

Book Review

Chauveau, Michel. *Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*. Translated by David Lorton. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000.

For background on the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt, one could almost not do better than Michel Chauveau's *Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*. Using the latest or most accepted information, both archaeological and scholarly, Chauveau leads the reader through the entire breadth of the empire, from its beginnings as a satrapy of Alexander the Great's empire and Ptolemy I Soter's creation of a kingdom during the Successor Wars in the late 4th century B.C. to the fall of Cleopatra VII and Marc Anthony almost 300 years later. Using information from both the Greek and Egyptian populations, Chauveau does an admirable job in showing how the two societies co-existed, one immigrant and one native. The book is a brief overview of the social history of Egypt under Greek rule but concentrates less on the royal succession and the ideology of the ruling class.

Each chapter is a different section of society, both Greek and Egyptian. The first chapter is entirely the historical background of the ruling class and the politics driving the nation between the years 323 B.C. and 30 B.C. Despite the wars between Alexander's successors and their descendants, fighting over the broken empire, and the internal conflicts of the Ptolemaic family, Egypt seemed to have long periods of peace and short periods of war. Some of the rulers were competent, such as Ptolemy II Philadelphos, while others were not so quick in the political arena, such as Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, who after fighting with his brother for years, seemed to have trouble managing his wives. These women fought each other to promote their individual offspring into becoming the heir apparent and thus becoming the next Ptolemaic king.

In the second chapter, titled "The Greek Pharaohs and Their Subjects," Chauveau approaches the Ptolemies' desire to be accepted as Greeks and Egyptians as well as the aspects and personas they took on to merge the two cultures together successfully. This is a touchy subject for many Ptolemaic scholars, and hypotheses are plentiful regarding many aspects of the interaction between the Ptolemies and their subjects, both native and immigrant. Chauveau skillfully takes the centerline of any touchy areas, giving the basic background and facts and shying away from anything controversial. One interesting turn taken by the author is the fact that he covers royal duties and mentions the involvement of the clergy, both Egyptian and Greek, with the Ptolemaic regime. To adequately maintain a hold on Egyptian natives, the Ptolemies had to take on Egyptian personae and thus become more acceptable to the native Egyptians. The Ptolemies offered protection and restoration of the temples, delved into philanthropy, visited the far reaching provinces (not done by their Persian predecessors), and intended to immerse themselves somewhat into Egypt culture in order to maintain allegiance. While there was some resistance, and Chauveau notes them, it was rarely successful for any long periods of time.

The following chapters regarding the cities, countryside, societies, and economy provide good background information on how the Ptolemies ruled Egypt. Like the Persians before and the Romans after, the Ptolemies essentially left the internal structure alone. Egypt had been self-sufficient for thousands of years without much internal strife. Its legal and judicial systems were good, public projects and private industry were still well-maintained, and the bureaucracy was not half as corrupt as many other civilizations were, so there was no need for "improvements". There were some changes made, however. The Faiyum, a swamp-like section of land located

east of Alexandria, had been drained and became a settlement for non-Egyptians as well as Egyptians who previously had not been landowners. Many of these individuals were military and the land was part of their pension for the services they had contributed to the state. The balance between the native and immigrant cultures was often confusing; sometimes it was not known who was an Egyptian and who was a Greek, so integrated was the society in some areas. A person may have had Greek parents and his siblings may have chosen to remain Greek, but one man could claim to be Egyptian and fall under Egyptian legal rulings. Ethnic status mattered little in a world where people were judged by the culture they ascribed to. The economic status of the peasants and the culture clashes figure prominently in the third and fourth chapters.

The fifth chapter deals primarily with the priests and the temples. The chapter covers both Greek and Egyptian aspects of religiosity in Egypt, both city and rural society, dealing specifically with Alexandria, which was a large cult center for the Greek population. In his coverage of the background on ceremonies and practices of the Egyptian priesthood, including the belief surrounding the Apis Bull, Chauveau also delves into the economies of the temples. Oracles and oaths of office are also covered. Chauveau uses specific examples to illustrate his points regarding the mix of the cultures in Egypt. Ptolemaios, the eldest son of a Macedonian soldier, had a good enough education that he learned to write Greek, retreated from his farm in the Faiyum south to Memphis, and joined a small temple dedicated to the Canaanite goddess, Astarte. It should be noted that as Greek he became a follower of a "barbarian" goddess, but even more remarkable, Ptolemaios was known for dream portents. His dream premonitions were sent everywhere, even to the Ptolemaic Pharaoh and his wife. Some of these portends indicated that current scandals were preludes to disaster for Egypt. Ptolemaios, a Macedonian turned Egyptian, is an excellent example of the cultural and religious mix between the populations that inhabited Egypt at that time.

