing was used in many areas of life. A consideration of the formal aspects of this writing — of what was recorded, where and in what form — may add a further historical dimension to our understanding of the history of the period.

Many writing materials were employed as surfaces, and different implements were used to write the different scripts and languages upon them. Both surfaces and script are worth consideration. The Rosetta stone, recording the decisions of a meeting of all Egyptian priests in 196 B.C., is probably the best known of all the records of Ptolemaic Egypt; at the British Museum more postcards are sold of this decree than of any other object.²³ What, however, most visitors to the Museum are probably unaware of, is the symbolism of the stone — of both the material of which it is made and the text which it carries. The fine black basalt of this stone,²⁴ unfortunately broken at the head, must have conveyed to *all* Egyptians who saw it a traditional message of continuity and the strength of the old ways of the gods and temples of Egypt. There was no need of literacy to read this particular message. Basalt was a stone regularly employed for important sacred matters and the first script of this trilingual decree was hieroglyphic; stone and writing would thus combine to place the stone more clearly in its traditional Egyptian context. The demotic and finally the Greek texts which follow might be important for the *literate* audience at which they were aimed. More significant, however, was the overall appearance presented by the stone.

Text therefore should not be separated from the surface on which it is placed, and the variety of surfaces is matched by the variety of scripts and growing number of tools which were now employed for the written records made. The hard basalt of the Rosetta stone was inscribed with three different scripts; limestone, more commonly used for official decrees, presented a surface which was easier for the stone-cutter to work. Yet the quality of writing differed not only according to the stone, but also to the importance of the message, as Borkowski knew well from his work on the inscriptions of

²³See Mary BEARD, *Souvenirs of culture: deciphering (in) the museum*, "Art History" 15 (1992) 505-532.

²⁴HARRIS, *Minerals* 22, questions this standard description. The stone of such Ptolemaic decrees is listed by Fr. DAUMAS, *Les moyens d'expression du grec et de l'égyptien comparés dans les décrets de Canope et de Memphis* (Cairo 1952), appendix.

Alexandria.²⁵ On metal a punch might be used, as for the Greek and hieroglyphs on the Harpokrates plaques from the Serapeum, or the surface might be inscribed, as for instance for the first century B.C. long demotic votive tablets of bronze from Dendera;²⁶ or, in the case of the Roman coinage from Egypt, the wording might be cast in the metal. Paint was used for hieroglyphs, on wall-paintings or, here, on the Serapeum plaques from the outer enclosure deposits. Demotic was written with a rush on papyrus, broken pot or camel bone,²⁷ and Greek was written with a sharpened pen of reed. Or simple scratching might be used to form a script on wax tablets and other surfaces. Communication increasingly came in written form and with the use of writing the messages grew in length. So, as already seen, on the Serapeum plaques the identity was recorded of both the subject and the object of the dedication. The written word had replaced the model tools of an earlier era.

Under the Ptolemies the temples of the Egyptian countryside remained bastions of Egyptian culture, but even in this aspect of native life the effect of Greek, language, culture and literacy may, in the Serapeum dedications, be seen to be taking effect. Here in Alexandria, as elsewhere in the temples of Egypt, the Ptolemies took over traditional practices, translated them into Greek and employed the results as part of both the image and the actuality of the new regime.

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²⁵ Z. BORKOWSKI, *Inscriptions des factions à Alexandrie* (Warsaw 1981).

²⁶ A. F. SHORE, *Votive objects from Dendera of the Graeco-Roman period*, in J. RUFFLE, G. A. GABALLA and K. A. KITCHEN, *Glimpses of ancient Egypt. Studies in honour of H. W. Fairman* (Warminster 1979) 138-60.

²⁷ SCO 25 (1976) 46-56, no. 7, with Tav. V-VII; SCO 27 (1977) 14-17, nos. 1-2, with Tav. 1-2.