

## Museum archaeology and reconstructing daily life in Late Roman Egypt

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*Journal of Roman Archaeology* 36 (2023), 589–598  
doi:10.1017/S1047759423000296

## Museum archaeology and reconstructing daily life in Late Roman Egypt

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SWIFT, E., J. STONER, and A. PUDSEY. 2022. *A Social Archaeology of Roman and Late Antique Egypt: Artefacts of Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 480. ISBN: 978-0-1988-6734-0

Over recent decades the archaeology of Graeco-Roman Egypt has experienced a renaissance. New excavations of domestic settlements, and their accompanying publications, at Amheida, Kellis, Soknopaiou Nessos, and Tebtunis, to name a few, have expanded our

understanding of the materiality of everyday life. And while papyri and ostraka, architecture, and pottery have received considerable scholarly attention, quotidian objects of daily use, which are ubiquitous in archaeological contexts, have not yet benefited from the same level of close analysis or quantity of published studies. This is where this volume steps in, demonstrating the rich social histories that can be produced by analyzing collections of everyday objects in museums and, when possible, reconstructing their original archaeological contexts. The authors (S. et al.) have taken to the Petrie Museum of Archaeology to analyze these typical, perhaps even mundane objects, which appear in nearly every Roman excavation in Egypt, and from them they have managed to produce a thorough – and thoroughly necessary – study of form, function, and social practice.

The volume contains no central argument. Its aim is rather to re-contextualize everyday objects that appear in the Petrie Museum *en masse*, seriate them, and study them using a functional approach in order to elucidate aspects of non-elite life during discrete life stages. The volume comprises two parts. The first part, encompassing Chapters 2 through 6, deals with artefacts related to dress, such as brooches, bracelets, hairpins, shoes, combs, and beads. Chapters 7 through 10 make up the volume's second part and deal specifically with domestic artefacts of daily use, such as objects related to textile production, children's toys, and sound-making objects (an interesting and surprisingly fruitful category). The volume ends with seven appendices dedicated to datasets for each type of object discussed in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10.

### **The objects in the Petrie Museum**

Before broaching the subject of the authors' method, it is useful to discuss the nature and constraints of their data. The Petrie Museum of Archaeology contains Roman and Late Roman objects from several sites in Egypt that were excavated by Flinders Petrie and his associates in the late 19th and early 20th c. Petrie and his associates were primarily focused on dynastic material, however, meaning that even when they collected Roman and Late Roman objects, they paid precious little attention to the archaeological contexts in which these objects, such as those excavated in Lahun and Gurob, appeared. Accordingly, the majority of objects chosen for analysis in Part I of the book were retrieved from burial excavations at Qau in the Fayyum that were undertaken in 1923–24 by Guy Brunton, an associate of Petrie who also worked at Mostagedda and Matmar and who “better recorded and published” the material (11).

The fragmentary (and typically messy) excavation data retained by the museum and the issues faced by the authors in reconstructing archaeological contexts are not unlike those for many legacy excavation data in other museums. S. et al. have shown that it is possible to make at least partial sense of these archives and to extract important conclusions. For example, in the case of excavations at Qau, the authors discovered through their analysis that “objects that were found together were kept together” (14), allowing them to be studied as groups with something approaching an archaeological context. Here lies a lesson for many museum collections: excavation data, though imperfect, can be useful if the limits and blind spots of archival records are understood. In fact, the issues the authors mention (for example, matching Brunton excavation numbers with the numbers assigned to groups of beads and reconciling documentation of graves) are similar to problems of other excavation legacy data. The authors' thorough approach to making sense of museum archival data is significantly more comprehensive than what has been done for other important

sites excavated in the early 20th c., such as Roman Karanis, arguably the most important excavated site of Roman Egypt, where although numerous publications have been produced regarding its papyri, architecture, and coins, surprisingly little to no attention has been paid, until recently, to reconstructing the archival data and contextualizing the small finds.<sup>1</sup> The authors are to be commended for squeezing out what little archaeological context could be wrought from the Petrie museum collections, and they provide a model for future museum archaeology.

