

PETER VAN MINNEN

HOUSE-TO-HOUSE ENQUIRIES:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO ROMAN KARANIS

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HOUSE-TO-HOUSE ENQUIRIES: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO ROMAN KARANIS¹

This article proposes a new approach to a Roman site that combines archaeological and textual data from individual houses. It should be of interest to archaeologists, ancient historians, Egyptologists, and papyrologists.

It may seem perverse to return to a site excavated and subsequently abandoned by American archaeologists almost sixty years ago. But in the era of post-processual archaeology it may meet with fewer objections than it did in the era of processual archaeology with its almost scientific standards set to processing archaeological data. True, in the past sixty years archaeological techniques and methodology have progressed far beyond those employed by the earlier excavators. But post-modern archaeology with its focus on meaning and interpretation, in short on hermeneutics,² may be more lenient when it comes to a site where the material basis for meaningful interpretation, i.e., the context for the establishment of meaning, is as promising as it is in the case of Karanis.³

i. The University of Michigan excavations at Karanis

Karanis is an ancient Egyptian town on the edge of the desert in the northern part of the Fayum, the fertile oasis to the West of the Nile valley just south of modern Cairo. University of Michigan archaeologists conducted excavations at this site from 1924 until 1935 attracted as they were by the reports of earlier excavators and the steady stream of papyri from Karanis that surfaced on the antiquities market. In the early 20's the University of Michigan had started a research program in papyrology under the inspiration of Francis Willey Kelsey (1858-1927).⁴ Before he died Kelsey initiated the Near East expedition that was to lead a team of University of Michigan archaeologists to Karanis. The stated aim of the excavations was to provide archaeological evidence relevant to the interpretation of the papyri.⁵

¹Expanded version of a paper given at the Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America at New Orleans, December 30, 1992. For standard abbreviations used for papyrus editions see J.F. Oates a.o., *Checklist of Editions of Greek and Latin Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets* (4th ed., Atlanta 1992). All dates are A.D.

I would like to thank my Michigan colleagues S.E. Alcock and T. Gagos for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I could not have written it without the cooperation of R. Meador-Woodruff of the Kelsey Museum of Mediterranean Archaeology, Ann Arbor, who helped me with everything I needed to know about the excavations of the University of Michigan at Karanis.

²For a statement of position see I. Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge 1991). In many respects Hodder's position is a vindication of R.G. Collingwood's culture-historical archaeology.

³My insistence on a post-modern strategy here and elsewhere in this paper should be enough to distinguish my approach from the more traditional one suggested for Karanis by A.K. Bowman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1990), 240.

⁴On Kelsey see W.H. Worrell, in: *Dictionary of American Biography* 10 (New York 1933), 313-314.

⁵See E.M. Husselman, *Karanis: Excavations of the University of Michigan in Egypt, 1928-1935: Topography and Architecture* (Ann Arbor 1979), 1. This book is a summary of the unpublished report on the excavations compiled by E.E. Peterson, which covers only the last seven seasons of excavations. The four earlier seasons are covered by A.E.R. Boak & E.E. Peterson, *Karanis: Topographical and Architectural Report of Excavations during the Seasons 1924-28* (Ann Arbor 1931). See also A.E.R. Boak ed., *Karanis:*

The excavations resulted in a rich and highly diversified harvest of archaeological data—potentially the most important data for any ancient town available at present. Unfortunately, a final report on the excavations at Karanis was never written, and the sheer bulk of the evidence, which consists of both objects and texts, remains formidable. In the past sixty years a number of studies on Karanis have been published that attempt to come to terms with the evidence. The majority of these studies deal with only one type of object and discuss—or simply list—all the objects of this type found during the excavations.⁶ As we shall see later on, this fairly common analytical approach is unnecessary and, in the case of Karanis, especially harmful.⁷ In my view the most acceptable study is a social and economic history of Roman Karanis based exclusively on texts.⁸

Although the excavations were pioneering at the time, the records kept during the digging do not come up to present-day standards. That is a general characteristic of older archaeological excavations and should not by itself deter us from tackling Karanis at all. Archaeological techniques and methodology tend to progress beyond those used by the original excavators fairly rapidly. It is therefore preferable that a site be published almost immediately after a dig. Such was the case with the excavations in Egypt undertaken by Flinders Petrie in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Petrie published the results of these excavations almost instantly. Other excavations are now buried in notebooks that are heavily dated by their techniques and methodology. This goes a long way to explain why archaeologists are more interested in undertaking new excavations than in publishing old ones and why, as a consequence, so many sites, especially in Egypt, have been excavated, but never published. It is the irony of archaeology that, unless a site is published promptly, even today's excavations may end up in a drawer, because posterity will find fault with their techniques and methodologies. It is a good idea to

The Temples, Coin Hoards, Botanical and Zoölogical Reports, Seasons 1924-1931 (Ann Arbor 1933). E.K. Gazda ed., *Karanis, An Egyptian Town in Roman Times: Discoveries of the University of Michigan Expedition to Egypt (1924-1935)* (Ann Arbor 1983) is a more popular account. More recent excavations by Egyptian archaeologists have not been published in full, but see S.A.A. el-Nassery, G. Wagner & G. Castel, "Un grand bain gréco-romain à Karanis. Fouilles de l'Université du Caire (1972-75)," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 76 (1976), 231-275.

⁶L. Wilson, *Ancient Textiles from Egypt in the University of Michigan Collection* (Ann Arbor 1933); D.B. Harden, *Roman Glass from Karanis Found by the University of Michigan Archaeological Expedition in Egypt, 1924-29* (Ann Arbor 1936); R.A. Haatvedt & E.E. Peterson, *Coins from Karanis: The University of Michigan Excavations, 1924-1935* (E.M. Husselman ed., Ann Arbor 1964); L.A. Shier, *Terracotta Lamps from Karanis, Egypt: Excavations of the University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor 1978); B. Johnson, *Pottery from Karanis: Excavations of the University of Michigan* (Ann Arbor 1981); M.L. Allen, *The Terracotta Figurines from Karanis: A Study of Technique, Style and Chronology of Fayoumic Coroplastics 1-2* (Ann Arbor 1985); and E.L. Higashi, *Conical Glass Vessels from Karanis: Function and Meaning in a Pagan/Christian Context in Rural Egypt 1-2* (Ann Arbor 1990). E.K. Gazda, *Guardians of the Nile: Sculptures from Karanis in the Fayoum (c. 250 BC - AD 450)* (Ann Arbor 1978) is again a more popular account.

⁷Its shortcomings have been pointed out before. See, e.g., for Pompeii A. Wallace-Hadrill, "The social structure of the Roman house," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 56 (1988), 43-97 at pp. 48-49, mentioning only a few exceptions in his note 20.

⁸H. Geremek, *Karanis. Communauté rurale de l'Égypte romaine au IIe - IIIe siècle de notre ère* (Wrocław 1969). Examples of analytical studies based exclusively on papyri are C. Wessely, "Karanis und Soknopaiu Nesos, Studien zur Geschichte antiker Cultur- und Personenverhältnisse," *Denkschriften der philosophisch-historischen Klasse der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 47.4 (1902) and M.E. Larsen, *The Officials of Karanis (27 B.C. - 337 A.D.): A Contribution to the Study of Local Government in Egypt under Roman Rule* (Ann Arbor 1954).

adopt a policy not to excavate a site in an otherwise well excavated, but poorly published area unless there is some immediate danger to the site itself. The by and large unpublished records for the excavations at Karanis are kept in the Kelsey Museum of Mediterranean Archaeology in Ann Arbor. The salvaged objects—a fraction of what was excavated—are now divided between Ann Arbor and Cairo (along with various provincial museums in Egypt), which presents a logistic problem to the present-day archaeologist.

The excavations at Karanis became more sophisticated with time, and the excavators made remarkable progress in archaeological techniques and documentation. The records for the first seasons are very clumsy, and only for the later seasons detailed maps and plans are available. At an early stage the excavated structures, mostly houses, were labelled according to the level in which they were found, A being the top level and B-E being the lower levels.⁹ This, so the excavators thought, would facilitate cross-dating objects found in the same level in various houses, and it would ultimately enable them to reconstruct the entire site in the successive stages of its history. This turned out to be a mistake. Often houses assigned to levels B and C are strictly contemporary. Evidently houses were rebuilt at moments that varied from street to street, from block to block, from house to house.

ii. The quality and potential of the archaeological data:
the house-by-house approach

The question that poses itself is whether the evidence from Karanis is good enough to be useful for modern archaeologists. It is a common fear that the data are flawed beyond repair, and that especially the chronology is in total disarray. The question of dating the movable objects, especially the pottery, has for a long time dominated research on Karanis. The following quotation illustrates this very well:¹⁰

The papyri from Karanis, considered in relation to the particular areas in which they were found, indicate quite clearly that in general they can contribute little of significance with respect to the dating of archaeological finds, and that this little must be used with the utmost caution. The attempt to draw well-reasoned and well-substantiated conclusions from the mass of disjointed fragments is also doomed to failure. Nevertheless the close study of the bits and pieces from a limited area does frequently enable us to assemble scattered fragments of single documents, and sometimes to establish relationships between them, as in C123. The duplication of names, the lack of chronological data, the contradictory evidence, and the wide gaps in essential information necessitate, however, the greatest restraint in the interpretation and evaluation of the material.

Indeed the possibility that the movable objects, including papyri, found in a particular house were deposited there, not by the original owners, but by others using this particular site as a dump for their own waste cannot be excluded out of hand. But the quotation just given comes unexpectedly at the end of an otherwise rather convincing discussion that successfully attempts to reconstruct several archives of original homeowners from Karanis by using the papyri found in particular houses. As I have come to realize through a study of several other houses, of which I will give an illustration later on, neither the dating problem nor the problem of primary deposit

⁹There does not seem to be a single spot in the excavated part of Karanis where all five levels are attested. Sometimes the excavators would call the top level they excavated B rather than A on the assumption that the original top level had been totally destroyed before they arrived.