The final three chapters of the book deal with funerary arrangements, military organization, and language. They are good sources of background to the culture being dealt with. The complexity of all three subjects continues to bring home the diversity of the population and yet the unity of the two main cultures. The Greeks adopted some funerary practices of the Egyptians. Egyptian priests embalmed Alexander the Great, and many of the Ptolemaic pharaohs followed the example of Alexander. Egyptians continued the embalming practices of the nobility and upper classes, and the embalming of animals such as baboons and ibises was at its height during the Greek occupation of Egypt.

The military was the most complex of the three. Ethnicity as a Greek, Egyptian, or Persian meant little up to a point. Depending on what the individual considered himself was the ethnicity he was to be regarded as. Two brothers born to a Greek man and an Egyptian woman may have one Greek name and one Egyptian, but what they used in their legal documents and military dispatches was the ethnicity that they were considered. So one brother, who used his Egyptian name, was Egyptian, while his brother, who used a Greek name, was legally considered Greek. The Greek would have the ability to get land in the Faiyum for his services in the army; the Egyptian would probably not. Soldiers could also deal heavily in business both abroad and at home, taking advantage of their mobility to find newer business opportunities.

The language was just as complex as the people. Many who were of two different backgrounds learned a variety of languages. Multi-lingual people were not unusual, but normal. Writing and reading required an education, which was to have been achieved by attending a scribe school, which was an enormous and difficult undertaking, but well worth it as it was the way to move up from the peasant class. To be able to read and write not only in Egyptian hieroglyphics and demotic, but also in Greek, Persian, Canaanite, and later Latin was a

tremendous social and caste boost. One could do more than become a scribe with such education. Literature, science, rhetoric, and medicine were Greek aspects of the culture that were highly prized. The Greek obsession with rhetoric and education fused into Egyptian, Persian, and Roman culture.

Chauveau's book is an excellent source for the amateur historian just starting out. It gives an excellent background to the cultures and societies, good jumping points to continue ideas of research, but does not bring out any new information that is not published in more respected journals. It is an overview book, though not a textbook by any means. Even being translated from its French text, the writing retains its personable storytelling style. The individual examples in the chapters bring home the points admirably, but sometimes seem too vague or leave the reader wanting a bit more clarification. The graphics in the book are black and white; some are a bit difficult to see in much detail, and none of them are anything that cannot be found in many other books on the subject of Greek Egypt. There is no bibliography, but the notes adequately provide the information needed for further research or clarification. The list of abbreviations regarding journals and texts the author used is nice as well, but a bibliography would have served better than the notes and list of abbreviations. The index is well put together and useful for looking up information, as many books of this type rarely have a decent index. What piqued my interest the most was the small glossary of terms included. Many authors take for granted that the reader knows what a *nome*, *cleruch*, or *aroura* is, not explaining it for the sake of "laymen" reading their text. A *nome* is an Egyptian administrative district, similar to the American concept of a county within a state. A *cleruch* is a soldier who had the revenue of a tract of land granted by the king, which technically he was not to have, but exploited through a third party. An *aroura* is a land measurement equal to roughly .681 acres, or 100 square cubits.

Michel Chauveau is a former member of the *Institut Francais d'Archaeologie Orientale* in Cairo and is the director of studies at the *L'ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris. This makes his credentials both as an educator and a scholar very credible. His translator, David Lorton, does not at first seem to have as good of credentials as Chauveau. The book states that he is an Egyptologist in Baltimore, Maryland. A quick search on the Internet brought up Norton's personal web page, which lists a very impressive bibliography and scholarly background.

In summation, *Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra* gives an excellent overview of Ptolemaic Egypt. It is a bit confusing why "age of Cleopatra" is in the title, as the book does not center on the famous Cleopatra VII and would mislead anyone browsing in a bookstore into thinking the book was concentrating on Cleopatra VII or her reign. Instead the book focuses on her family's dynasty, their influences upon the society around them, and that society's influences upon them.

Valancy Gilliam