1.1 A Wealth of Sources

Whoever studies ancient Egypt has to deal with an abundance of available sources, making this region unique among those of the ancient world (Wendrich 2010). In addition to the non-organic archeological and epigraphical remains that are available for other regions and periods, the desert climate of Egypt also provides a wealth of organic sources such as wood, linen, papyrus, and mudbrick. Taken together, the sources allow for a much more detailed historical analysis for Egypt, although sometimes the abundance causes extra interpretational problems, because the models needed to analyze and explain what is happening are much more complex than those for regions with fewer sources. There is always the chance of an odd text or object not fitting the model.

In order to gauge what exactly an Egyptian site can yield, it is perhaps worthwhile to browse through a preliminary report from a recent excavation. This is not to claim that there is a “typical” archeological yield for sites, including trash dumps, in Egypt, but just to illustrate the abundance of material that is coming from even short and limited excavations. The example is the short 2009 season at the Red Sea harbor site of Berenike (Sidebotham and Zych 2011). Apart from the more typical descriptions of magnetic surveys and trenches excavated, finds are presented in a number of categories: archeobotanical and archeozoological remains, ostraca (and other writing materials, such as papyrus), coins, glass, an intaglio, and pottery. Whatever does not fit in one of these specific categories is presented in a chapter on “Finds.” The 134 individual finds listed here include terracotta oil lamps, a mixture of various items made of wood and basketry, textiles, and a mix of so-called “personal accessories,” such as beads. All this is the result of “17 days of
actual digging” (Sidebotham and Zych 2011, p. 9), showing what Egyptian archeologists have to deal with in number and variety, especially when excavating a trash dump.

The abundance of Egyptian sources is even more telling for the focus of the current volume, the Greco-Roman and Byzantine Period, from the late fourth century BC to AD 642, when Egypt became part of the Caliphate. Most remarkable about the sources available for this period are the written texts. Not only is there simply a greater variety of written sources (inscriptions, papyri, ostraca, wooden tablets, wax tablets, etc.), there is also a much greater linguistic diversity, with documents surviving not only in various stages of ancient Egyptian (Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, Demotic, Coptic), but also in Greek, Latin, and various other languages, such as Aramaic and Arabic. Many of these languages were in use at the same time, and often by the same people, which has made available Egyptian sources for more theoretical debates about bilingualism and code-switching (e.g. Adams 2003; Vierros 2012). On a more practical level, it is only because three languages occurred on the same writing surface of the Rosetta Stone that Thomas Young and Jean-François Champollion were originally able to decode Hieroglyphs (Robinson 2012).

The contents of the written record of ancient Egypt are very varied, especially in this late period. The main distinction is that between literary and documentary texts, with an in-between category that is commonly called “subliterary,” or “para-literary.” The latter category contains magical texts, medical prescriptions, prayers, and so on. Literary texts comprise the books of the ancient world, not only the works of Greek (and Latin) literature and Christian biblical texts, but also representative samples of Egyptian literary texts (see Chapter 31). The category of documentary texts is the largest, showing that ancient Egypt, although perhaps not a literate society per se, did function as a semi-literate one, with many aspects of life being conducted in writing (legal claims, registration of land ownership, census, etc.) (Eyre 2013).

Documentary texts come in all shapes and genres. There are very long texts on papyrus, such as second-century BC papyri listing court proceedings (P.Tor.Choach. 12 in Greek: 192 cm long, 10 columns; P.BM Siut in Demotic: 290 cm long, 10 columns) and a contemporaneous agricultural account (P.Tebr. IV 1103: c. 286 cm long, 23 columns). And there are short texts on papyrus, ostraca, and other writing materials, such as a late fourth-century BC order not to enter (SB XIV 11942: three lines of Greek writing on papyrus), an early third-century BC receipt for burial tax (P.OI Muhs 8: four Demotic lines of writing on potsherd), and a second-century AD order to arrest (SB XXIV 16005: five lines of Greek writing on papyrus). The contents of the documentary papyri are very broad, ranging from administrative documents (correspondence, accounts, etc.) to private letters and various lists.

In all their variety and broadness, however, it is important to note that texts do not come from all parts of Egypt or from all chronological periods in equal number (Habermann 1998). As most of the writing surfaces are organic, they depend for their survival on dry, desert-like circumstances, preferably without too much subsequent habitation. Most written sources, then, survive from the desert edge, with virtually no papyri coming from the humid Delta or continuously inhabited and used parts of the country such as the center of the Fayum. This geographical chance of survival has consequences for what we can expect from our written source material. For example, the lack of papyri from the Nile Delta means that almost none survive from the administrative center of Egypt, the capital city of Alexandria. And settlements at the desert edge, as a rule, represent rural rather than
urban Egypt (without denying the existence of close connections between villages and the urban centers).