¹⁰E.M. Husselman, *Papyri from Karanis: Third Series* (Cleveland 1971), 9.

versus secondary deposit, or of primary refuse versus secondary refuse, is unsurmountable.¹¹ In my view, which is at present no more than an impression based on published and some unpublished materials, most of the excavated houses at Karanis do not present a thoroughly mixed bag of objects of various periods at all. This can easily be demonstrated with the aid of the papyri, which I have been able to study in more detail. Those found in houses with a good number of papyri are almost always contemporary. If they can be precisely dated, they often come from a fairly restricted period of time, say 35 years. Occasionally we find a text of much later date in a well-defined group of earlier texts. This can easily be accounted for by reference to the rather underdeveloped digging and documentation techniques used by the excavators, or by considering the possibility that the surface of the site was looted before the excavations started.¹² Bits and pieces from a higher level may have found their way to a lower level without being detected as intruders by the excavators. Also levels that should have been kept separate during the digging may have been recorded as a single level. With a minimal staff of professional archaeologists and a large work force of hundreds of local peasants and their children the chances of mistakes were very high indeed. The amazing thing is that the detectable intruders in the chronology are so few, as far as we can tell from the papyri. Evidently, notwithstanding their rather crude digging techniques the excavators were very successful in keeping material remains apart that did not belong to the same level and therefore not to the same period.

The existing data do not allow us to reconstruct a stratigraphy of the site according to present-day archaeological standards. A stratigraphy in greater detail could easily have eliminated the occasional odd-man-out in the present data. Our control of the site is not ideal, and in a few cases we will have to resort to a *non liquet*, e.g. when it comes to dating a particular level on the basis of a mere two papyri that happen to be widely divergent in date. But it seems to make sense to try to make the best out of what we have and to accept the simple division in levels as a given. Then it seems rather promising to regard these levels as corresponding to the cycles of habitation of a limited area occupied by a successive line of houses built on top of each other, and to use the papyri found in the various levels for dating the other movable objects in these levels. After all, more than 95% of the papyri can be fairly accurately dated on palaeographical or internal grounds—unlike the so-called diagnostic pottery, which makes up only a small percentage of all pottery found in a normal dig in Egypt.

We should also keep in mind that Greco-Roman Egypt was a fairly developed society characterized by continuity in occupancy. There were highly structured forms of homeownership.¹³ This continuity in occupancy implies that the often needed repairs of the mud brick houses were carried out promptly, or that the sand blown in from the desert was removed quickly—or not at all. In the latter case houses were often entirely rebuilt at no great expense.¹⁴ The older house

¹¹Clear cases of primary deposits from Karanis are already listed by Husselman in the book referred to in the previous note (p. 1). For a modern perspective see M.B. Schiffer, *Formation Processes of the Archaeological Record* (Albuquerque 1987), especially pp. 295-296, where some of the characteristics of secondary deposits are discussed.

¹²Thus the central part of the town was completely destroyed by Egyptian peasants in search of fertilizer at the end of the last and the beginning of the present century.

¹³See e.g. H. Maehler, "Häuser und ihre Bewohner im Fayûm in der Kaiserzeit," in: *Das römisch-byzantinische Ägypten* (Mainz 1983), 119-137; G. Husson, *Oikia. Le vocabulaire de la maison privée en Égypte d'après les papyrus grecs* (Paris 1983); and for comparison with modern Egypt J. Lozach & G. Hug, *L'habitat rural en Égypte* (Cairo 1930).

¹⁴See from a comparative perspective C.M. Cameron, "Structure abandonment in villages," in: *Archaeological Method and Theory* 3 (Tucson 1991), 155-194, especially p. 170.

was levelled and its various material remains were squashed underneath the new house. It is unlikely that the refuse was dumped on an open space somewhere down the street, because in Roman Egypt even such open spaces were not without an owner. These so-called *psiloi topoi* were the object of sales and disputes as much as proper houses.

It is important to note that the movable objects squashed under the new house tend to reflect the life cycle of the last occupants only. Conceivably the house itself was used by more than one generation of a family or even by more than one family over a longer period of time. But apart from a few stray objects and texts the vast majority of the movable objects, including the papyri, will have belonged to the last occupants of the house, even if they had inherited some of them from their parents or acquired them from the previous owners in some other way. It therefore seems worthwhile to direct our attention to these movable objects as a group, because they were left by the very family that lived in a particular house before it was abandoned by them. There is little to be done about the fact that we can no longer distinguish between the various layers that were formed during the final event in the existence of their house, i.e., its levelling.

I assume that the occupation of a house in Karanis lasted no more than two generations. After that the time had come to level the old house and build a new house on top of it. This was presumably dictated by the short life span of the mud brick houses themselves. A period of about 70 years separates the earliest movable objects (read: papyri) from a house in one level from those in the level immediately above it. This is admittedly no more than an impression based on the papyri from the houses that I have reviewed in more detail. But if it is accepted as a working hypothesis it at least suggests that the dramatic date of the movable objects of a particular house in a particular level does indeed tend to converge towards the end of the occupation of that house. The first generation that lived in a particular house may thus hardly be represented in the movable objects. If the same family occupied the house for a second generation the papyri would at least mention some older family members in some way, e.g. through patronymics. But sometimes the original owners must have sold their house to another family after one generation, and it is known from papyri recording the sale of a house that they did that for a fact. In that case the first occupants have become invisible for us. Anyhow, from the perspective of social archaeology it is important that we can approach Karanis family by family, so to speak, and that we can trace the composition of the actual families that owned the houses in this town at least some of the time, reconstruct a bit of the life cycle of the various members of these families, and make tentative statements about their social status.

This is in my view the major result of the house-by-house approach. It is now time to contrast this approach with the only alternative open to us: skepticism. Let us consider the latter alternative first. If we do not use the house as the basic unit of study, because for some reason we fear that the movable objects from a house may have been deposited elsewhere, we have no other option than to use the entire site as our reference point. What is in that case the chance of linking movable objects from one level with a particular family? If originally there were a thousand houses in each level and each level was preserved intact, there is a chance of one in a thousand of a true link.¹⁵ In reality the chance is infinitesimal because the movable objects of one site may have been dispersed over several other sites. Thus, objects found in a particular house in a particular level have a very slight or virtually non-existing chance of belonging together. This is hardly an attractive approach, but skeptics may think it is nevertheless realistic.

Let us therefore have a look at the house-by-house approach. Let us assume that on average only four levels were excavated. These would represent four different houses built on top of each

¹⁵The chance is even smaller if there were a lot more houses.

other. Each house was originally used by a family for two generations or maybe by two families. The same family could have outlived the old house and built a new one on the same spot, but we also know that families moved within Karanis. Anyhow, let us assume the worst possible scenario: when the last house was built the previous levels were all uprooted, then, when Karanis was finally abandoned, looters started to ransack the material remains, without regard of the proper stratigraphy of course, and the archaeologists did the same in the 20's and 30's. Even so, the movable objects that were eventually unearthed have a minimum 25% chance of belonging to a particular family that last owned a house in one of the four levels. In a very optimistic scenario the various levels would have been left intact. This would raise the chance of linking movable objects from one level with a particular family to 100%. Surely, there cannot be a more attractive approach than this. But is it realistic?

We can make a reasonable choice between the two approaches just outlined thanks to one type of object: the papyri found in a particular house in a particular level. In very many cases such papyri do belong together and constitute dossiers relating to a particular family and even personal archives in the true sense of the word. The inevitable conclusion therefore is that it is not only more attractive, but also more according to the facts to approach Karanis house by house. Two major concerns for present-day contextual archaeologists are also taken care of at the same time, viz. integration and meaning.

iii. Integration and meaning in Karanis: the family-by-family approach

Integration of archaeological data of different type and character is often impossible to achieve through lack of data. Even where the data are plentiful integration may not take place for various reasons. Scholarship relating to Karanis in the past sixty years is a case in point. The various types of objects were assigned to scholars of various disciplines who, as far as we can tell, did little in the way of communicating with one another. They studied the objects assigned to them in a vacuum—for reasons we no longer accept, as I have just shown. Recently various efforts have been undertaken by classical archaeologists dealing with other well excavated sites, such as Ostia and Pompeii, to approach houses as the basic unit of study and to integrate the various data.¹⁶

Meaning in archaeology centers on the individual agents responsible for the archaeological record rather than on some norm, process, or “structure” that supposedly generated things the way they are. Asking for meaning is asking questions such as: is this a house or did this structure have some other purpose? Who chose to build it? Who decided to make the objects found in the house? Who used them and for what purpose? And so on.¹⁷ In the case of Karanis the existing data allow us to formulate tentative answers to such questions. With the help of papyri the owners of the structures I have identified as houses can be fleshed out as individuals and families.

It seems a helpful extension of the current approach to meaning in archaeology to regard families as the major agent in the formation of the archaeological record. This would go a long way to correct the gender bias in archaeological studies. Many objects found in Karanis were used predominantly by women, but the main point is that the majority of the structures and the objects found in them were *demonstrably* used and owned by men and women alike. There is hardly room for a male oriented approach to Karanis. The fact that the last part of this paper deals with a house identified as “the house of Socrates” should not be a cause for alarm. As we shall see, the

¹⁶See, e.g., J.S. Boersma, *Amoenissima civitas. Block V.ii at Ostia: Description and Analysis of its Visible Remains* (Assen 1985). For Pompeii see the article by Wallace-Hadrill referred to in note 7.

