

R.S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History (Approaching the Ancient World)*. Pp. viii + 145; 8 figs. London, New York: Routledge, 1995. £30.00 (Paper, £9.99). ISBN: 0 415 09376 (0415 09377 5 pbk)

It is always of interest when a major historian pauses to consider the nature of his field, its directions and philosophy. B.'s prominence among a group of historians working mainly with papyri and his productivity over the last decade make him ideally qualified for such a task. This work provides an explicit and valuable discussion of the methodology and historical philosophy behind his work and a clear vision of the discipline of the historian working with papyri.

B. emphasises the value of dealing as directly as possible with as many texts as possible. Of necessity, the historian working with papyri must be a specialist. In some ways, the recent development of a school of such historians has been in contrast to the traditional, essentially philological and technical study of papyri which has centred on editing and publishing texts. B. distances himself from this approach but, by stressing the importance of the linkage between editorial work and historical investigation, firmly places historians within the wider discipline of papyrology.

The traditional emphasis on texts, natural in a book on papyri, draws attention away from the context of the documentation. For the social historian, this lack of context for the textual material provides the single greatest challenge. The interpretative context for papyrologists is most often provided by the papyri themselves rather than the growing (but still inadequate) body of archaeological data or even the literary sources. B.'s own work has been extremely valuable here in establishing ways of quantifying the evidence and a central chapter of the book deals with this issue. B. summarises some of his work and subsequent debates on patterns of land ownership, demography and religious conversion. The process of quantification is a necessity given the number and disparate nature of the texts and offers obvious benefits when dealing with particular types of documents, such as census returns. However, the evidence may often be skewed in ways that cannot be assessed accurately and cannot be allowed for statistically or may simply not represent a 'real' social context. Yet, our evidence must be quantified to be assessed. Also, any quantification tends to presuppose the representative nature of the evidence and introduces spurious confidence, whatever the intentions of the historian. This is a problem at the heart of the debate on conversion where Wipszycka's doubts concerning B.'s linkage between nomenclature and religious affiliation and the 'certainties' of the measures can hardly be overcome by statistical means. Such issues will become an increasing problem as social and economic historians struggle with data even less suitable for quantification. B.'s discussion asserts a case but ultimately

fails to grapple with the fundamental issue of what the historian does when forced to work with masses of obviously imperfect data.

B. concentrates on 'theories of the middle range', holding to the view that there is no acceptable 'substantive theory of history' (p.3) and that a difference of approach affirms and celebrates the diversity of historians (p.5), though it becomes progressively clear that B. would align himself with the so-called *Annales* school, a school of thought which emphasises social materialism. B. describes this group as the 'cutting-edge [of] scholarship in twentieth-century historiography' and lauds their commitment to 'total history' (p.112). It is clear how his work contributes to this school with its concerns with the 'deep structures' of societies and synchronic analysis of the extended period. Indeed, many ancient social and economic historians would affiliate themselves with this school. This cultural enterprise is, however, only one strand of current historiography and historians deriving inspiration from Foucault and others and represented most clearly in the historiography of the ancient world by Peter Brown are asking different questions of their material and deriving answers less from quantification than cultural linkage and impressionistic treatments. B. does not face the challenges of this school or ask how papyri can contribute to their debates. The post-modern agenda is not easily addressed from papyrological data, but then neither, ultimately, is that of *Annales* school. Yet, these texts, these representations of people to the outside world should allow us access to their cultural world, even if we must reconstruct this world image by image and individual by individual, and even if the official nature of many of these texts presents substantial technical problems.

B. uses examples to illustrate what he regards as 'good practice' in the discipline and in so doing provides an accurate and useful snapshot of the work of a particular group of mainly British and American historians and makes the theoretical basis for their work explicit. This is a confident book, confident (justly) of the importance of the author within the discipline, confident of the approaches adopted, and confident of the direction of the discipline. But by concentrating on the 'theories of the middle range', B. avoids discussion of more fundamental issues. This not a manifesto for change and I doubt whether it will alter the way people write history from texts.

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