### **A model for interpretative frameworks in future museum archaeology**

The authors employ two main interpretative frameworks for analyzing objects: Life Course Theory and Design Theory. Social archaeology, as defined by the authors, “foregrounds everyday life and social experience. The aim is not simply to document the types of objects that existed as components of daily living, but to understand how they functioned within society to achieve particular human goals” (3). Utilizing Life Course Theory within social archaeology, the “goals” that the authors pinpoint in the volume are essentially life stages: *menarche*, marriage, childhood, etc. The authors effectively maintain this theoretical framework throughout the book, and it serves as a solid foundation for the different types of objects they analyze.

The second interpretative framework, Design Theory, focuses on how the physical features of an object may be indicative of social practice. Beyond focusing on the production aspect of beads or dress objects, the emphasis shifts to physical clues that can pinpoint usage. Chapter 8 presents a potent example, where cross-hatched lines on finger distaffs appear to have been incised in order to increase grip on the tool. Wear on other parts of the object suggest repeated finger placements and, thus, the tool’s mode of use, which elucidates important social aspects of the object, such as the interaction between the individual and the object in the actual act of textile production (257).

Interpretative social analysis of such objects is not common in studies of Roman Egypt. Anna Boozer’s *At Home in Roman Egypt: A Social Archaeology*<sup>2</sup> was the most recent work of its kind to engage with Life Course Theory. Boozer studied objects according to how they fit within stages in the life course of an individual, and the authors rely heavily on her work both at a theoretical level and in practice; for instance, in looking at house B2 at Amheida for comparanda with material from the Petrie collection. Boozer’s analysis focuses on narratives where objects form an integral part but are not the only players in the histories she weaves. Boozer engages much more with the pitfalls of archaeological finds in Egypt.<sup>3</sup> S. et al., on the other hand, present case studies of how archaeologically contextualized objects may elucidate aspects of stages in the life of an individual, but their volume reads more like extended essays accompanying the catalogues of material. The underlying principle is that an object “represents moments of social action in

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<sup>1</sup> Gazda and Wilfong 2004. Even though this volume was published 19 years ago, the lack of discussion of its attempt to reconstruct archives or its attempt to give the reader an overview of the material available was a big omission by S. et al. Andrew Wilburn’s *Karanis Housing Project* (<http://karanishousingproject.org/map.html>) has also been using archival data to try to reconstruct the archaeological layers in different areas of the site.

<sup>2</sup> Boozer 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Boozer 2021, 9–16. See also Davoli 2011, 69.

which it has been involved” rather than something to be analyzed from a more abstract perspective (7).

A particularly salient example of the strengths of an interpretative social analysis is the study of objects associated with *menarche*, or a woman’s first menstruation, where jewelry and dress were commonly given to young women to demonstrate their sexual maturity. Placing these understudied objects within such an important, yet also common, life occurrence for women highlights the social role these objects had in daily life. Furthermore, a wide array of jewelry was not available to most non-elite women, thus the assumed sentimental value and importance of these items offers a glimpse into the daily life of the general population of Roman Egypt. The authors suggest that “daily social experience, in turn, can be diverse according to life course stages, and material culture contributes to this” (326).

The catalog of beads is a particular high point of the volume. It is useful, organized, and clear, and sets a new and badly needed standard for the analysis of beads – objects that are ubiquitous in the archaeological record, but which remain painfully understudied until now. Placing the catalog in the middle of a chapter renders it somewhat difficult to consult on the fly, but overall it is a great resource for archaeologists and scholars of Roman Egypt. More information on the materials and better photographs would have helped the reader as well. But to my knowledge there are few studies of beads or strings from Late Antique Egypt writ large, and none that are nearly this thorough or theoretically sophisticated.<sup>4</sup>

The authors were also wise in incorporating papyrological texts throughout their work, taking advantage of all the material available to historians and archaeologists of Roman Egypt. Throughout the book, examples illustrate how papyri shed light on the social role of archaeological material, though here I will limit myself to highlighting the discussion of basketry in Chapter 7 (219). Baskets are well known in the archaeological record of Egypt, whose arid conditions preserve organic material quite well, and there have been studies highlighting the anthropology of basket weaving in Egyptian societies.<sup>5</sup> Through the texts incorporated into the authors’ analysis here, however, the role of these objects as containers for transporting foodstuffs (*P.Col.* 8.225) and as presents for expectant mothers (*O.Florida* 14) comes to life. Again, contextualizing these objects relative to important social practices, such as childbirth, makes their importance almost tangible.