¹⁷For this see again the book by I. Hodder referred to in note 2.

name is merely a matter of convenience. Socrates' papers are preserved in such quantities that an extensive reconstruction of his life and to a lesser extent that of his family is possible. As a papyrologist I naturally focused on the papers of Socrates. However, just down the street from his house the house of a woman named Taesis (or Taesion) was located (house 1 in the B level). Unfortunately few papyri were found in her house, which was about the size of that of Socrates. I would invite an archaeologist to attempt an interdisciplinary approach to the house of Taesis.¹⁸

The family-by-family approach also goes a long way to correct the age bias in archaeological studies. Unlike adults—predominantly males—children can rarely be documented as agents in the archaeological record except in cemeteries. In Karanis the situation is entirely different. No cemeteries were excavated, but in almost all the houses various toys and dolls were unearthed. Some of them are quite interesting in their own right. Given the current popularity of studies about children and childhood in the ancient world more interest in the children from Karanis and their toys and dolls should be forthcoming. The evidence for these children is much better than anywhere else in the ancient world. With the aid of the papyri found in a particular house we are in a position to *identify* the children that once played with the toys and dolls found in the same house.

Karanis is a special case. Elsewhere it is often impossible to identify the agents in the archaeological record. Often we can do no more than to admit that there were agents who had the option to do the things that have left traces in the record. But in the case of Karanis we have an eloquent source of information on individual people, viz. texts on papyrus and, to a lesser degree, texts on potsherds.¹⁹ This presents not a small problem for archaeologists who are not used to having to literally *read* the ancient records. There seems no way out of this problem but intensive cooperation with papyrologists.

The presence of texts in Karanis is a great advantage. It also reminds us of the fact that most historical archaeology is muted by the absence of texts. Without at least some documents relating to and identifying the majority of the population an in-depth archaeology of the kind I have set out for Karanis is not possible. More general approaches to the archaeology of the ancient world are therefore unavoidable elsewhere.²⁰ I may refer here to the approach first advocated by pre-historical archaeologists, viz. settlement archaeology and the reconstruction of “human landscapes” through field surveys.²¹ This approach provides us with insights into certain aspects of ancient life, such as the constraints on the economy and the population, in other words normative and structural aspects. These have a bearing on, but do not exhaust, the options of the original agents. I personally do not believe that the general always holds precedence over the particular. Anyhow, the new approach to Karanis could well provide a complementary perspective on the ancient world, the more so since we are in a position to approach Karanis also in a more general way.

Although the texts invite us, so to speak, to reconstruct the whole range of individual “agents” in Karanis, this does not in itself preclude wider generalization and extrapolation of our findings, and these will ultimately have to be part of any truly historical study of the site. The diversity itself can be extrapolated, first from the excavated part of Karanis to Roman Karanis as a

¹⁸For some details on house B1 see Boak & Petersen in the book referred to in note 5 (pp. 9-20).

¹⁹Most of these so-called ostraca are tax receipts and therefore singularly uninformative.

²⁰It has been suggested for Graeco-Roman Egypt in an unpublished paper by D.W. Rathbone.

²¹For the cutting edge in settlement archaeology see J.F. Cherry, J.L. Davis & E. Mantzourani, *Landscape Archaeology as Long-Term History: Northern Keos in the Cycladic Islands from Earliest Settlement until Modern Times* (Los Angeles 1991), and G. Barker & J. Lloyd eds., *Roman Landscapes: Archaeological Survey in the Mediterranean Region* (London 1991).

whole, then from Karanis to other villages in the Fayum, then from there to other parts of Roman Egypt, and so on with a decreasing level of plausibility. To extrapolate through time is likewise possible, although we should allow for changes in the *longue durée*. To show what can be done with Karanis I will first give an example of this more general approach and suggest ways in which the material from Karanis can be brought to bear on some of the current issues in Roman archaeology. From the start it should be clear that all this will be highly tentative, because the material from the whole site has never been digested. My impressions are also not those of a professional archaeologist, but I hope they will inspire some real work on Karanis. Next I will present an example of the house-by-house approach to demonstrate its potential. In dealing with a large number of papyri found in a particular house I am in my natural element as a papyrologist.

iv. Houses and households: sampling Karanis and Pompeii

We know thousands of individuals from Roman Karanis in the second, third and early fourth century thanks to papyri. If the total population that lived in Karanis through about seven generations was as much as 100,000—published estimates for the population of Karanis would suggest no more than 25,000, but that is far too conservative²²—we still know a larger part of its population than of any other town before the early modern period. From the textual data a mixed population of Egyptians, Greco-Egyptians and Romano-Egyptians emerges.²³ Karanis was a town with a high number of veterans who had acquired Roman citizenship through service in the army, and recruits sent private letters from all over the Roman world to their families back home. It is important to note that this tends to put Karanis in a different class from the other towns in the Fayum we know so well through papyri: Tebtynis, Theadelphia and nearby Philadelphia. It seems to have been a little less of a typical Egyptian peasant village and a little more of a Roman town with a large number of moderately wealthy inhabitants who were no peasants. It should therefore be interesting to look at Karanis from a comparative perspective.

It was only when I saw the aerial photo of Karanis (Taf. Xa)²⁴ that I became aware of Karanis as an entity, just like Pompeii, and not just as the location of a number of individual houses. As it happens, not only the size of the built-up area of Karanis is about the same as that of Pompeii (60 ha for Karanis as against 65 ha for Pompeii), but also the impression of the layout of the streets and the *insulae* is remarkably similar. There is no detectable plan underlying the jigsaw puzzle, and the houses come in all kinds of shapes and sizes just as in Pompeii. For limited parts of Karanis the excavators have provided detailed maps to aid the reading of the aerial photo. These I have used to calculate the size of some of the houses and to establish the number of rooms in them. There is a good number of larger houses, suggesting the presence of precisely the kind of moderately wealthy inhabitants we have detected in the textual evidence. We have to bear in mind that smaller houses are often more difficult to trace in the archaeological record, and they may

²²See A.E.R. Boak, “The population of Roman and early Byzantine Karanis,” *Historia* 4 (1955), 157-162 and “Egypt and the plague of Marcus Aurelius,” *Historia* 8 (1959), 248-250. The basis for Boak’s calculations has been demolished by T. Gagos in an unpublished paper. See also note 95 below for the suggestion that we may have to double Boak’s figures to start with.

²³In about the middle of the second century, after the Jewish revolt that decimated the Jewish element in the population of Egypt at large, there was only one adult Jewish male on 1,093 money taxpayers in Karanis. This fact is derived from a papyrus that was not excavated by the University of Michigan. See the introduction to P.Ryl. IV 594.

²⁴Taken by the British Air Force during the excavations (Kelsey Museum Photo Archives 5.7900). The plate is much reduced from the original I used in the Kelsey Museum. Note the clear boundary between the cultivated area and the desert. The town does not occupy cultivable land.

also have made less of an impression on me in reading the maps. Anyhow, it seems worthwhile to attempt a comparison of the houses and the number of rooms in Karanis and Pompeii before addressing some of the other general issues involved in comparing the two sites, the more so since the study of houses in Pompeii has advanced considerably in the past few years.²⁵

Let me first give a brief indication of the rather tentative reconstruction of Pompeian housing that has emerged so far. The total number of houses in Pompeii in the first century may have been as low as 1,200-1,300. Substantial areas were used for public buildings and public space, and some areas within the walls may have been devoted to some form of horticulture. For the population of Pompeii a moderate figure of 10,000 rather than the traditional 20,000 may have to be employed—this is of course a mere hypothesis. The lower figure suggests an average of 7.7-8.3 inhabitants per house. This seems to square neatly with the average number of rooms in Pompeian houses, 7.5, and suggests that the rate of occupancy was about 1 person per room. Especially in the larger houses the larger number of rooms may have been used by the same people for different functions, and this may go some way to render this very low rate of occupancy—seemingly unparalleled before modern times—acceptable.²⁶ Anyhow, the elasticity of the number of rooms is smaller than that of the size of the house, viz. in a house three times as big there will be only twice the number of rooms, etc., because the rooms will be bigger too.²⁷

I will now try to give a similar overview for Karanis. Readers cannot fail to note the enormous difference between the meticulous analysis carried out for Pompeii and my impressionistic figures for Karanis. The databases for the two towns, a sample of less than 200 houses from two different areas within each town, are comparable in quantity only, not in quality, although the Pompeian figures are also based on maps. I have used the same definition of a house and a room as in Pompeii: the presence of a door marks the boundary of a house²⁸ and the presence of a recognizable “entrance” rather than a mere passage marks the boundary of a room.²⁹ Sometimes a door is found within the same structure, which must have been occupied by more than one family. In that case the structure counts as two houses. The total number of houses in Karanis at the time of greatest prosperity in the second century³⁰ must have been much larger than in Pompeii. As a reasonable working hypothesis I would propose 3,000 houses. This is based on the following observations. In the excavated residential areas the average number of houses that

²⁵Notably by A. Wallace-Hadrill. See, apart from the article referred to in note 7, especially his “Houses and households: sampling Pompeii and Herculaneum,” in: B. Rawson ed., *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (Canberra & Oxford 1991), 191-227 and his “The social spread of Roman luxury: sampling Pompeii and Herculaneum,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 58 (1990), 145-192. I have not found much use yet for his “Elites and trade in the Roman town,” in: J.W. Rich & A. Wallace-Hadrill eds., *City and Country in the Ancient World* (London & New York 1991), 241-272.

²⁶To be honest it should be pointed out that it would make the average occupancy rate per room even lower if there were a lot of houses with a second floor.

²⁷See table 9.2 in Wallace-Hadrill, “Houses and households” and table 1 in Wallace-Hadrill, “The social spread of Roman luxury,” both referred to in note 25.

²⁸See Wallace-Hadrill, “The social spread of Roman luxury” (referred to in note 25), 157-158.

²⁹See Wallace-Hadrill, “The social spread of Roman luxury” (referred to in note 25), 161-162.

