
David Frankfurter’s *Religion in Roman Egypt* has now appeared as a Princeton paperback. Recognised as an important book from the time of its publication half a dozen years ago, it won in 1999 the American Academy of Religion’s Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in the Historical Studies Category.

Frankfurter (F) traces with a light touch the radical changes the Romans made to the funding of Egyptian religion: setting up in the late first century BC a (Roman) High Priest of Alexandria and All Egypt whose department regulated priestly life on the system laid down in the *Gnomon of the Idios Logos* (198) and paid for it from imperial grants (*suntaxeis*)—the temples’ own land holdings having been expropriated—and then in the reign of Septimius Severus (200) requiring municipal councils to assume responsibility for temple costs. His interests focus on priests and communities.

F’s priest is a ritual expert rooted in a community (eg 214) and in ‘little traditions’ (eg 97-144), but capable of being seen in an urban context as ‘ever more weird, an Oriental wise man constructed almost entirely according to the exoticist perspective of Roman culture’ (236). But at the local level ‘an established culture ...’ can ‘... preserve its religious ways despite multiple pressures and traumas’ (5).

F’s explanation of the change to Christianity seeks, where possible, to insist that things were not that different after Christianity came in. Yes, Christianity presented ‘more efficient, or integrated, or coherent fonts of supernatural power than could at that time be negotiated through most village temples’ (267: n.4, with candour, refers to this as a “‘magical” explanation for Christianity’), but ground-level function might be similar: ‘In the year 484 ... that particularly resilient temple of the goddess Isis in the town of Menouthis was converted into a shrine of Saints John and Cyrus ... One healing shrine simply superseded another’ (271).
In conclusion F advocates a minimal view: ‘Christianity settled back to function as an idiom for supernatural authority. And that, we may conclude, speaks to the resilience, indeed the triumph, of local culture’ (284). As minimal explanations will, this leaves the reader wondering why, enfin, the Egyptians bothered to change their religion.

Paul McKechnie
Chancellor College, University of Malawi, Zomba
University of Auckland