Another thing to realize is that in most cases, the caches of written texts that do survive are not the untouched records of the ancient world, but are the result of selection and choice. Many of the written sources, as was already clear from our summary of the Berenike excavation report, come from trash dumps or have been reused as second-hand paper in mummy cases or mummified crocodiles. This means that somebody in Antiquity made a decision to discard these texts for whatever reason. We thus find the texts that were no longer needed, rather than the active archive of a person or government official. Texts removed from an archive can then find another use, for example as scrap paper, fuel for burning, or material to construct mummy casings for humans or to strengthen crocodile bodies in the process of their mummification. In this process, as shown by various archaeological finds, texts from one archive can be mixed up with texts from another. For example, the cache of papyri found in 1934 in the cellar of a house in Tebtynis consists of texts discarded from at least three separate private (or professional?) archives (Gallazzi 1990; Smolders 2004). The papyri recovered from crocodile mummies in 1899/1900 also contain administrative texts removed from various village offices (Verhoogt 1998). The modern scholar will find the texts in this secondary use context and will be required to actively reconstruct the original discarded groups.

Alternatively, discarded texts can be found thrown away on a local garbage dump. Such dumps may be inside an inhabited space (such as a courtyard or a stairwell that went out of use), close to an inhabited space, or farther removed at the edge of the settlement. The archeological record offers examples of all such possible dump sites in Egyptian towns and villages (Verhoogt 2012). However, it is important to realize that trash is not a static thing and that there may be movement between these sites, such as when one was cleaned out for development and the trash was removed to another dump. Alternatively, the trash may even have been returned to the original site for use in construction projects (Dicus 2014). Modern excavations give ample examples of texts in trash dumps with precise find circumstances (e.g. Berenike, Trimithis, Mons Claudianus), and also many texts found in earlier excavations come from trash dumps (e.g. Oxyrhynchos, Theadelphia), although here the precise context is more difficult to ascertain (e.g. Rathbone 2009, p. 22 for papyri probably found in a dump in Theadelphia in the early 1900s).

Admittedly, the difference between “dumping” and “storing” texts is difficult for the modern eye to distinguish, but the archeological record also offers possible examples of the actual storing of documents. There have been a number of finds of papyri that were wrapped carefully and stored in jars in cellars (Vandorpe 2009). There are also groups of texts that were stored in tombs and houses, only to be discovered by modern-day archeologists or illegal diggers. It is then difficult to establish why the texts were still found where they were found. Is it simply that they were forgotten by their owners? Or did major events contribute to residents moving away without taking their documents? The latter situation seems to be the case for the many Pathyris archives found inside what may have been houses, left behind when the residents fled after a military revolt in 88 BC (Vandorpe and Waebens 2010a).

Another problem with written sources is that they represent not the population as a whole but, more frequently, the literate groups in society, which, in the ancient world, also
tend to be the more wealthy and privileged groups. At the same time, the literate elites we see at work in Egypt’s documentary record are more varied than the elites we see in the epigraphic record elsewhere in the ancient world, who as a rule represent the top layers of society. Subaltern groups do appear in the written record, because of ancient Egypt’s dependency on writing to claim ownership and payment of taxes. Even the most illiterate farmer would have at least one or two receipts for payment of taxes at home.

The greatest producer and absorber of documents, perhaps, were the ancient state and its representatives on the various levels. Documents produced included various reports and surveys registering the composition of households or ownership of land, as well as the registration of rents and taxes owed on land and property. There was also much written correspondence between various state actors, either giving directions or submitting reports. In addition, the state also required people who wanted to engage the state to their benefit, to do so in writing.

Although Greco-Roman Egypt certainly has the top place in the survival of papyrological written sources from Antiquity (more than 78,000 papyri, ostraca, and texts on wood or parchment; see Table 1.1), it does not have sole rights. Writing materials have survived from elsewhere (about 2900 papyri, ostraca, and texts on wood or parchment), which can be compared in format, language, and content with those known from Egypt. From the extreme western frontier of the Roman Empire, near Hadrian’s Wall, for example, comes a cache of several hundred thin wooden tablets used for writing (e.g. Bowman 2004). Another important source of writing materials was found near Mt. Vesuvius in Italy. Most attention has been given to the library of hundreds of literary works that was carbonized during the AD 79 eruption of the volcano (e.g. Delattre 2006), but there have also been a number of groups of waxed tablets found in Pompeii and Herculaneum that have been very important for the economic history of the early first-century AD (e.g. Terpstra 2013). In addition, potsherds may have been used for writing throughout the ancient world at a much grander scale than previously assumed (Bagnall 2011). Table 1.1 shows the geographical spread of the documentation (Egypt versus the rest of the Mediterranean): 96.5% of the organic writing materials are found in Egypt, versus only 3.2% of the texts on stone (cf. Clarysse n.d. for the Greek documentation).