³⁰Even then a number of houses must have been unoccupied. But the same goes for Pompeii, and for the sake of comparison it seems best to disregard them altogether. Note also that the areas on the east and the west of the town were apparently used for only one level of houses. These must have been built at the time when the population peaked in the second century. They have not been excavated, but they are included in my estimate of the built-up area at the time of greatest prosperity.

fit in half a hectare³¹ number is just over 50. It is unlikely that the University of Michigan archaeologists excavated slums, so this figure may be biased towards the bigger houses. To establish how much of Karanis was used for houses I can at present do little more than to apply the Pompeian index: the 1,200-1,300 houses there take up only half the size of the entire site. For Karanis I therefore use 30 hectares as the total area occupied by houses. Multiplying this figure by 100, the number of houses per hectare, leads to a minimum of 3,000 houses. It should be clear that the two figures used to arrive at this estimate are themselves minimum figures. I do not see as much public space or as many public buildings in Karanis as in Pompeii. Nor do the papyri suggest much more horticulture within the boundaries of the town than in Pompeii.

The number of people in Karanis at the height of its development may have been 12,000-15,000.³² If we divide this number by the number of houses we arrive at an average of 4-5 people per house. This is two thirds the Pompeian figure or less and seems to put Karanis in a different class of town from Pompeii altogether. If we take the average size of a house in Karanis into account, this discrepancy becomes even more urgent. If, as I have calculated, there are more than 100 houses to a hectare in Karanis, this implies an average size about one third the Pompeian size (say, about 90 m² as against about 270 m²). However, the number of people per house in Karanis seems to coincide with the average number of rooms per house (4-5 rooms)³³ just as in Pompeii. Now, if we limit ourselves to the houses of similar size in Pompeii, the quartile with an average size of 108 m², the average number of rooms comes very close to that in Karanis: 4.7³⁴ as against 4-5 rooms. This suggests that living conditions in the two towns were at once similar and different. There was one room per person in both towns, but on average the rooms were twice as large in Pompeii as in Karanis.³⁵ The main reason for this difference was the presence of a considerable number of larger houses (read: wealthier people) in Pompeii. But the majority of the population of Pompeii lived very much like the population of Karanis.

To apply these results to our view of Karanis at large we have to confront them with the evidence on houses and households in papyri. The latter is a thorny subject.³⁶ Rather than trying to solve every problem in a single article I will make some preliminary observations based on the existing literature.³⁷ What needs to be stressed first is the correspondence between the average size of a house in Karanis and the average size attested in other towns in the Fayum and in papyri

³¹The squares on the maps measure about 70 x 70 m. These squares I used in calculating the number of houses. Apart from the sketch map of area G I have heavily relied on the much better maps of the area to the east excavated in the later years.

³²See note 22 for the source of this figure.

³³For this only the maps of the later excavated area were used.

³⁴See table 2 in Wallace-Hadrill, "The social spread of Roman luxury," referred to in note 25.

³⁵Note that in the calculations for Pompeii as well as in my calculations for Karanis no account is taken of second floors. A good number of houses with a second and even a third floor were excavated in the very areas on which I base my calculations. The effect of adding a second floor to all these calculations is briefly as follows: either the space per person or the number of inhabitants needs to be doubled. I rather favour the first option.

³⁶In Roman Egypt a household is a mere administrative unit. Those who belong to different households, but nevertheless live in the confines of a single house are often related and should therefore be treated as an extended family rather than as so many distinct households. See briefly D.W. Hobson, "House and household in Roman Egypt," *Yale Classical Studies* 28 (1985), 211-229, at pp. 222-223.

³⁷Most germane to the questions I am addressing here is the article by Hobson referred to in the previous note.

in general. Some scholars operate with an average of only 60 m² per house in these towns.³⁸ But if we add some extra space for courtyards and passage ways, which I have included in the figure for Karanis, it is not hard to see that houses in Karanis were on average not much bigger than elsewhere in the Fayum.

From a substantial census register from first-century Philadelphia the average number of adult males per household in this town has been established—it is a little more than 2.³⁹ Since the number of households per house can also be calculated—it is more than 1.5—we can establish the number of people per house as well. If we multiply the number of adult males by 2.85 we arrive at a total of about 9 people per house.⁴⁰ This is about twice the figure I arrived at for Karanis above. Of course that figure may have to be raised if a higher estimate for the total population of Karanis is applied. But to bring the evidence from Karanis in line with that of Philadelphia we would have to double the population figure for Karanis from 12,000-15,000 to 27,000. I suggest that this is unlikely. The comparatively low number of people per house in Karanis suggests there was a marked difference between Karanis and other towns in the Fayum. Although, as we have seen, Karanis resembled the other towns in the Fayum in the average size of its houses, it resembled Pompeii in the number of people per room. It seems best to end my reconstruction of the broader questions relating to housing in Karanis by noting this discrepancy.

v. An example of analysis: the house of Socrates

To proceed with more positive evidence and as a test case for the importance of studying Karanis house by house I would like to take a closer look at one particular house. I have chosen house B17 (house 17 in the B level) because that house was excavated in an early phase of the excavations. This means that the records kept by the excavators are relatively simple and easy to use for a non-specialist. Also the number of papyri found in the house is extremely large, about 200 fragments. This number may become smaller as fragments are joined. Among the fragments is only one text that is so obviously later in date than the rest that I have discarded it as an unimportant intruder. The rest of the texts all seem to fall in about the middle of the second century.⁴¹ Very few fragments that obviously belong to the ones in B17 were found in the adjacent house B18 and on the street BS1 that runs in front of B17. This minor displacement of fragments was most likely caused by looters. The papyri were found in a relatively high level in the debris inside B17 and could easily have been disturbed by superficial ransacking. It is also conceivable that the fragments were displaced during the excavations, e.g., by a gush of wind.⁴²

³⁸This is Hobson's figure based on house sizes mentioned in papyri and actual house sizes in Soknopaiou Nesos (see her article referred to in note 36, pp. 215-217). In both cases the sample is very small.

³⁹Again by Hobson in the article referred to in note 36 (pp. 218-221).

⁴⁰Because Hobson in the article referred to in note 36 (pp. 219-220) uses 3.5 as the multiplier, her figures are slightly inflated. I use 2.85 on the advice of B.W. Frier.

⁴¹One seemingly earlier text, a will, is in fact a copy made for some special purpose at a much later date, a fact not noted by the editor, P.J. Sijpesteijn, "Three papyri in the University of Michigan papyrus collection," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 22 (1985), 327 (for the text see now SB XVIII 13308). I would not hesitate to date the text in the second century.

⁴²This is no special pleading. The films shot during the excavations often show the effect the wind had on the excavations.

The general area where house B17 was located is known as area G (see fig. 1, p. 238).⁴³ Taf. Xb and XIa illustrate this area from different angles. In the first shot⁴⁴ taken from the south-west house B17 is just visible as the low structure in the background to the extreme left. Next to it in the picture and more towards the middle its neighbor, house B2, is visible. Between the two houses and running through the middle of the picture is street BS2, which ran from north to south. The other shot⁴⁵ taken from the west again shows house B2, this time as the high structure in the background to the right. House B17 is the lower structure immediately in front of it. Through the middle of the picture runs street BS1, which ran from west to east. Taf. XIb, XIIa and XIIb are three shots from the inside of house B17 as it was being excavated. The first shot⁴⁶ shows room F in the process of being excavated. In the other shots⁴⁷ room E is already partly cleared to ground level. I was unable to find out what—if anything—the excavators found when they removed the lid of the pot sunk in the floor of the room. In rooms E and F all the papyri and most of the other movable objects were found.

The photography of the excavations and the extensive film footage are quite impressive, and they are, together with the notebooks of the photographer, a major source of information of immense value in dealing with specific questions relating to houses excavated in Karanis. They provide information that is often lacking in the accounts of the excavators themselves. Moreover, they portray the people who really did the digging during the excavations: the men, women, and children of neighboring Egyptian villages. They were directly involved in recovering an important part of their own heritage. The parallel between the formation of the archaeological record of an ancient town—by men, women, and children alike—and its recovery in modern times forces itself on us.

Unfortunately little can be said about the layout of house B17. No ground plan exists and the position and relative size of its rooms (distinguished by the excavators as rooms A through G) can no longer be ascertained from the photos. As a mere curiosity I record the fact that in one of the rooms of the house part of a bolting arrangement for a door was found.⁴⁸ We have no idea where the door led to. On the basis of the sketch plan of area G (see fig. 3, below p. 243) I would put the size of the house at 120 m². This accords well with the number of rooms. B17 was one of the larger houses in Karanis, a cut above the average at least. The suggestion seems not far-fetched that at some point seven people were living in the house occupying the seven rooms distinguished by the excavators. Who were these people?

The main reason for taking a closer look at B17 is the fact that in this case we can come up with a very precise answer to this question. To start with the major character in the texts found in the house: this is a comparatively well-known figure, Socrates the collector of money taxes, who has even been the subject of a recent study.⁴⁹ That study was undertaken without a clue about the exact findspot of the texts, but the author arrived at about the same reconstruction of the personal archive of, and the wider dossier relating to, Socrates as I do. This mutual confirmation is particu-

⁴³Plan I in the book by Boak & Peterson referred to in note 5. I have added area G myself.

⁴⁴Kelsey Museum Photo Archives 5.2161 (taken by G.R. Swain).

⁴⁵Kelsey Museum Photo Archives 5.2381 (taken by G.R. Swain).

⁴⁶Kelsey Museum Photo Archives 5.2134 (taken by G.R. Swain).

⁴⁷Kelsey Museum Photo Archives 5.2137 and 5.2141 (both taken by G.R. Swain).

⁴⁸Excavation label 26-B17G-L. It did not find its way to the Kelsey Museum and its present whereabouts is unknown.

