

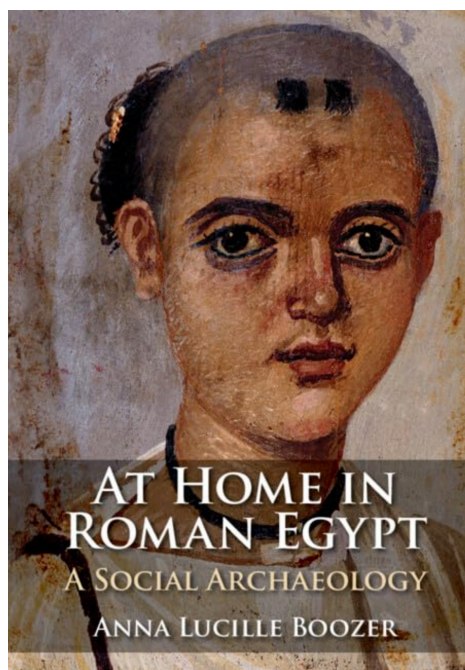
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Book Review

Boozer, Anna Lucille. 2021. *At Home in Roman Egypt: A Social Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-108-49017-0 hardback £75.

Anna Lucille Boozer's *At Home in Roman Egypt: A Social Archaeology* offers an interdisciplinary analysis of daily life in Graeco-Roman Egypt, blending archaeological, textual and anthropological evidence. The book is structured around a life-cycle framework, exploring themes such as childhood, domestic space, self-presentation, religion, illness and death. This structure allows Boozer to trace how individuals navigated their social environments throughout their lives, shedding light on household dynamics and personal identity.

The volume beginning with two introductory chapters on homelife and settings and community that outline the theoretical framework and discuss the sources — archaeological, textual and artistic — used throughout the study and their interpretative challenges. Her evocative presentation of these sources, along with Pamoun's fictional accounts that introduce many chapters, not only immerses the reader in the historical context but also makes the book highly accessible to a non-specialist audience. Chapter 3 explores pregnancy, childbirth and childhood, combining archaeological and papyrological evidence with anthropological insights. Adulthood is then examined in Chapter 4,



with a focus on marriage, sexuality and gender roles, followed by an investigation of domestic spaces, home-based labour and household organization in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 turns to the care and presentation of the body, analysing adornment, clothing and bodily practices as expressions of identity. Domestic religion and magical practices are the focus of Chapter 7, highlighting the integration of ritual into everyday life. Illness, healing and disability are the focus of Chapter 8, which also considers the role of medical practitioners and household responses to disease. The discussion of death and the afterlife appears in Chapter 9, paying particular attention to funerary practices and emotional responses to loss. The final chapter offers a brief conclusion, underscoring the significance of the home as a central locus for understanding social life in Roman Egypt.

A particularly compelling aspect of Boozer's work is her integration of sensory and emotional archaeology, which provides a holistic view of domestic experiences that goes beyond traditional material culture analysis. Her approach highlights how material culture shaped the daily lives of people, enriching our understanding of how objects and spaces influenced sensory and emotional experiences. However, while this theoretical framework is valuable, it faces certain challenges when it comes to the available archaeological data. A stronger engagement with scholarship on material agency — such as the work of Daniel Miller (1997: 3–21) — could have provided a more nuanced interpretation of how objects actively shape human experience. The author effectively applies practice theory, especially in her analysis of domestic space, but a more detailed discussion of household assemblages, storage practices and spatial organization would have strengthened her argument. Additionally, more sustained attention to post-depositional processes would have improved her study of material culture reflects daily life (see Davoli 2022: 473–482).

Despite the author's commendable attempt to illustrate ordinary people's lives, the volume candidly addresses the challenges posed by the archaeological record of Roman Egypt. A key issue is the limited number of objects recovered from methodically excavated contexts, which complicates efforts to interpret objects within their original functional and spatial frameworks. Many excavations in Egypt were conducted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and although they yielded a substantial quantity of artifacts, these finds often lack the extent of contextual analysis needed to fully understand these finds. While more recent excavations have improved methodologies standards, the publication of their results has frequently been delayed. As a result, well-documented and systematically excavated domestic contexts remain limited, significantly constraining our ability to reconstruct daily life in Roman Egypt. This problem is particularly evident in Boozer's discussions of domestic spaces,

where the absence of well-documented in situ assemblages complicates attempts to understand household organization and everyday practices in detail.

