enabling you to check any reading. The editors have wisely decided not to offer an apparatus, including Nicole's now manifestly incorrect readings, but they have also, and again wisely, stuck with his numeration, even though there was no particular rationale behind his order. Chronologically the texts range from A.D. 38 to the sixth/seventh century. With just a few exceptions they come from the Arsinoite nome and comprise a familiar mixture of official and private documents: contracts, receipts, petitions, declarations, some letters. While familiar in subject matter, they are, however, an exceptionally well-preserved collection: the majority of texts are complete or nearly complete, and that makes it all the more welcome that access to them is now so dramatically improved. Styles of papyrological commentary vary considerably. These editors say most of what they want to say in the helpful introductions to the texts, and do not add much by way of line-by-line commentary. I personally prefer to have more explained to me, but it is a matter of taste, and this is a careful and elegant work of modern papyrological scholarship.

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A COPTIC TOWN

T. G. WILFONG: *Women of Jeme. Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt.* Pp. xxvi + 192, map, ills, pls. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002. Paper, US$24.95, £18 (Cased, US$49.50, £35.50). ISBN: 0-472-06612-9 (0-472-09612-5 hbk).

The Coptic archives from the town of Jeme, later known as Medinet Habu, situated largely within an old temple enclosure on the West bank of the Nile opposite Luxor, have long been known. The obscurity of the site and the difficulty of the Coptic have meant that they have never had the attention they deserve. Copticists tend to concentrate on literary texts, and the scrappy, difficult, formulaic Byzantine and early Arab period documents have not been attractive. W.'s contribution, in bringing this material to a wider audience, is welcome, and this is an interesting study of women of a social class not normally visible in the literary sources from which most of the social history of this period is written.

The Jeme archives date from the end of Byzantine rule in Egypt and the start of the Arab period. Nevertheless, although the changing political conditions in Egypt are reflected in the archives and the people of Jeme appear to have suffered during the Sassanian wars, the texts discussed come from a firmly Christian religious context. Indeed, Jeme itself appears not to have made the transition from Coptic to Islamic town, the archives and the archaeology ending in the first decades of the ninth century. Apart from the occasional mention of Arab administrators, there appears to have been few converts to Islam from Jeme. W.'s study, therefore, relates to an early or mid-Byzantine Christian community.

Jeme provides a rich mix of material. The archaeological context of the community is relatively well understood, there is ample documentary material of a varied nature and on different media, and there is a surviving local homelitic and sub-literary corpus. W. is able to compare the religious literature to the documents and concludes,

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unsurprisingly, that behaviour was rather more liberal than teachings. Similarly, W. is able to place the documents in an archaeological context and identify the architectural form of the house over which two of the main characters of this book disputed. Nevertheless, W.'s focus is firmly on the documentary material, and especially on certain dossiers or archives.

Social historians face various difficulties with the Egyptian documentary material. It often does not answer the type of questions that historians would like to ask. The sexual lives of ancient Egyptians are rarely attested and it is difficult to know what to do with the anecdotal evidence that does survive. Does, for instance, an attestation of lesbian activity in a nunnery suggest either widespread awareness or fear of female homoeroticism? Does lesbianism's absence from the rest of the documentary record mean that such activities were foreign to the sexual experience of virtually all Egyptian women? Similarly, the documentary record tells us very little about female heterosexuality. W. notes the absence of evidence for prostitution at Jeme, but it is difficult to draw conclusions. Similarly, a marital dispute between newlyweds turns on the virginity of the bride, which suggests certain expectations, but we cannot automatically assume that female virginity was a prerequisite for 'respectable' marriage, whatever that might mean. W. identifies several women as unmarried mothers, on the basis of rather slim evidence, but it is not clear that 'unmarried mother' was a social status. The book lacks an obvious theoretical underpinning that would allow us to understand better why we should be interested in the sexual lives of the women of Jeme, and how we can reconstruct their society and its constructions of gender from these stray references.

Some of the material allows quantification, and here W. is on firmer ground. The very existence of a female money-lender is of interest, and that her lending was overwhelmingly to men reflects women's rôle in the economic life of the community. Here we see interesting similarities to the economic activities of the women of Tebtunis, another Egyptian village, five centuries earlier, where the division of parental estates seems to have often resulted in men having land and women cash. Inevitably, women lent to men.

It is, of course, the bane of the papyrologist and the historian of Egypt that it is often the seemingly dull sets of documents, the leasing contracts or the tax lists, that are easier to turn into social history, while personal letters resist analysis. Yet, anecdotes should have their place in any social history of Egypt. W. has opened our eyes to the richness of this documentary material and to its potential. The women of Jeme appear to have had limited geographical horizons, limited economic power, conservative sexual *mores*, to have been devoutly Christian, and to have lived under the watchful gazes of their neighbours, their menfolk, and the Church. Although obviously geographically and socially remote from most of the women who figure in our literary sources for this period, the similarities in social expectations are marked and probably more notably than the differences. This rich insight into the world of these women on the fringes of the Byzantine world offers another perspective to the hagiographies through which we understand the lives of women of this period. As a result, this book should be on the reading lists of all who teach and research the lives of women in the late antique and early Byzantine worlds.

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