⁴⁹S. Strassi Zaccaria, "Prosopografia e incarichi amministrativi a Karanis nel II sec. d.C. Proposte interpretative," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 85 (1991), 245-262.

larly welcome. But the fact that the purely papyrological reconstruction abounded with uncertainties, and that these uncertainties are *removed* by taking the archaeological findspot into account, suggests that from now on Michigan papyri from Karanis should be published with full discussion of the archaeological context. The author of the above-mentioned study was keenly aware of this:⁵⁰

Un buon contributo alle nostre conoscenze potrebbe inoltre venire dalla possibilità di risalire in modo più preciso all'origine dei documenti presi in esame. I documenti di cui conosciamo i contesti archeologici di provenienza sono però soltanto quelli dell'archivio di Gaius Iulius Sabinus e di Gaius Iulius Apollinarius, cui si aggiunge P.Mich. III 169, mentre ignoriamo da dove esattamente provengono gli altri.

The last statement is not quite true. At the back of the three serial editions of Michigan papyri from Karanis some information about the exact findspot is given.⁵¹ This kind of information is however not provided in publications of single documents from Karanis. Some of these were published without any indication of provenance whatsoever. I have commented elsewhere⁵² on what Louis Robert would have called a *véritable sabotage géographique*.⁵³

(a) *A contextual reading of the textual data*

In the reconstruction that follows I rely on both published and unpublished texts from B17. Full documentation and publication of the unpublished material can only be attempted elsewhere.⁵⁴ Socrates is without doubt the protagonist of the texts found in the house. Other family members are mentioned too, but there is sufficient reason to believe that they only appear in the texts because of Socrates. Basing myself on an examination of all the papyri from B17 accessible to me I can state that they do constitute a primary deposit rather than a mixed bag of documents of all sorts. Where the addressee of private letters is identified by name they are directed to Socrates and no one else.⁵⁵ Other private documents are directly linked to Socrates as well.⁵⁶ A few personal tax receipts for payments by Socrates for himself⁵⁷ or as the representative

⁵⁰Strassi Zaccaria in the article referred to in the previous note (p. 260).

⁵¹H.C. Youtie & O.M. Pearl, *Papyri and Ostraca from Karanis* (Ann Arbor 1944); H.C. Youtie & J.G. Winter, *Papyri and Ostraca from Karanis, Second Series* (Ann Arbor 1951); and the volume edited by Husselman referred to in note 10. In L. Amundsen, *Greek Ostraca in the University of Michigan Collection* (Ann Arbor 1935) the information is given in the header of each text. Amundsen also explains the correct way to read the excavation labels on pp. xviii-xix.

⁵²See my "Another look at O.Mich. I 126," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 29 (1992), 169-171.

⁵³See L. Robert, *Noms indigènes dans l'Asie-Mineure gréco-romaine* (Paris 1963), 204.

⁵⁴For details on the published texts see the discussion of Strassi Zaccaria in the article referred to in note 49. To the texts mentioning Socrates, but not found in his house, should now be added SB XVI 12798 of 145, a receipt issued in the name of Socrates and the other *πράκτορες ἀργυρικῶν* of Karanis by Socrates' colleague Dios.

⁵⁵P.Mich. VIII 506-507; P.Mich. inv.no. 4796a (unpublished); and P.Mich. VIII 505. The latter was found on the street BS1 in front of B17.

⁵⁶P.Mich. IX 564, a lease dated to 150. In this text a villager offers Socrates to sublease the small date palm grove Socrates himself leased from the government as a *κληροῦχος*. See also the draft of a petition written by Socrates himself mentioned in the next section.

⁵⁷Including P.Mich. VI 419 of 162. Strassi Zaccaria in the article referred to in note 49 (p. 250) tries to remove this text, a so-called penthemeros certificate for work on the embankments issued to Socrates, from the dossier, but it was found in his house along with the other text she mentions (SB VI 9433 of 163),

of others⁵⁸ have also been found in his house. All texts but one can be dated within the period 135-171. A likely assumption is that Socrates died shortly after the date of the last text. The latest document, which is dated to 185,⁵⁹ does not mention Socrates, but is nevertheless concerned with collectors of money taxes. As is clear from the evidence we have, Socrates was not the only member of his family who acted as collector of money taxes in Karanis in the second century. It is important to note that the office of tax collector in Roman Egypt was a so-called liturgy, performed by the wealthier members of a community and operated out of their own homes. Socrates must have been such a well-to-do inhabitant of Karanis, and it is likely that the other members of his family performed similar liturgies for the same reason. As we shall see, they were allowed to charge taxpayers for their services. Let me first give a tentative family tree (see Fig. 2).

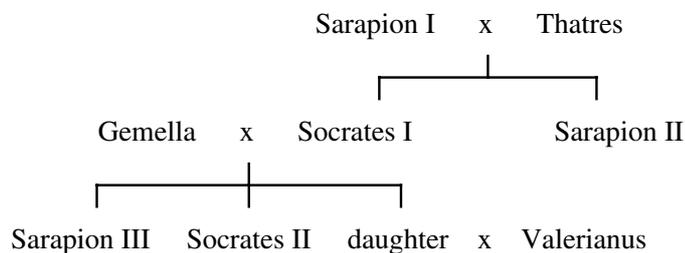


Fig. 2: Family tree of the occupants of house B17

Socrates' father Sarapion I is not mentioned as still alive in any of the documents found in B17, but his mother Thatres is mentioned as such once in a private letter addressed by a woman named Artemis to Socrates.⁶⁰ Presumably she survived her (much) older husband by several years and lived with one of her sons, Socrates. Socrates' brother Sarapion II does not occur in the texts found in B17, but he may be known from other texts as one of the leading *sitologoi* in charge of the public granaries of Karanis.⁶¹ His house must have been somewhere else. Socrates' probable "wife" Gemella does not occur in the texts found in B17 for a reason that may be connected with the circumstances under which their twin sons were born. In a Latin birth certificate of 145 found elsewhere in area G these two sons are apparently registered by an adult male relative of Gemella as being born *ex incerto patre*. As a Roman citizen she could not openly claim Socrates as the father of her children, and as a matter of fact she may not have lived with him at all.⁶² Socrates'

a receipt for taxes paid in kind by Socrates on public land belonging to Ptolemais Nea. P.Mich. VI 419 might mention the name of Socrates' grandfather (Reml- ?), but the text is far from clear.

⁵⁸SB VI 9263 of 152, again a so-called penthemeros certificate for work on the embankments.

⁵⁹P.Mich. IX 536. In this curious text the village scribe of Psenyris Ano requests that assistants to the πράκτορες ἀργυρικῶν be nominated διὰ τὸ μὴ ἐξαρκεῖν περὶ τὴν ἀπαίτησιν τῶν λημμάτων πλείστων ὄντων (ll. 6-8: "because they cannot manage the collection of the very abundant revenues"). This sheds an interesting light on the daily work of Socrates himself, discussed in the next section.

⁶⁰P.Mich. VIII 507, 15-16: ἀσπάζ[ο]μεν τὴν μητέρα ὑμῶν Θατρῆν.

⁶¹See P.Mich. VI 392-393 of 153 and 158 respectively.

⁶²All this is based on P.Mich. III 169, which was found in B7, where Gemella may well have lived. Strassi Zaccaria in the article referred to in note 49 (pp. 258-259) was the first to connect the twins mentioned in this text with the sons of Socrates. Her tenuous argument for this may now be strengthened a little bit by the proximity of Socrates and Gemella in physical (B7 is only a few houses down the street from Socrates) and social terms. There is evidence of contact between Socrates and Roman citizens living in Karanis and elsewhere and I will mention some of it in the next paragraphs. The presence of Latin texts

son Sarapion III is probably mentioned in one of the private letters found in B17.⁶³ Otherwise he does not occur in the texts found in B17, which he eventually seems to have moved out of. He is known from other texts⁶⁴ as a collector of money taxes just like his father. Socrates' son Socrates II does not occur in the texts found in B17, but he is probably known from other texts as *laographos* or census official.⁶⁵ Socrates also had a daughter who married a certain Valerianus, who wrote several private letters to his father-in-law. In one of them Valerianus conveys his wife's greetings to her father.⁶⁶

From bits and pieces of texts found in B17 it appears that Socrates I, or Socrates for short, had had the opportunity to act as census official himself at least twice in his career, for the census of 145/146 and that of 159/160.⁶⁷ His two sons each apparently took over one of their father's two official positions after his death. Between the two offices there is an important difference: a collector of money taxes was in office most of his life, whereas a census official became active only once in fourteen years. Socrates must have been quite a busy man. On top of it he also acted as a sort of an entrepreneur of public land.⁶⁸ Evidence to show that Socrates owned land privately has yet to turn up. Several texts from the last period of his life found in his house are reports of uninundated land.⁶⁹ The latter Socrates apparently received in yet another official capacity in his old age.

From texts found elsewhere it appears that Socrates was born in the last decade of the first century. He first appears as an assistant collector of money taxes at the end of the first decade of the second century.⁷⁰ and then as a collector of money taxes in his own right.⁷¹ In 117/118⁷² and again in 132/133⁷³ he acts on behalf of another family living in another area in Karanis. The roots of this family lay in the metropolis of the nome in which Karanis was situated, Arsinoe. This may

in B17 is in itself remarkable. See apart from the marriage document from Algeria (referred to in note 81) the Latin recipe P.Mich. VII 449.

⁶³P.Mich. VIII 507, but the mere mention of Sarapion may not be sufficient for identification.

⁶⁴BGU III 819 and P.Aberd. 35, both from 202/203. These papyri were acquired on the antiquities market and their exact findspot is therefore unknown.

⁶⁵BGU II 577 and BGU I 97 of 201/202 and 202/203 respectively. These papyri were also acquired on the antiquities market and their exact findspot is likewise unknown.