Objects discovered in funerary contexts dominate the book’s corpus, leading to a variable quality of archaeological interpretation due to the different composition of finds between tombs. For example, the authors deduce that the inclusion of different sizes and styles of shoes in tomb 1006 at Matmar, and the general absence of footwear in other tombs from Late Antique Egypt, make it clear that including shoes – and single shoes, at that – was likely an intentional funerary practice, one that dovetailed with Roman practices of “associating single shoes with death” (183). Building on this insight, the authors suggest that the funerary practice that they have deduced helps to explain another peculiarity of the archaeological record at Matmar, where numerous single, stray shoes were found across the site. To make a chain of logical deductions from graves

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<sup>4</sup> The numerous publications by J. Then-Obluska, who focuses heavily on Nubia, Meroe, and Egypt, which the authors incorporated extensively and included in the bibliography of the book, should be highlighted here.

<sup>5</sup> Wendrich 1999.

to normative funerary rites to ultimately explaining the pattern of archaeological preservation is an impressive feat, and indeed the author's analysis of shoes is remarkably rich and informative, particularly as it relates to methodological issues regarding the gendering of shoes (165). Nevertheless, the chapter remains scattered rather than comprehensive, attending to shoes as loci for analysis. In the end, I walked away with the impression that the authors were trying to fit as much information as possible into the chapter and struggled to tie together a more coherent narrative.

From the presentation of the shoe data, the reader learns about the museum provenance of the finds: some are from the Petrie Museum, others from the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum. Within Egypt, the authors traced the objects to five sites or, when site data was unavailable, more generally to "Egypt." Then the chapter jumps to decoration and types of shoes, including analysis and textual references to literary authors, and then to the deposition of shoes in Hawara, after which we are introduced to examples of shoe finds from tombs at Matmar, excavated by Brunton. The data from Matmar proves to be important for the authors, as I delineate above, but there is no overview of these excavations, and nor is a methodology for the retrieval of objects from tombs discussed (even though data from Matmar appears throughout the entire book), missing the opportunity for more archaeological discussion on the nature of the deposition. Nor does Brunton's 1948 analysis on the state of the tombs seem to be questioned. Are we sure this is a primary deposition based on Brunton's work? Could some of the tombs have been opened in antiquity? If so, how would the analysis change? The authors may have answers to these questions, and the answer may be "no." It is, nevertheless, important to ask, and given that the authors predicate so many conclusions about social and funerary practice on the burials, the discussion is warranted.

The occurrence of textile objects in graves, especially those of young girls, brings about obvious but interesting analyses; for example, a tomb at Hawara containing six wooden spindles with whorls attached shows the central role textile production had in the lives of matrons and married women. The authors touch upon fascinating aspects of the role of women in textile production, such as the association of Aphrodite and Mary as the matrons of textiles (258). This discussion of the cultural and religious world of textile tools, though rich in ideas and connections, has left very little space for the authors to discuss these religious themes to a greater extent. Other important aspects related to the materiality of textile production were also left aside. At the end of Chapter 8, for instance, we only get a couple of quick sentences on the spinning of the fibers themselves (261).

Overall, the case studies in Part II are well researched, though the whorl discussion, which touched upon fascinating points, was limited to only four pages. The scatter plot graphs could have been better fleshed out in the discussion; for example, in fig. 8.10, the weight of the whorls was plotted against material, showing the "trait of different designs for different weights more clearly" (244–45). There was not much interpretation of the origin of the designs themselves, but perhaps extensive discussion was not the authors' aim. If we think of this book as more of an introduction to thinking about how these objects could be analyzed beyond their physical descriptions, one can forgive the brevity of the analysis.

