

Terry G. Wilfong, *Women of Jeme. Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt* (New Texts from Ancient Cultures). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. xxvi + 192 pp., 4 plates. ISBN 0 472 09612 5 (cloth); 0 472 06612 9 (pbk).

This excellent book provides a new case study in women's history. Its main source is the documentary evidence of Jeme, a settlement which grew up on the walls of the former mortuary temple of Ramses III in Medinet Habu on the west bank of the Nile opposite the famous temples of Thebes. Comprising more than one hundred papyri and several thousand ostraca from the late

6th to the late 8th century, this unique material is well-known among coptologists,<sup>1</sup> but has scarcely been noticed by papyrologists, arabists and historians, since, unlike other Coptic documentary dossiers and archives, this one is recorded almost entirely in Coptic. Thus Wilfong's well-written study is extremely welcome as a valuable contribution to our knowledge of late antique and early Islamic Egypt.

The arrangement of *Women of Jeme* is as simple as it is fitting. The long Preface (xi-xxi), though disguised as a personal statement, is a concise review of recent trends in matters like archaeology, papyrology, and historical gender studies. The subject proper is dealt with in five chapters framed by an introduction and an epilogue. The Introduction: The Town of Jeme in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries CE (1-22) provides useful information about the history of the site of Jeme and its environment from New Kingdom times onwards. We learn about the structures of the late antique settlement (the 'Coptic town' of the book's subtitle), its material culture, its inhabitants and their principal occupations, from the results of the excavations carried out in the 20s and 30s of the twentieth century. Here the author shows expertise, in particular close familiarity both with the details of the excavations and with all aspects of the finds. Already here we see how the author weighs all the evidence cautiously, aware both of the intriguing gaps even in well-preserved materials and of the methodological implications (as well as complications) involved in interpreting sources and drawing reliable conclusions from them.

The first chapter: Saints, Sinners, and Women of Jeme: Literary Ideals and Documentary Realities (23-46) leaves the general archaeological and socio-historical point of view behind and turns to a gender-focused perspective. In order to evaluate the documentary evidence correctly, W. starts aptly by sketching a background of (male) conceptualization about women and womanhood as provided by literary evidence. As chief witness, W. has chosen Pisentius, a holy man who became bishop of Koptos (about 20 miles north of Jeme) in 599 CE. Pisentius' opinion is ascertained from his only surviving Coptic homily (fortunately treating, amongst other things, the behaviour of women) as well as from other Coptic and Arabic hagiographical sources. W.'s choice of informant provides one contemporary concept, probably the predominant (male) one, of womanhood current in the Jeme environment; that is why W.'s tempting picture showing women of Jeme in the original audience of Pisentius' homily rings true, even if it is not real. Pisentius' example becomes all the more credible when we consult a second, documentary dossier connected to the same person, which contains mainly letters and petitions begging for intervention, support or advice in dealing with problems (it is striking how many concern married people and marriage agreements, formed or to be formed, etc.). Both (literary) ideals and (documentary) realities of women's behaviour thus become extremely visible through two kinds (or levels) of social interaction of one person.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The main text editions are W.E. Crum and G. Steindorff, *Koptische Rechtsurkunden des achten Jahrhunderts aus Djême (Theben)*, Leipzig 1912 (P.KRU), W.E. Crum, *Coptic Ostraca*, London 1902 (O.Crum), A.A. Schiller, *Ten Coptic Legal Texts*, New York 1932 (P.CLT); E. Stefanski and M. Lichtheim, *Coptic Ostraca from Medinet Habu*, OIP 71, Chicago 1952 (O.Medin.HabuCopt.) and W.C. Till, *Die koptischen Ostraka der Papyrussammlung der Oesterreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, Wien 1960 (O.Vindob.Copt.).

<sup>2</sup> W. remarks (39): 'Indeed, Pisentius is perhaps the only author of Late Antique Egypt represented by examples of his literary output, biography, and documentary evidence', though he himself mentions Dioscorus of Aphrodito, who lacks a biography, as a further example. Recently, a similar case of at least two types of evidence has been argued by C. Zuckerman, 'The Hapless Recruit Psois and the Mighty Anchorite, Apa John', *BSAP* 32 (1995) 183-94. He brings together convincingly Coptic and Greek letters forming the documentary dossier of a late fourth-century anchorite and holy man called Apa John with historiographical dossiers about the anchorite Johannes of Lykopolis as attested by Palladius, Johannes Cassianus, Sozomen, Rufinus, and Augustine.