⁶⁶P.Mich. VIII 506, 11-12: ἀπᾶζεταί σε ἡ θυγάτηρ σου. The other letters are P.Mich. VIII 505 and the unpublished P.Mich. inv.no. 4796a.

⁶⁷Based on the presence of various census documents in B17. These relate to different people and are sometimes glued together in a roll. They are therefore part of the archive of the census official rather than private documents. Some have been published (SB VI 9554 (2), (3), and (5) as well as 9555a). More unpublished ones are found under the same inventory numbers as the published texts.

⁶⁸Exemplified by the lease of 150 (P.Mich. IX 564) and the tax receipt of 162 (P.Mich. VI 419). See also P.Kar.Goodsp. 78 of 158/159 and several unpublished documents found in B17.

⁶⁹P.Mich. VI 367 of 168/169 and 368-369 of 171. Another was found on the street BS1 in front of B17 (P.Mich. VI 366 of 168).

⁷⁰If the reading suggested in the note to P.Mich. VI 383 iv 33 is accepted. This text was found in house B2, just across the street from B17. In this house the taxpayer no doubt lived.

⁷¹BGU XV 2534 is the earliest attestation for this. See Strassi Zaccaria in the article referred to in note 49 for details.

⁷²P.Mich. IX 549. This papyrus was found in structure C123 along with other papers belonging to the other family.

⁷³In P.Mich. inv.no. 5894 (unpublished, but referred to in the note to P.Mich. IX 549, 3). This papyrus was also found in structure C123.

literature: grammatical papyri,⁷⁶ Menander,⁷⁷ and the so-called *Acta Alexandrinorum*.⁷⁸ The latter is a sort of *samizdat* literature not at all favorable to the Roman imperial government—a government Socrates dutifully served for a lifetime. This illustrates the ambivalent position of the local elite in a Greco-Roman town rather well.

The mother of a navy recruit who sent his mother letters from Italy lived in B1. She is the Taesis I previously mentioned. Her son advises her in one of his letters⁷⁹ to use Socrates as a go-between in sending messages to Italy. Private individuals could not count on the official Roman mail service and had to rely on the goodwill of travelers—or friends with connections such as Socrates. Among the letters found in B17 is a letter from an army recruit on his way to Algeria.⁸⁰ Among Socrates' papers we also find a Latin document relating to a marriage agreement of a soldier in the navy drawn up in Algeria.⁸¹ For all we know this document may be related to Gemella. Young Egyptian males served in the Roman army and navy world-wide, and Socrates apparently had contacts with army officials within Egypt itself as well. A man of Socrates' standing was supposed to give a helping hand to travellers wherever he could as his son-in-law informs him in one of the letters found in B17.⁸² As we have seen, the likely mother of Socrates' children, Gemella, was a Roman citizen herself, and she—or at least her adult male relatives who kept the documents relating to her and her children's status as a Roman citizen—presumably lived in B7, where one of those documents was found.

(b) *The meaning of the Tax Rolls*

There is one text that I have not yet mentioned. It is a petition written by Socrates in 154 (Taf. XIIIa).⁸³ In it he requests that the village scribe of Karanis be ordered to visit some plots of land Socrates leased from the government. Apparently others had encroached upon his rights on this land, and Socrates now wants to see the old situation restored or the perpetrators be held responsible for the damages.⁸⁴ The text appears to be in his own hand, which is quite distinctive. Some of the receipts for money taxes that were found elsewhere in Karanis must carry his signature, but I have not yet been able to check the papyri kept in various collections. There is

⁷⁶P.Mich. inv.no. 4711a (unpublished) and 4693 (also unpublished; this text was found on the street BS1 in front of B17).

⁷⁷Partly published by M. Gronewald, "Menander, Epitrepontes. Neue Fragmente aus Akt III und IV," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 66 (1986), 1-13, with no indication of provenance. The text will be republished along with additional fragments by L. Koenen. The text is written on the back of a late-first-century document, which suggests that it was a private copy. The text is not obviously in Socrates' hand.

⁷⁸Latest edition by H.A. Musurillo, *Acta Alexandrinorum* (Leipzig 1961), 67-72 (no. XXII), with no indication of provenance.

⁷⁹P.Mich. VIII 490-491.

⁸⁰P.Mich. inv.no. 4711b (unpublished).

⁸¹Latest edition by A. Bruckner & R. Marichal, *Chartae Latinae Antiquiores* (Dietikon & Zürich 1975), 36-38 (no. 295).

⁸²P.Mich. VIII 506, 10-11: *χαρειεῖς καὶ τούτῳ ἐπεὶ [ξ]ένος ἄνθρωπος ἐστὶ* ("you will do him [a certain Iulius] a favour as well, because he is a stranger").

⁸³The text was published by P.J. Sijpesteijn, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 22 (1985), 323-325. For an improved text see now SB XVIII 13306.

⁸⁴Socrates adds (ll. 4-7): *πρὸς τό μ(ε) δυνηθ[ῆ]ναί καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὠ(ν) γεωργῶ ἐδ(αφῶν) τὴν φρ[οντί]δαν π(ρ)οιεῖσθαι καὶ τὰ ἐκφόρια διευθύν[ειν]* ("so that I can take care of the other plots of land I lease and pay their rents").

however one other text from Karanis now kept in Cairo that is relevant here. I was able to check this text on a set of photos. It is written in the same distinctive hand as the petition and dates to 171/172.⁸⁵ It is not a receipt, but a huge roll recording day-to-day payments of money taxes (see Taf. XIV showing col. 46). The text surfaced in 1924 along with three other tax rolls covering the three following years, 172/173, 173/174, and 174/175, and these three rolls were written in a different yet distinctive hand. The other roll was published in full almost 60 years ago.⁸⁶ Since the petition and the tax roll are 17 years apart I assume they are both the work of Socrates himself rather than of a scribe he happened to employ for both jobs. In the roll Socrates recorded what he was doing in his official capacity as one of Karanis' leading collectors of money taxes. Whether the rolls were found by looters in B17 or in another house elsewhere in Karanis I cannot tell. At some point his son Sarapion may have moved both his family and his most important papers, i.e., the ones relating to the collection of money taxes. I have not yet found fragments of the tax rolls among the papyri excavated at Karanis, but one day I may and that would settle the question for good.⁸⁷

The first tax roll is peculiar because of a feature that was copied by the scribe of the later rolls—presumably Socrates' son Sarapion. To the right of many entries some text was written in parentheses. This part of the text usually records Egyptian nicknames by which taxpayers were also known, as well as Greek translations of these nicknames. Some of the latter are quite *recherchées*. Once an obscure word only found in Callimachus is used in such a translation. On this feature the following comment has been made:⁸⁸

For us, however, these “names” resurrect an anonymous but well delineated personality. Among the clerks in the tax bureau was one whose role as *érudit manqué* comes through to us even after so long a time. The linguistic facility, the literary culture once so promising and now so pointless, the trivial display for no eyes but his own, the light and barely sarcastic touch—they are all there. And what could be more satisfying to a tax clerk with pretensions to learning than a borrowing from Callimachus furtively inserted into a gigantic money register, where no one would ever notice it?

This imaginative account needs revision in light of the exact context I have been able to find in the evidence. The scribe who wrote the first tax roll was not a simple clerk, but the collector of money taxes himself. Moreover, he is not an anonymous, but a well identified person, Socrates, about whom we know more than about most people from the ancient world. Whether Socrates was an *érudit manqué* or not I cannot tell. He certainly was an *érudit* of some sort because he owned several pieces of Greek literature including specialized grammatical treatises. Finally, can it be a coincidence that Socrates borrowed an obscure Greek word from Callimachus if we realize that someone just across the street from him owned a copy of at least one of Callimachus' works?

⁸⁵Easily recognizable by the presence of two distinctive types of *phi* in the context of only a few lines.

⁸⁶H.C. Youtie, *Tax Rolls from Karanis in Two Volumes* 1 (Ann Arbor 1936), 3-128. A second volume with addenda to the later rolls and indexes but not the commentary appeared three years later: H.C. Youtie & O.M. Pearl, *Tax Rolls from Karanis* 2 (Ann Arbor 1939). The last roll reappears in H. Riad & J.C. Shelton, *A Tax List from Karanis* 1 (Bonn 1975) and J.C. Shelton, *A Tax List from Karanis* 2 (Bonn 1977).

⁸⁷There is one tax document among the papers found in B17 that mentions several people who also occur in the tax rolls. The document (P.Mich. inv.no. 4689; unpublished) is so carelessly written and so full of corrections that it must have been a draft of some sort or just a piece of scrap paper crammed with notes. I would identify the hand with that of Socrates.

⁸⁸H.C. Youtie, “Callimachus in the tax rolls,” in: *Proceedings of the 12th International Congress of Papyrology* (Toronto 1970), 545-551. The quotation comes from p. 551.

The literary borrowing from Callimachus may have been preceded by Socrates' literally borrowing Callimachus' works from his neighbor.