There were further opportunities for socio-economic analysis that could have been drawn from the analysis of whorls. We are not told, for example, what type of wood was utilized for the wooden whorls in the Petrie Museum. The authors mention the fact that studies were not done and quickly assume, based on the Louvre material, that



boxwood and olive wood could have been used. Erroneously, though, they identify both as imports, even though we have ample papyrological and archaeological evidence for the production of olive oil in Roman Egypt (240).

Third-century papyrological evidence from the Fayyum itself, where most of the Petrie material comes from, lists olive trees as one of the major crops grown in parts of the Arsinoite nome. The Heroninos Archive, belonging to a *phrontistes* in Theadelphia who worked on the estate of an Aurelius Appianus, makes frequent reference to the harvesting of olive groves, especially in nearby Euhemeria and also Dionysias.<sup>6</sup> Rathbone has estimated that the size of the harvest was considerable.<sup>7</sup> Earlier studies of *Olea europaea*, the type of olive grown in Egypt, identified major production centers starting in the Late Period (664–332 BCE) and continuing through the Roman in Siwa, Memphis, Fayyum, Oxyrhynchus, Hermopolis, Akhmim, Thebes, and Kharga Oasis at Ayn Manawir.<sup>8</sup> To this list the sites of Kellis and Trimithis in the Dakhleh Oasis can be added, especially after the frequent appearance of olives in the *Kellis Agricultural Account Book*.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, recent ceramic analyses of the ovoid vessel called “keg” in Trimithis also suggest intensive olive oil production in Dakhleh during the 3rd and 4th c. CE.<sup>10</sup> If it is olive wood being used in the whorls, it could therefore be evidence of local production of this textile implement, though acacia and other smaller trees are also possible sources.

In other places, greater familiarity with the economy of Roman Egypt would have forestalled interpretive errors. For example, questionable assumptions were made during the discussion of ivory whorls. Footnote 8 (241) states, “Arguably, this is less the case for Roman Egypt since it had access to North African elephants and hippopotami.” Most of the ivory probably came from further south in Africa and from lands as far away as India. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (4, 6, 7, 10, 16, 17) and the Muziris papyrus speak of the trade of this highly valuable product in different forms, and here I believe the authors might have missed a key opportunity to connect Egypt, as they did in the bead chapter, to the wider global trade network. Ivory itself is a very “social” object (241).<sup>11</sup> These errors in source material make the analysis of whorls seem particularly rushed, and one wonders if perhaps more thought could have been put into the socio-economic aspect of the objects, an important component of “social archaeology” studies.

What was strongly discussed was the variety of objects which were found together with the whorls: “five glass *unguentaria*, one alabaster phial, a toy bedstead, a small wooden table, a ceramic doll, four wooden boxes (one of which contained an iron spindle hook), a ceramic sphinx, two ceramic miniature vases, a basket containing a hair-net, two papyrus sandals, a wooden comb, and two wooden vases” (243). The appearance of these objects led Petrie to identify the interred individual as a female, and S. et al. have also interestingly hypothesized that given the importance of domestic textile making for married women, the

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<sup>6</sup> Rathbone 1991, 216.

<sup>7</sup> Rathbone 1991, 244–47.

<sup>8</sup> Newton et al. 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Bagnall 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Soto Marín 2019.

<sup>11</sup> See De Romanis 2020, 268–72 for a discussion of Indian and African Tusks. De Romanis (2014) furthermore talks of schidai, which he identified as unfinished tusks, and their wide availability on Indo-Roman trade routes.

materials in the tomb could represent a “starter kit” for sewing, representing the “unattained wedding” of the individual (244). This kind of analysis is where the authors’ work shines, guiding the reader not only through the archaeological record, but also through their studies of these contexts, creating empathy for the individual whose remains we encounter. This re-humanizing should not be taken for granted in archaeological studies, where we often forget it is people we are studying.