The second chapter: Elizabeth and an Abigaia or Two: Some Women of Jeme (47-68) and the third: Elizabeth and Abigaia in Context: Women's Lives in Family and Community (69-94) lead us *in medias res*, focusing on the world of women of Jeme through the lens of an archive relating to two Jemean women: Elizabeth and her niece Abigaia. This archive contains five documents dealing with an intricate series of legal transactions showing the family members, acting, sometimes in concert but occasionally in dispute with each other, over several generations. The second chapter gives primary information on this family archive.<sup>3</sup> Here we find not only reliable translations of large parts of the documents but also information about family connections, on the structure of the house dealt with in the documents as reconstructed from the documents themselves and as suggested by archaeological comparison, on relevant legal matters and, finally, on the formulaic lay-out of such Coptic records.

The third chapter evaluates and interprets these primary data by embedding them in the whole documentary and archaeological evidence from Jeme. Here the different topics implicated in or touched on by the documents are studied with an eye to their impact on women's lives: e.g. the use of family terminology, childbirth and childhood, education, marriage and divorce, sexual life, mortality and widowhood, death, burial and funerary offerings, public life and officials, duties and taxes. W. summarizes (93): 'excluded from certain official functions and obligations that were imposed from outside the community, women were not excluded from acting in extrafamilial roles within the community. Indeed, we see the women of Jeme participating in the life of their community in other, often very visibly public, ways as well ... . In some way, their participation in the religious life of the community parallels their involvements in the secular sphere: although barred from official positions in the religious hierarchy, the women of Jeme found many significant unofficial roles in the religious life of their community'. This chapter is one of the book's highlights, clearly demonstrating the enormous capacity of documentary sources to provide detailed and vivid historical knowledge, if read, interpreted and contextualized skillfully.

The fourth chapter: Donors, Monastics, Worshippers: Women's Lives and Religion (95-116) follows a significant trail picked up already in the preceding chapter: the striking fact that 'private lives and public acts of women at Jeme were both intimately connected to another aspect of Jemean life: religion' (95). Such phenomena as various sorts of pious donations made by women (from donations of mural paintings in a church up to the famous child-donations<sup>4</sup>) and women's monasticism are collected and evaluated here as well as testimonies to some significant roles borne by women in connection with men's monasticism, often but not always based on family relationships. A further main topic is women's participation in local worship and festivals and in domestic magical practices.

The fifth chapter: Koloje the Moneylender and Other Women in the Economy of Jeme (117-49) deals with women's activities in local crafts and commercial life. The starting point here is given by a female moneylender's archive which W. has already dealt with elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> This archive is formed mainly by a number of short documents of the 'acknowledgement of debt' type usually written on potsherds (at least in the Theban area). Since this type belongs to those Coptic

<sup>3</sup> This is the archive which the legal historian A.A. Schiller has dealt with, 'A Family Archive from Jeme', in *Studi in onore di Vincenzo Arangio-Ruiz*, Naples 1952, 325-75, but of course, given the long period of productive research since 1952, W. is able to make improvements on all levels (reading, translation and interpretation).

<sup>4</sup> For the latter, see most recently T.S. Richter, 'Rechtssemantik und forensische Rhetorik. Untersuchungen zu Wortschatz, Stil und Grammatik der Sprache koptischer Rechtsurkunden', *Kanobos* 3, Leipzig 2002, 136-41.

<sup>5</sup> T.G. Wilfong, 'The Archive of a Family of Moneylenders from Jême', in *BSAC* 27 (1990), 169-81.



formularies not hitherto studied in detail,<sup>6</sup> W.'s remarks on recurrent business details concerning loan and repayment are especially interesting and highly welcome. A prominent occupation like that of the female moneylender Koloje is one of the most striking examples of a woman's powerful role in a local economy.<sup>7</sup> But some other, if more modest, features are also mentioned, like lists of women's property (so-called *eidos n-shime* 'women's things'), matrimonial property mentioned in marriage contracts and related documents,<sup>8</sup> the frequent occurrence of women as both lessors and tenants of house leases,<sup>9</sup> and women's activities in crafts and trade. W. concludes the last chapter with: 'It seems clear that women controlled somewhat less wealth than men, but their resources were still a significant factor in the economy of Jeme. Their ownership and transfer of property, their activity in moneylending, and, to a lesser extent, their involvement in trades and crafts combined to make them a considerable force in the fiscal life of Jeme' (144).