Thus, the tax rolls are far from boring as long as one knows who wrote them. After sixty years the study of these rolls without a clue to their authorship seemed to have come to a halt for lack of interested scholars. The great papyrologist Herbert Chayyim Youtie (1904-1980)⁸⁹ devoted many years of his life to the study of these rolls, but he never wrote the definitive commentary on them.⁹⁰ From a cursory glance at the photos of the first roll, i.e., the one written by Socrates himself, it appears to me that the roll is not a copy made at a particular moment,⁹¹ but that the daily entries were recorded at the end of each day. The character of the hand differs considerably from day to day. Apparently Socrates was particularly susceptible to changes in mood. Thus, the roll could well be subjected to a graphological study.⁹²

The daily entries also allow us to reconstruct each working day of Socrates as a collector of money taxes for a whole year.⁹³ We have to imagine him going through town according to a certain pattern—dictated by the tax roll of the previous year no doubt.⁹⁴ Each day Socrates knocked on a fairly limited number of taxpayers' doors in Karanis. Thus, he may have performed his task with a certain amount of leisure—unless we assume that he had to bargain over each payment. Here I may recall what I mentioned earlier: as a collector of money taxes Socrates was allowed to charge a handsome fee for his services. These added up to quite a substantial amount of money each year. On the basis of the tax rolls it has been figured out that a collector of money taxes in Karanis cashed about 10,000 drachmas for himself each year.⁹⁵ This is an incredible amount of money⁹⁶ and must have put Socrates in the category of the wealthiest inhabitants of Karanis. Moreover, in a society where cash is hard to come by, 10,000 drachmas in money is not to be despised even by the wealthiest landowner. Thus, even if Socrates did not own substantial amounts of land himself, as we have seen, I suspect that he must have been able to live quite a comfortable life. The fact that he attained a relatively high age combined with the fact that he owned several pieces of Greek literature confirms my suspicion.

⁸⁹On Youtie see E.G. Turner, in: *American Philosophical Society, Yearbook 1980*, 636-639.

⁹⁰Some help is provided by H.C. Youtie, "A problem in Graeco-Roman bookkeeping," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 15 (1974), 117-141, and V.B. Schuman, "P.Mich. IV: a commentary," *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 29 (1983), 41-57, as well as by the introduction and commentary in P.Cair.Mich.

⁹¹Pace H.C. Youtie, *Scriptiunculae* 2 (Amsterdam 1973), 854.

⁹²A neglected topic in papyrology, but see E.P. Wegener, *De betekenis der grafologie voor de Griekse papyrologie* (Leiden 1947).

⁹³For a comment on their work see also the text quoted in note 59.

⁹⁴A similar observation was made independently in an unpublished paper by A.E. Hanson for the tax documents in the archive of Nemesion from nearby Philadelphia. These date from the first century A.D.

⁹⁵See V.B. Schuman, "The income of the office of the *πράκτορες ἀργυρικῶν* of Karanis A.D. 172-173," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 12 (1975), 23-58, using the second roll. The use of the plural *πράκτορες* by Schuman is unfounded. The roll was owned by only one of the collectors of money taxes. There were more collectors of money taxes in Karanis at the same time operating in other parts of town. This simple insight has severe consequences for the use of the tax rolls in population estimates such as the ones referred to in note 22. If there was only one other collector of money taxes, the figure should already be doubled.

⁹⁶I would guess that 10,000 drachmas would buy about 40 arouras (10 ha) of arable land in 171/172.

(c) A contextual reading of the archaeological data

Let me conclude this survey of the “textual” data with the kind of papyri that everyone can read: blank papyri. Of course blank papyri are mere archaeological data, but one should not forget that papyri with texts are archaeological data as well—as long as one knows exactly where they were found. Several blank papyri were found in B17 along with the papers of Socrates. My reading of them is as follows. Socrates’ official position required the use of much writing material. It seems very likely that he kept a pile of blank papyri for the purpose of drawing up tax registers and other official documents. Some of these blank papyri ended up among the papers that his sons did not bother to remove from the house when they abandoned it some time after their father’s death. The blank papyri were eventually buried in the debris of Socrates’ house. Two important conclusions can be drawn from my reading of the blank papyri. First, I have been able to “read” a blank papyrus in its proper context. It turned out to be highly meaningful, at least from the perspective of post-processual archaeology. Second, the fact that so many blank papyri were found in B17 is conclusive evidence that it was not just a papyrus dump. Who in his right mind would willfully discard valuable writing material?

I cannot attempt a full discussion of all the other archaeological data. The simple list of objects that were found in B17 (see the appendix to this article) already runs to several columns. One should keep in mind that the majority of the objects never found their way to Ann Arbor or even Cairo. Not counting the papyri only about 25% of the objects are currently available for study in Ann Arbor in some form, either the objects themselves or photos taken during the excavations. The latter are often so small as to be virtually useless. It is not always clear what one can do with the brief descriptions of the other items that were not transferred to Ann Arbor and that were not photographed either. Moreover, since no previous study of all the movable objects in a single house has ever been undertaken and preliminary studies of only a few types of objects exists, there is little or no scholarly expertise to draw on. The problem that faces us here is compounded by the fact that to my knowledge no comparable Roman site has been excavated. Most of the movable objects that were left in the houses in Pompeii in 79 have disappeared without leaving any trace. The kinds of objects that were found in Karanis also tend to be exceptional by their very banality. I have already mentioned the toys and dolls, but what about the other ordinary objects? Bits and pieces of glass, fragments of textile, basketry, hair pins, combs, castanets, sandals, rings, beads, coins, mortars, “collectibles” such as blue-glazed lions (Taf. XIIIb)⁹⁷ or terracotta figurines, bronze rings, buttons, stone weights, ordinary lamps, wooden furniture legs, boxes, pegs for looms and other instruments, nails, ivory handles, bits and pieces of ropes, knives, spindle whorls and the endless amounts of pottery. All of these objects are represented at least once in the house of Socrates.⁹⁸

It is at least conceivable to engage in analytical studies of the different types of objects of daily life found in Karanis and take the evidence from other houses into account. But as I have tried to make clear that would not be enough. We do have to take the other houses into account somehow, but we should avoid isolating one particular type of object from the others. A different strategy would be to look at the bewildering array of objects to register the presence of women and children. Women are visible, e.g., in the castanets and the spindle whorls, and probably also in the hair pins, the beads, the pegs for looms and the ivory handles. Castanet dancers mentioned in

⁹⁷Kelsey Museum inv.no. 25963, found in B 17; another one from B 17 is Kelsey Museum inv.no. 25977.

⁹⁸Readers of the appendix—be they ever so few—will notice that I have mentioned the objects in the order of the record of objects.

papyri are always women. Traditionally wool was spun by ordinary Egyptian housewives. Since the house of Socrates was not a weaver's workshop it is likely that the weaving implements were used by the women in his house. The hair pins, the beads and the ivory handles seem more likely to be part of a woman's toilette than that of a man—but who knows? A blue-glazed hermaphrodite (Taf. XIIIc)⁹⁹ is particularly elusive. It seems to have been attached to the lid of a fancy box. This box may well have been part of a woman's trousseau.

The question who the women in Socrates' house were can not so easily be answered. His mother Thatres must have lived with him after her husband's death for some years, as we have seen. I have not been able to prove the presence of Socrates' likely wife Gemella in the house, and the only time his daughter is mentioned it is clear that she is living with her husband Valerianus elsewhere. The other women mentioned in some of the private letters, Artemis and Tasoucharion,¹⁰⁰ may have been Socrates' friends or neighbors. Still we can sense the presence of women in his house and their impact on the archaeological record. The children who lived in B17—at least Socrates' sons and daughter when they were little—are represented by a few fragments of toys and maybe some of the terracotta figurines such as that of a camel (Taf. XIIId).¹⁰¹ My impression is that these along with rag dolls are far more common in other houses in Karanis than in B17. Of course, by the time Socrates' sons abandoned the house they were adults and had no more use of dolls. His daughter moved out while Socrates was still alive.

There is one more type of object found in B17. A blue-glazed ink well found in room E of his house (Taf. XIIIe).¹⁰² Another blue-glazed ink well¹⁰³ was also found in this room. In the adjacent room F yet another blue-glazed ink well was found.¹⁰⁴ My reading of these objects is very much along the lines of my reading of the blank papyri. The ink wells attest the presence of someone actively engaged in the process of producing written texts. Socrates fits this description very well, and we may assume that his sons were already engaged in their father's business at a tender age. One is tempted to assign one ink well to each of the sons and the remaining ink well to Socrates himself. Anyhow, what needs to be stressed here is the fact that the ink wells in combination with the papyri in B17 attest a level of literacy well beyond the level of simple craftsman's literacy.

In recent studies on ancient literacy¹⁰⁵ much has been made of the different levels of literacy, especially in the Roman world.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately the evidence is as a rule rather thin. It seems worthwhile to take a closer look at the literacy levels attested in the archaeological data from Karanis. To this end we should include houses with texts as well as those with writing imple-

⁹⁹Kelsey Museum inv.no. 25987.

¹⁰⁰Artemis, Socrates' correspondent in P.Mich. VIII 507, conveys greetings to Tasoucharion. Artemis was currently engaged in some legal business in "the city," presumably Alexandria, and requests Socrates to send her one of his sons or associates, an adult male, to assist her as a legal representative in doing her business ἐπὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἔξεστι γυνῆ χωρὶς ἐκδίκου δικάσασθαι ("because a woman is not allowed to engage in a lawsuit without a legal representative").

¹⁰¹Kelsey Museum inv.no. 6879.

¹⁰²Kelsey Museum inv.no. 3665.

¹⁰³Kelsey Museum inv.no. 25955.

¹⁰⁴Excavation label 26-B17F-JII. It did not find its way to the Kelsey Museum and its present whereabouts is unknown.

¹⁰⁵Starting with W.V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass. 1989).

