Egypt after the Pharaohs: Ethnic Identity in Graeco-Roman Egypt

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Course Description

Egypt under Greek and Roman rule (from c. 332 BC) was a diverse place, its population including Egyptians, Greeks, Jews, Romans, Nubians, Arabs, and even Indians. This course will explore the sometimes controversial subject of ethnic identity and its manifestations in the material and textual record from Graeco-Roman Egypt, through a series of case studies involving individual people and communities. Topics will include multilingualism, ethnic conflict and discrimination, legal systems, and gender, using evidence from contemporary texts on papyrus as well as recent archaeological excavations and field survey projects.
**Course Objectives**

By the end of the course, participants should understand and be able to articulate:

- how Graeco-Roman Egypt functioned as a diverse multiethnic, multilingual society.
- the legal and political frameworks within which this diversity was organised and negotiated.
- how research in the social sciences on multilingualism and ethnic identity can be utilised to provide productive and interesting approaches to the textual and archaeological evidence from Graeco-Roman Egypt.

Students will also gain a broad overview of Egypt’s history from its conquest by Alexander the Great, through its rule by the Ptolemies, to the defeat of Cleopatra and Mark Antony and its integration into the Roman Empire, to the rise of Christianity.

**Course Requirements**

Attendance and participation (10%); assignments (2 short essays of 4-5 pages) and quizzes/map exercises (50%); extended essay on individual topics to be decided in consultation with me (c. 5000 words) and in-class presentation (40%).

Assignments are expected to be completed and handed in in a timely manner, and any anticipated problems (schedule clashes, etc.) discussed with me well in advance of due dates.

No knowledge of ancient languages is assumed, but students with a background in Classical languages and/or Egyptian may choose to put these skills to use in their extended essay.

**Background Reading**

The following books and articles will come in useful in particular sessions, with required readings for specific classes noted below, but participants may wish to get a ‘head start’. Selective reading of the edited volumes or handbooks can be used to get an overview of the topic and sources. (Supplementary readings indicated in the weekly schedule, below, are intended principally as additional bibliography for the extended essay, or for those simply interested in following up topics discussed in class.)

**Papyrology (Week 3):**


**Multicultural Egypt (Week 6 onwards):**


Johnson, J. H. ed. (1992) *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: Egypt from Cambyses to Constantine and Beyond*. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. [A large collection of short articles which, again, it may be helpful to use as a reference work or dip in and out of. A couple of specific articles will be distributed during the course.]
A skim through the following may also be useful:

Current archaeological work on Hellenistic and Roman Egypt (Week 4). These articles contain good summaries and further references on excavations at particular sites:


Further suggested readings are given in the weekly schedule, below.

**Weekly Schedule**

**1-2: Egypt in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods**

Historical introduction to Egypt under Greek and Roman rule. The main topics covered will be:

- The last days of the Pharaohs: Egypt under Nubian and Persian kings;
- Egypt’s conquest by Alexander the Great, and the establishment of the Ptolemaic kingdom;
- Ptolemaic Egypt in decline;
- Egypt becomes a Roman province: Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Octavian/Augustus;
- Egypt in the Roman Empire;
- The rise of Christianity;
- Egypt in Late Antiquity: from Byzantine rule to the Arab conquest.

Reading one of the following general histories of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt will provide a good overview:


**3: Ethnicity and Archaeology**

Ethnicity is a problematic and controversial topic in archaeology. This session will provide a brief introduction to the concept’s evolution and fluctuating popularity in scholarship (in archaeology and in the social sciences in general), and suggest some ways in which we can see expressions of ‘ethnic identity’ in the material and written record from Egypt.


Supplementary:

4: Oxyrhynchus: Introduction to Papyrology

Many of the topics covered in subsequent weeks will make extensive use of texts on papyrus. This week’s classes will introduce some of the basic tools and resources for reading and using papyrological documents: terminology and abbreviations; how texts are edited and published; internet resources (e.g. the portal www.papyri.info); new technology for reading texts; interdisciplinary collaboration between scholars (specialists in Egyptian, Greek, Aramaic, etc.); the excavation of papyri. These will be explored through the case study of the city of Oxyrhynchus, with further discussion of how the Oxyrhynchus papyri have been used to reconstruct the social and family lives, identities and economic activities of the people of the city. A portion of class time will be devoted to practical demonstration of online resources, including how such tools may be utilised by those with no background in ancient languages.