### The missing background of excavations

Several things would perhaps have made this book more “archaeological,” as implied by the title itself. The first is the background of the excavations. The authors discuss the issues with the reconstruction of the grave contexts (13–18), but as I mentioned before, Brunton’s conclusions and analysis could have benefitted from more discussion.

Material used to contextualize most objects came from a rather small archive – largely from Karanis and house B2 at Amheida, and less frequently from Kellis. House B2 at Amheida was properly and recently excavated by Boozer, who herself analyzed the objects using the same framework as the authors. In this regard, the material from Amheida provides solid comparanda, especially since it was excavated using 21st c. archaeological methods. The story of Karanis, whose objects feature heavily as comparanda, is different, and I think more analysis of the problems of the archaeology of the site would have been necessary to make the book truly useful as an archaeological study, which it is not at present. For example, the authors state that two comb pendants housed in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology were obtained from 3rd- to 5th-c. CE levels. This is a broad date range, which I am sure is correct since most of the later layers of the excavated structures have been historically dated to this period, and the layer data is very broad as well (247). The issue I have is again that there is no discussion of the blind spots in the archaeology of Karanis.

There are, in fact, many problems with the archaeological layers at Karanis. The site was excavated over the course of 11 years, from 1924 to 1935, but to date, no holistic analysis of the site has been published. More importantly, almost nothing has been published on the site’s small finds – the objects that would serve as true comparanda for the Petrie collections. Reports were published by Boak and Peterson in 1931 that cover the first four seasons of excavation, and the first three coin hoards, the temples, and the archaeobotanical material were published two years later by Boak, in 1933. Forty-six years later, in 1979, Husselman and Peterson published a volume dealing with the topography and architecture of the site, though the book was more of a summary of unpublished reports from the last few seasons of excavations.<sup>12</sup> The volume on coinage was published in 1964 by Haatvedt et al., contextualizing the coin hoards to the best of the authors’ ability within buildings of the site and the general layers but nothing more, and here again discussion of the series of dated contexts at Karanis was missing.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the lack of in-depth analysis of the layers and our partial documentation of how the site was excavated make these objects, housed in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, tricky to work with from an archaeological perspective. The authors are not at fault for the situation at Karanis, though

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<sup>12</sup> Van Minnen 1994, 227.

<sup>13</sup> Boak and Peterson 1931; Boak 1933; Husselman and Peterson 1979; Haatvedt et al. 1964.

some discussion of the issues with the site, given how often its objects are used for comparanda, would have been welcome.

I sympathize with the authors' desire to make this book accessible and not overly technical (though the degree of description and number of appendices make it clear that certain objects were prioritized in their analysis). Unfortunately, this aim seems to have come at the cost of more engagement with the archaeology of Roman and Late Roman Egypt. A particularly salient example occurs in the introduction to Part II of the book, where ceramics are discussed on pages 209–11 to talk about social practices that used quotidian objects, such as cooking and eating. The authors discuss the way in which soot in cooking wares is evocative of the practice of domestic cooking, yet I was surprised that for their comparanda they limited themselves to objects at the Kelsey and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, when there are numerous rich and recent publications of pottery available. Besides house B2 at Amheida, the corpus of ceramic publications for Roman Egypt is remarkably robust, and discussions of cooking based on soot, utilization of kitchen wares, and even imitation tableware and its socio-economic role have been widely published.<sup>14</sup> Certainly these archaeological publications are not as theoretically heavy, but the lack of engagement with actual published archaeological objects that can serve as important comparanda requires us to ask the question: to what extent does this volume really engage in archaeology beyond the analysis of objects that were unearthed by archaeologists? The discussion of *dolia* (212) and lamps (213) would have likewise been more robust had the many publications available for these two sets of objects been considered. The same oversight occurs in the conclusion to the book, where the authors briefly describe the global connections Egypt had with the rest of the Roman Empire as evidenced through the archaeological materials. Numerous studies on amphorae found in Alexandria and beyond should have been cited to show the degree of social and economic integration.<sup>15</sup> Even if wine or oil products were not the focus of the analysis, the trade routes these products traveled along were the ones bringing the people and the beads, ivory, shoes, etc. the authors discussed, and they are also the group of objects that have been archaeologically studied most thoroughly. The fact that in Late Antiquity Egypt shared for the first time the same coinage as the rest of the Mediterranean was not mentioned either, even though this could also have indicated integration.