Table 1.1 Geographical spread of the documentation in the Mediterranean world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Outside Egypt</th>
<th>Egypt</th>
<th>Egypt (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organic material</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papyri</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>49,513</td>
<td>98.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ostraca</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>23,981</td>
<td>98.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texts on wood</td>
<td>1,286</td>
<td>3,698</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texts on parchment</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>1,097</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2,855</td>
<td>78,289</td>
<td>96.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compare</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texts on stone (including graffiti)</td>
<td>445,256</td>
<td>14,354</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Trismegistos online October 2016.
While small pockets of written sources have thus been found all over the ancient world, scholars have compared the picture in Egypt mostly with the written sources from the ancient Near East and the eastern part of the Roman Empire (Gascou 2009). There is a similar mix of types of text, not only literary (e.g. Nessana), but also documentary (official texts, private legal documents, etc.). In addition, there are, apart from the texts in Greek and Latin, also texts from the various language communities in the Near East (Aramaic, Arabic, Nabataean, etc.). The chronological range of texts from the Near East is less broad than for those from Egypt, with almost none surviving from the Hellenistic Period. An interesting difference is in the development of handwriting, with an earlier move to what papyrologists consider a typical four-lined Byzantine type (Crisci 1996). However, as more Egyptian texts with image become available, we may have to revisit this statement (It is now easy to assess the often – for people trained to boldly claim date ranges on the basis of handwriting – disconcerting range of possible contemporaneous handwritings via the website http://PapPal.info.)

The abundance of written sources for Late Period Egypt has tilted the historiography of this time and region toward an almost exclusive focus on texts. When Late Period Egypt entered the scholarly discourse in the late nineteenth century, it became the territory of classical philologists rather than archaeologists and (Late Period) Egyptologists (obviously, the Pharaonic Period remained in high Egyptological demand during this time). And even within the category of ancient Greek texts there was a clear focus on literary texts that could provide, it was expected, the missing links between ancient author and medieval manuscript tradition. In addition, the hunt for the most ancient Christian texts also focused the scholarly interests of the time, fueled by finds like the so-called Sayings of Jesus (actually a fragment of the Gospel of Thomas), allegedly among the first papyri to be found at Oxyrhynchus in 1897 (Parsons 2007, p. 15). With regard to non-literate texts, preference was given to official documents that could illustrate the workings of the Ptolemaic and Roman state and to texts that illustrated the private lives of ancient Egyptians. Given that papyrology was at this time mostly the field of classical philologists, scholars tended to focus on Greek (and the handful of Latin) texts, which seriously impacted the resulting historical analysis. This is most clear in the study of Egyptian land tenure, which was originally based only on Greek texts from one region in Egypt (the Fayum) and thus completely ignored the Egyptian evidence from the Nile valley. This Greek focus has been remedied only since the late 1980s, when Demotic texts were also taken into account when writing the history of Ptolemaic Egypt. This happened particularly in the Leiden and Leuven schools but has now become generally accepted, leading to all-encompassing studies by, for example, Manning (2003a, 2010) and Monson (2012b). A similar trend is currently also underway for later periods of Egyptian history with the inclusion of Coptic and Arabic texts in historical studies of the country.

The same focus on texts also triggered a very active trade in ancient papyri, where individuals and institutions were more interested in the texts themselves than in their provenance. Egyptian antiquarians were more than willing to feed this market by initiating their own “excavations” and encouraging local farmers to search for and sell papyri (and other artifacts of interest) in the margins of existing scholarly excavations (Davoli 2015). They also played the market by dividing caches of texts that clearly must have been found together (or even were part of the same codex; see e.g. Nongbri 2014b) and offering
them for sale separately to different buyers. As a result, some of the more famous archives (e.g. of Zenon and of Heroninos; see Chapter 17) from ancient Egypt have been dispersed over more than a dozen collections worldwide (Figure 1.1). The papyrus trade fed most Western collections and museums that are currently still in existence. In this trade, too, the same hierarchy existed, with literary texts – including Christian ones – fetching much more money than financial accounts. It is sad to see that in some circles, the same ruthless interest in especially literary/Christian texts still exists (see the various blogposts on the Green Collection’s acquisition of papyri by Roberta Mazza).