Supplementary:

5: Tebtunis 1: Archaeology and Papyri
6: Tebtunis 2: Multilingualism

The town of Tebtunis, in the Fayum, is a good example of a site where archaeological data and papyri can be used in tandem (for this and subsequent sessions, information on the most up-to-date field reports can be found in the two review articles in the American Journal of Archaeology cited above). Week 2 of this topic will use papyri from Tebtunis to look at individual and societal multilingualism in Graeco-Roman Egypt.


Supplementary / for reference:


7-8: Elephantine: Diverse Communities 1

Elephantine, at the southern boundary of Egypt, offers an invaluable opportunity to look at the longue duree: the interaction of languages and ethnic groups from Pharaonic times through into Late Antiquity and beyond. Among the communities discussed will be Egyptians, Greeks, Jews, Romans, Nubians and Persians, in their internal group dynamics and their interactions with others.

Porten, B. et al. (1996) The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change. Leiden: E. J. Brill. [Read the Introduction, texts from other sections will be distributed and discussed in class.]

9: Zenon: Managing Land and People

A discussion of the archive of Zenon, an estate-manager in the third century BC, and one of the most famous names in papyrology. Zenon’s business papers contain a wealth of information on social and economic affairs on a wealthy Greek official’s estate in the Egyptian countryside.

10: Apollonia: Gender and Ethnicity

Gender and ethnic identities in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt were inextricably intertwined. Intermarriage between ethnic groups was common, and changing strategies were adopted for deciding the ‘official’ ethnicity of the offspring of such marriages. In addition, women were treated differently under Egyptian and Greek law, the major difference being that in the Greek courts, a woman needed a guardian to act for her. The businesswoman Apollonia-Senmonthis, a bilingual, mixed-descent product of Hellenistic Egypt, knew how to play the system. Her business and personal papers show how she switched between languages, legal systems and even names according to what was financially or socially advantageous.


Supplementary:


11: Kerkeosiris: Diverse Communities 2

This topic will primarily be dealt with using texts and short articles distributed in class, but the following are fuller studies for supplementary reading:


12: Herakleides vs Psenobastis: Ethnic Conflict and Discrimination

Is there evidence of ethnic conflict and discrimination in Graeco-Roman Egypt? The system certainly favoured certain groups: tax privileges were accorded to Greeks. A number of papyri contain the complaints of individuals who believed they had been unfairly treated because of their ethnicity. Among Zenon’s papers is a letter from a camel-driver, probably an Arab, who protests that he has been badly treated and given only bad local wine to drink, because he is a ‘barbarian’ and does not know how to ‘hellenize’ ‘act like a Greek/speak Greek’ (P.Col. Zen. II 66, 256/5 BC). The Greek Herakleides writes an unintentionally humorous petition of complaint against an Egyptian woman named Psenobastis who emptied a chamberpot over his head when he was passing through her village, and then assaulted him in the street (P. Ent. 79, 218 BC). Ptolemaios, a religious recluse in the Memphis Serapeum, was threatened by a lynch mob of Egyptians because he was a Greek (UPZ 18, 161 BC). This session will also explore the physical spaces – village streetplans, temple complexes, households - in which such interaction and conflict might take place.

Catacombs of Kom es-Shoqafa, Alexandria: note the Egyptian animal-headed gods dressed as Roman soldiers.

13: Alexandria: A Multicultural Metropolis, c. 331 BC – AD 1957

To conclude, a run through the history of the city of Alexandria, from its foundation as a new Greek city in 331 BC to the mass exodus of Greeks and other foreigners under the Nasser regime in the 1950s and 1960s - from the city of the Ptolemies to the last years of the diverse, multiethnic metropolis depicted in the works of Lawrence Durrell, E. M. Forster, Naguib Mahfouz, and others. Special attention will be given to the work of the poet Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933), and his evocation of the cultural complexity of the Hellenistic and Roman eastern Mediterranean to reflect on his own society.
If you want to take a further look at some novels and films featuring ancient and modern Alexandria for your own interest (not all of them light relief):


*Agora* (Alejandro Amenabar, 2009).
*Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963). The Elizabeth Taylor version; of dubious historical accuracy!

**14: Reading week / preparation of extended essay.**
**15: Final presentations.**