Notwithstanding my (minor) criticisms, this book is a solid introduction to and analysis of small finds in Egypt, which often do not receive much scholarly attention. The authors provide a service to future generations of archaeologists excavating and analyzing these often-overlooked objects of daily life and present thought-provoking analyses of the social role these objects played in the daily life of individuals. Furthermore, they exemplify the rich usage of archival data from museums, setting an example of future avenues for curators, archaeologists, and art historians to navigate when analyzing these objects. The chapters discussing "Children's Material Culture" and "Sound-Making Objects" were particularly strong, both as introductions to their subjects and groups of objects and in their originality of research.

The breadth of the volume, however, means that discussion of its more interesting aspects remains limited. For example, the authors very briefly mention the fact that

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<sup>14</sup> See Ballet 2017; Caputo et al. 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Recently Şenol 2018; Dixneuf 2011.



the bracelets, discussed extensively in relation to female usage, could also have been worn by young male children “to reflect their status as more feminine than masculine at this life course stage, especially with regard to astrological beliefs in the rulership of feminine or masculine planets at different life course stages” (132). The reader gets a couple more sentences referencing a line in a hagiography of St. Theodore where a male saint wears bracelets, and then a brief mention of depictions from Egypt of male gods as young children wearing bracelets (Dionysius and Horus). Here lies a wonderful opportunity to analyze the gendering of the artefacts – beautifully done in the chapter on shoes – and the broader social implications thereof. Unfortunately, that is all the discussion that was left.

Upon finishing the book, I was left with a question: what was the volume trying to be? As published, its format straddled a divide between catalog and extended analysis. If it were intended to be a catalog, it would have paid to have been a bit more user friendly in order to serve as reference material. If analysis was the focus, the book required much more discussion and perhaps a scaling back of the number of groups of objects discussed to be able to be really thorough. My criticisms, I believe, could be a sign that the reader simply might have wanted more of the thought-provoking analyses we saw implemented. One wonders if maybe the authors attempted to do too much in one volume. I could see Part I and II more fully fleshed out into two separate volumes, though that might not have been the goal of the authors. Nevertheless, this book is a great contribution to the study of Roman and Late Antique Egypt, clearly showing how objects in museum collections, even when excavated under the different archaeological standards of the early 20th c., can shed light on the lived experiences of people in antiquity.

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*Journal of Roman Archaeology* 36 (2023), 598–604  
doi:10.1017/S1047759423000272

## Urban daily life in Late Antiquity

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LAVAN, L. 2020. *Public Space in the Late Antique City* (2 vols). Part 1: *Streets, Processions, Fora, Agorai, Macella, Shops*. Part 2: *Sites, Buildings, Dates*. Late Antique Archaeology (Supplementary Series) 5. Leiden: Brill. Part 1: Pp. xxiv + 624, figs. 130; Part 2: Pp. 1,072. ISBN 978-90-04-41372-6.

Studies on Late Antique urbanism have revealed impressive developments under the auspices of civic and ecclesiastical authorities who staged magisterial events within grand city spaces so as to showcase their leadership. Streets lined with colonnades fed into public plazas that were dominated by monuments honoring those holding power. The major Late Antique civic spaces of streets, markets, plazas, and commercial areas are the topics of Luke Lavan's (L.) extensively researched volumes consisting of a first part functioning as a monograph (vol. I) and a second part comprised of appendices, including a gazetteer (vol. II). His focus on public areas can be traced to an interest in daily life in its civic, outdoor manifestations, causing him to shift attention away from the private and domestic buildings of Late Antique cities. L. characterizes daily life in the public sphere by drawing upon evidence from hundreds of cities and towns in various regions, creating an overview of issues and trends, with the material and textual evidence aggregated for the purpose of painting the big picture. This examination of extensive archeological data from many sites, inserted here into a dialogue with textual sources,