The archeology of Late Period Egypt came to fruition only in the course of the twentieth century (Bagnall 2001; Bagnall and Davoli 2011). The text-only approach was replaced with a text-and-architecture one in the 1920s and 1930s, with the Italian excavations at Tebtynis and the University of Michigan excavations at Karanis being the most well-known representatives. It is quite clear that the abundance of portable finds from these sites surprised even the excavators, who were in no position to deal with everything. Thus, for dating and interpretation, they focused on what they knew best: papyri and coins. Only in the late 1980s did continuous excavation according to the methods developed for more traditional parts of the Mediterranean world (Greece, Italy) enter Egypt, with Claudio Gallazzi’s excavations in Tebtynis being the trailblazer. Soon, other exemplary excavations followed, especially in the Fayum and Eastern and Western Desert.

The twentieth century also saw a more holistic approach to the textual evidence from Late Period Egypt. Texts were no longer studied as texts per se, but as important historical sources with an unparalleled level of detail. In order to tease out as much as possible from these fragmentary sources, models from the historical and social sciences were introduced, with sometimes exciting results. For example, comparative demographic models were applied to the evidence from especially Roman Egypt, leading to important insights into Egypt’s demographic regime (Bagnall and Frier 2006).

A final development that is currently underway is a return to the study of papyri as material and archeological objects. This is not to say that there is no longer interest in the actual contents of the texts studied, but they are now studied as a whole package, with ample attention to the physical properties of the writing surface and of the writing itself. Studies of literary papyri led the way here (e.g. Johnson 2004), but recently the same amount of detail can be found in studies of documentary texts (e.g. Ast 2014; Claytor 2014). Study of writing surfaces as material objects also includes their interpretation as archeological objects (Verhoogt 2012). This is of course being done for texts being excavated during current excavations (e.g. Cribiore-Davoli 2013), but there is also an attempt to reconstruct the contexts of texts that are parts of collections without further find information (e.g. Vandorpe and Waebens 2010a).

It is clear that the original focus on texts has often separated Egyptian history from its physical environment. This has led to some interesting interpretational results, such as the reading of one text as being about how to catch pregnant mice (from the very literary Greek \textit{entoka}), rather than how to catch mice in the Egyptian village of Toka (\textit{en Toka}: more suitable for an Egyptian setting) (P.Oxy. II 299). As far as we can establish, the practical question how one would specifically target pregnant mice did not enter scholars’ minds. Recent scholarship has brought the physical setting back into the interpretation of texts. Most studies of Egypt currently begin with a chapter in which the physical space of the country is presented (e.g. Monson 2012b; Sijpesteijn 2013).
Figure 1.1  Daily record of lamp oil for the retinue of the minister of finances. The day numbers are found in the left column. The papyrus, almost 2.5 m long and of a fine texture, belongs to the Zenon archive (257 BC). Source: courtesy Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, Graduate Library P.Cornell II 1, cf. P.Cornell 1. Image digitally reproduced with the permission of the Papyrology Collection, Graduate Library, University of Michigan.
1.2 The Physical Landscape

Egypt’s history is tied up with the Nile, the desert, and the Mediterranean (Parcak 2010). The Nile provides Egypt’s connection to Africa and enables a successful agricultural regime (although admittedly nowadays the link is not as direct as before the 1960s building of the Aswan High Dam). The desert secures Egypt’s borders and, with its aridity, brings forth the abundance of materials that survive from periods other than the present day. And the Mediterranean provides Egypt’s access to the networks of the Near East and southern Europe.

The interplay between Nile, desert, and Mediterranean has shaped an Egypt that is so unique in its physical and ecological setting that it has been difficult for modern scholars to fit it in broader historical models. The actual and perceived otherness of Egypt as compared with other regions has often blurred or even prevented attempts at analysis, although in recent years this has been remedied with great success. A case in point is the position of Egypt in Roman imperial studies, where the original tendency to see it as “other” and not representative for the incorporation of the Near East into the Roman Empire has given way to a more balanced approach that allows for its inclusion in Roman provincial studies, especially in the East (Monson 2012b; see also Chapter 37).