In response to the limitations of earlier excavations, modern archaeology increasingly emphasizes the importance of contextualizing objects, texts, structures and stratigraphy. While many of these older sites are currently being re-evaluated through archival research and focused re-publication efforts (see Gagos et al. 2005: 171–188; Davoli 2020: 11–29; Davoli et al. 2020: 59–87; Alfarano et al. 2024: 271–272), new projects such as those at Trimithis/Amheida adopt rigorous stratigraphic methods and prioritize detailed contextual analysis.

Boozer's earlier study of House B2 at Amheida (Boozer 2015: X) demonstrates a context-based approach in which artifacts are analysed alongside architectural features, room functions, and spatial organization. This close integration of material culture with its immediate surroundings provides a more nuanced insight into household activities and social relationships. The recent publications of the house of Serenos (B1) in Amheida raise critical questions regarding the formation of domestic deposits and their connection to household practices (Caputo 2020; Davoli 2022). Together, these case studies illustrate broader methodological challenges faced in the field: while holistic interpretative frameworks offer valuable perspectives, they can sometimes overshadow the micro-analytical work — like spatial distribution studies and artifact analysis — that is essential for fully understanding material culture within its lived environment.

The use of museum collections as primary sources poses additional methodological challenges. While Boozer combines textual, artistic and material evidence effectively, the lack of context for many artifacts complicates efforts to assess their original function and social significance. This issue becomes more evident when compared to recent works such as Swift et al. (2022), whose contextual analysis offers insights into socio-economic transformation and everyday practice. Their emphasis on excavated contexts, settlement structures, object distribution and production areas underscores the potential of contextual archaeology — an approach that could have further enriched Boozer's conclusions.

Although *At Home in Roman Egypt* is firmly anchored in the Egyptian context, comparative perspectives from other Roman provinces could have enriched the study. A broader examination of domestic practices across the Empire — particularly in North Africa — might have helped delineate both continuities and divergences within provincial daily life, placing Egyptian material more clearly within the imperial framework.

Boozer's treatment of gender is another area that, while present throughout the book, could have been expanded. Her discussions of gendered labour in home-based industries such as weaving and agriculture are insightful but could benefit from a more thorough examination of social mobility and economic agency. A deeper analysis of how gender, status and ethnicity intersected in dress and adornment could have added nuance to the discussion of social identity in Roman Egypt.

The book is richly illustrated, yet the visual materials could be better integrated into the argument. A better organization of visual documentation would have enhanced the reader's engagement with the archaeological record. The limited presence of detailed plans and maps, which is not Boozer's fault but rather a reflection of the available data, maintains the perception of objects being disconnected from their context. For example, in the house of Serenos, a fresco depicting a family banquet corresponds to the presence of a banquet hall with a *stibadium* added to the house — an aspect that could have been more explicitly linked to the material culture discussed by the author in the chapter on domestic space.

Despite these challenges, *At Home in Roman Egypt* makes an important contribution to the study of ancient domesticity by integrating archaeological and textual sources. Boozer successfully highlights the complexity of household life in Roman Egypt, challenging assumptions of its exceptionalism within the broader Roman world. However, the book also underscores the need for future research to adopt a more integrated approach that balances textual and archaeological data. Boozer's work represents a significant step toward a more comprehensive understanding of domestic life in Roman and Late Antique Egypt. Future studies would benefit from a greater emphasis on contextualized archaeological evidence, including detailed spatial analyses and a deeper understanding of deposition processes. While large-scale syntheses remain invaluable, in regions like Egypt, where systematically excavated domestic contexts are still rare, a return to more fine-grained contextual studies is essential. Only by prioritizing the study of material culture in its original contexts can scholars deepen their understanding of the lived experiences of ancient households.

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