The Epilogue: Harriet Martineau at Jeme, 1846 (151-8) draws a line from the final abandonment of the late antique settlement of Jeme about 800 CE to the arrival of the first travellers with archaeological interests in the mid-nineteenth century. Among these we meet Harriet Martineau, an early feminist who made some disappointed comments about how the pharaonic temple was covered by the modest Christian-period structures of Medinet Habu. W.'s closing reflection is devoted to her: 'it is hard to imagine that Harriet Martineau would have passed such a disdainful

<sup>6</sup> For the Demotic loans see J.G. Manning, 'Demotic Papyri', in R. Westbrook and R. Ritner (edd.), *Security for Debt in Ancient Near Eastern Law*, CHANE 9, Leiden, Boston, Koeln 2001, 307-26. Tomasz Markiewicz is preparing a thesis in Warsaw on this material. For the Greek documents see H.-A. Rupprecht, *Untersuchungen zum Darlehen im Recht der graeko-ägyptischen Papyri*, Muenchen 1967 and H. Preissner, *Das verzinsliche und das zinslose Darlehen in den byzantinischen Papyri des 6./7. Jahrhunderts*, Erlangen 1956.

<sup>7</sup> The name of the archive's female protagonist Koloje is discussed by W. on p. 30: 'It exists in both masculine and feminine forms that are nearly the same; the feminine adds a terminal -e in most cases'; and later 'The name finds its way into Greek as Kolluthos, which is attested only for men'. This is not quite correct. The Greek feminine counterpart is Kollauthis (Preisigke, *Personennamen* 178), a form which casts some more light on the masculine/feminine paradigm underlying the Coptic forms of the name. In fact, the etymological feminine counterpart to the masculine form Kollouj seems to be Kllauj(e), attested at least once in the Old Coptic Schmidt papyrus, obviously following a well-known pattern of names like Amoun (m.) / Amaune (f.), Karour (m.) / Karaure (f.) or by the noun *kour* / *kauri* 'dumb' (m./f.). To the best of my knowledge, feminine forms with the second vowel -o- or -ô- are restricted to texts from southern Upper Egypt — an observation which fits into the Achmimoid change of stressed *au* to *ô*, like in *maau* 'mother' Achmimic *mo*, or *nau* 'to see' Achmimic *no*. In fact, in the Theban dialect the only (if adequate) distinction between male and female name forms seems to be the ending -e.

<sup>8</sup> Discussing the Coptic term *shaat*, W. rightly states it is a gift given to the bride by the groom or his parents (p. 138 and n. 39). The only (though literary) instance contradicting this opinion is in the Coptic version of Sententiae (Pseudo-)Menandri, *Koptisches Sammelbuch* No. 269: 'A bride not possessing a *shaat* (in Greek *ἀπροίκος* 'dowryless') does not have candour (*parrêsia*)', cf. the entry *shat*, *xxaat* in Richter, 'Rechtsschmantik und forensische Rhetorik', 272.

<sup>9</sup> Already in 1913, A. Berger, 'Wohnungsmiete und Verwandtes in den graeko-ägyptischen Papyri', *Zeitschrift fuer vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft* 29 (1913), 321-415, had observed (p. 355): 'Es ist auffallend, wie oft in den Mietverträge Frauen, sowohl als Vermieterinnen als auch als Mieterinnen ... auftreten'. Cf. also H. Mueller, 'Untersuchungen zur ΜΙΣΘΩΣΙΣ von Gebäuden im Recht der Graeco-ägyptischen Papyri', *Erlanger Juristische Abhandlungen* 33, Koeln/Berlin/Bonn/Muenchen 1985, 102-9. This is also true of the Coptic leases of houses not only from Thebes but in general, see T.S. Richter, 'Koptische Mietverträge ueber Gebaeude und Teile von Gebaeuden', *JJP* 32 (2002), point 4.1. For the Theban lease contract O.Crum Ad. 15, probably (like O.Hall 73/2) originating from Hermonthis see the reedition by T.S. Richter, 'O.Crum Ad. 15 and the Emergence of Arabic Words in Coptic Legal Documents', in Acts of the Colloquium 'Documentary Evidence and the History of Early Islamic Egypt', Cairo 23-25 March 2002' (forthcoming).

verdict over the remains of Jeme had she been aware of the prominence and activities of the women in the town' (158).

The book includes instructive figures and plans, plates, a glossary, an extensive and well-chosen bibliography (165-83), and an index of quotations. To conclude: *Women of Jeme* is highly to be recommended. Combining archaeological expertise, subtle textual analysis and cautious adoption of recent methods and models provided by social history, W. succeeds perfectly in giving a vivid idea of different women's realities and lives in a late antique and early Islamic Egyptian settlement.

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