¹⁰⁶See M. Beard a.o., *Literacy in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor 1991).

ments.¹⁰⁷ The presence of texts is not by itself an indication of literacy among the inhabitants of a house. Simple tax receipts were used by all adult males and some of the adult women, especially those owning land. If no other texts and no writing implements are found in a particular house we can do no more than to admit that some of its inhabitants did at least passively partake in the writing and reading culture. If in addition private letters are found or writing implements, we may assume that in the extended family at least someone could be found who took a more active part in the writing and reading culture. If several texts are found that can be ascribed to a particular writer living in the house, we are dealing with a full-fledged literate. Socrates and his sons belong in this class, and we have additional evidence for this in non-textual writing materials of various sorts, as we have seen. It is worthwhile to distinguish yet another class. If literary texts are found in a house at least some of the inhabitants took part in a special kind of reading culture.¹⁰⁸ As we have seen Socrates owned several pieces of Greek literature. In Karanis at least 39 houses with bits and pieces of Greek literature were found.¹⁰⁹ This figure is not very meaningful as long as we do not know how many houses with papyri were excavated in Karanis (several hundreds?), but it is probably well above what one would expect in an Egyptian town.

vi. Conclusion

There is every reason for archaeologists dealing with Karanis not to discard papyri, because these papyri add an individual dimension to their reconstruction of the ancient culture of Karanis. Likewise, there is every reason for papyrologists dealing with Karanis not to discard the houses themselves and the objects found in them, because these form the bulk of what remains of the material culture of the men and women who appear in the texts. To come to terms with the evidence close cooperation between archaeologists and papyrologists is needed. Karanis is a site where an interdisciplinary approach is not only feasible and promising, but also far superior to the only alternative: analytical studies of different types of evidence from Karanis.

It seems best to end with a sober view of what lies ahead of us. Given the dispersal of the data over Ann Arbor and Cairo some improvisation or *bricolage* is necessary in this early stage of renewed research on Karanis. To give meaning to what has been excavated we have to adopt an approach that enables us to make sense of all that has been found, preferably in a context of manageable proportions. That is why I advocate the house-by-house or family-by-family approach as the clue to Karanis. I trust this will not seem unreasonable after the discussion of the house of Socrates.

¹⁰⁷Many writing implements from Karanis are included in M.L. Allen & T.K. Dix eds., *The Beginning of Understanding: Writing in the Ancient World* (Ann Arbor 1991). Unfortunately the excavation labels identifying the exact findspot of these writing implements have been omitted.

¹⁰⁸I have not found any trace of original literary production in Karanis.

¹⁰⁹I owe this information to the kindness of G. Schwendner.

Appendix: List of objects found in house B17

This list does not include the papyri found in B17, which were entered as B17E-A and B17F-A. Items preceded by an asterisk are available for study in Ann Arbor, either the object itself or, in a small number of cases, on a photo. Some entries represent more than one item. If such entries are preceded by an asterisk not all objects are necessarily available for study in Ann Arbor. Typing errors in the record of objects have been tacitly corrected.

| | | |
|-------------|---|--|
| B17, Room B | A Glass | *Q Conical shaped palm leaf basket |
| | B Frag. of basketry sieve | *R 7 Soles of sandals |
| | C Textiles | S Small round basket of palm fibre |
| | D Frag. of terracotta horse | *T Rope pot carrier |
| | E Wheel of toy | *U Rope muzzle |
| B17, Room E | F Bone hair pin | V 5 Mud jar sealings |
| | *B Toggle | W Pot stopper |
| | C Frag. of comb | *X Stone weight |
| | D Piece of turned wood | Y 4 Stone palettes |
| | E Frag. of castanet | Z Pottery lamp |
| | F Rope muzzle | AI Pottery lamp |
| | G 2 Soles of sandals | BI Pottery lamp |
| | *H Textiles | CI Pottery lamp |
| | J Blue glaze | *DI 3 Table legs |
| | K Bronze ring | EI Part of wooden frame |
| | *L Beads, partly blue glaze | FI Round wooden box with two handles and 1 spout |
| | M 2 Coins | GI 8 Wooden buttons |
| | N Beads | HI Wooden base of standard |
| | O Terracotta frag. | JI 2 Toggles |
| | P Frag. of stone shallow mortar | KI Frag. of wooden box |
| | *Q small figure of lion in blue glaze (Taf. XIVa) | LI Wooden top |
| | *R 2 Blue glaze ink pots (one Taf. XIVd) | MI Frag. of table |
| | a Pottery frag. | NI Frag. of panel |
| B17, Room F | *B Terracotta camel (Taf. XIVc) | *OI 2 Combs |
| | C Terracotta frag. | PI Frag. of weaver's comb |
| | *D Shell | QI 5 Weaver's pegs |
| | *E Pot sherd with child's drawing | RI Small toggle |
| | F 4 Coins | SI Frag. of cylindrical wooden box |
| | G Bronze ring | TI Lid of cylindrical wooden box |
| | H Bronze handle | UI Frag. of toy wheel |
| | J Frag. of bronze | VI Wooden handle |
| | *K Beads, partly blue glaze, partly glass | WI 2 Pegs for fastening wheels |
| | *L Glass set | XI Peg for hanging objects |
| | *M 3 Glass buttons, large, decorated and pierced for suspension | YI Wooden plumb bob |
| | *N Glass | ZI Nail |
| | O Blue glaze | AI Frag. of ivory handle |
| | P Frag. of reed basket | *BII Small lion in glaze |
| | | CII Frag. of shallow stone mortar |

| | | | | |
|------|--|-------------|----|--------------------------------------|
| DII | Textiles | | k | Globular vase |
| EII | Shells | | A | Frag. of round wooden box |
| *FII | Piece of rope strap | B17, Room G | B | Frag. of wooden hook |
| GII | Wooden handle of tool | | C | Terracotta camel |
| HII | Frag. of shallow stone mortar | | D | Blue glaze |
| JII | Blue glaze ink pot | | *E | Glass |
| *KII | Blue glaze decoration on top of box (?) (Taf. XIVb) | | F | Coins |
| *LII | Wooden bottle | | G | Piece of bronze |
| *a | Pottery frag. | | H | Knife blade |
| b | Pottery frag. | | (J | not used) |
| c | Pottery frag. | | K | Blue glaze frag. |
| d | Pottery frag. | | L | Part of bolting arrangement for door |
| *e | Pottery frag. | | M | Pottery lamp |
| f | Pottery frag. | | *N | Small wooden spindle whirl |
| *g | Cylinder vase of thick pottery with perhaps 1 handle | | O | Terracotta frag. |
| h | Pottery frag. | | a | Pottery bell |
| j | Shallow plate | | *b | Carinated pitcher |



a)

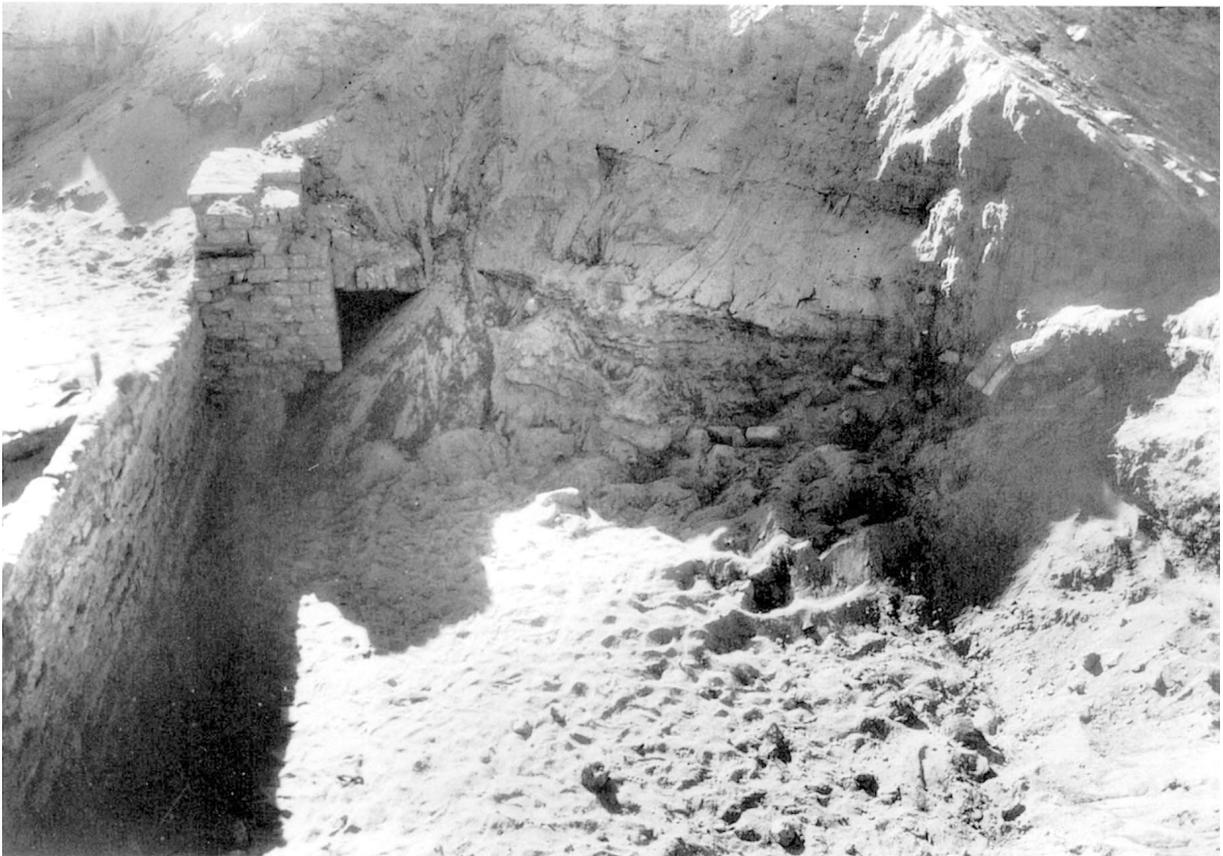


b)

a) Karanis from the air, b) Karanis: general view of area G from the south-west



a)



b)

a) Karanis: general view of area G from the west, b) Karanis: room F in house B17



a)



b)

a) Karanis: room E in house B17, b) Karanis: room E in house B17 (detail)



a)



b)



c)



d)



e)

Karanis: a) P.Mich. inv.no. 4728a found in house B17, b) blue-glazed lion found in house B17, c) blue-glazed hermaphrodite found in house B17, d) terracotta camel found in house B17, e) blue-glazed ink well from room E in house B17