Egypt’s lifeline is – and has for several millennia been – the River Nile. Apart from annually providing the rich sediment that covered the Egyptian fields (especially upriver), it also enabled traffic from south to north and (with slightly more difficulty) vice versa, and allowed abundant fishing to add to the population’s diet. The Nile also shaped Egypt’s agricultural regime (Chapter 15). It divided the year in clear segments, with an inundation season, a sowing season, and a harvest season. During the inundation season (roughly June–September), the focus was on preparing the country for the upcoming flood by cleaning irrigation canals, repairing dykes, and so on. The sowing season (roughly October–February) included the preparation of the fields, the actual sowing, and the weeding of the fields to ensure a good crop. The harvest season (March–June) included not only the physical harvesting of the fields, but also the storage and transportation of crops and the payment of taxes. The Egyptian state, whether pharaonic, Saite, Ptolemaic, or Roman, was always heavily involved in all stages, because the outcome of the agricultural year was the basis for its financial well-being. This involvement left a substantial paper trail, as already discussed.

The most fertile fields were the ones in the Nile valley, about two-thirds of which were flooded every year, even in years when the inundation was low. The most difficult fields for a farmer were the ones in higher-lying parts, where sufficient inflow of water was not secured on a year-to-year basis and crop yields could vary greatly. Here, there was more effort needed to make sure that the fields were irrigated. That the ancient state was willing and able to deal with the vagaries of nature is shown by the fact that annual surveys by government officials assessed the natural state of the fields and, if necessary, adjusted the rents levied on them (Manning 2003a).

The overall nature of Egypt’s landscape within the desert boundaries on either end remained largely the same for all of its history until the building of the Aswan High Dam (Bowman and Rogan 1999). Bordering the Nile, lakes, swamps, and bigger canals grew reeds (including the papyrus reed) and flowers (such as the lotus). Interspersed with larger
and smaller settlements on higher-lying parts were the fields used to grow crops to feed people and animals. Between and around these fields were bigger and smaller canals surrounded by low dykes that directed floodwaters during the inundation season. And between these fields, there stood occasional trees (acacia, tamarisk, palm date). It is not surprising that in this landscape, the widely available papyrus became the writing material of choice (Figure 1.1), instead of the much more scarce wood (Figure 1.2). What did change over time were some of the actual crops that were grown in this landscape. The staple crop in pharaonic Egypt was emmer wheat, but with the coming of the Greeks, this gradually changed to hard wheat (Triticum durum). Similarly, the Greeks expanded viticulture and oleoculture in the Egyptian landscape (van Minnen 2001a), which was a considerable economic investment given the import of vines and the manual irrigation necessary.

Recent research has also shown that there was not one Egypt (Manning 2003a; Monson 2012b). There are substantial differences in ecology and in the agricultural and

Figure 1.2  Mummy label in Egyptian Demotic having the shape of a stele. According to this label, a priest in Upper Egyptian Hermontgis has the permission to perform burial for Tnephorsais, daughter of Horos. Wood, although scarce in Egypt, was regularly used to identify mummies (99 BC). Source: courtesy Leiden, Papyrological Institute V 3, cf. Short Texts II 427. © Leids Papyrologisch Instituut.
demographic regimes between, for example, the Nile Valley and the Fayum, a depression in the desert c. 80 km south west of modern Cairo. But even within the Fayum, there are differences between the center and the periphery. These latter differences can only be distinguished in the archeological record, as almost no texts survive from the continuously inhabited Fayum center, apart from a big cache of papyri found in the ruins of the capital Arsinoe in 1877. What is even more important is that it is now clear that the state (Ptolemaic and Roman) allowed for this regional variety and did not impose a one-size-fits-all approach (Manning 2003a; Monson 2012b).

The deserts to the east and west of Egypt have been the subject of extensive archeological activity in the last decade (Bagnall and Davoli 2011). On the eastern side, the focus has been on the many fortresses and Red Sea harbors that formed part of the Roman road and trade network. On the western side, focus has been on the urban centers that developed in the oases. The various excavations have shown that the desert was part of Egypt, too, but again the Eastern and Western Deserts were different (Bingen 1998). The Eastern Desert presents us more with low-key settlements built to accommodate temporary visitors traveling to and from the Red Sea. In the oases on the western side of the Nile, there was more permanent settlement, and thus the development of urban institutions and elites. On both sides of the Nile, however, there were also several nomadic tribes that roamed the desert and often came into contact (friendly and less friendly) with the settlements.

1.3 Conclusion

Egypt, then, has much to offer for scholars interested in studying and understanding its long and varied history. The desert climate provides an impressive number of different sources that make it stand out from the remainder of the ancient world. Prominent among the organic sources that survive in great number from Egypt are writing implements such as papyrus, potsherds, wooden tablets, etc., although it should be noted that this prominence may be more the result of scholarly interests than of actual numbers.

The written sources from ancient Egypt (combined with pharaonic tombs and Egyptian temples) have attracted the most scholarly (and also general-public) attention from the nineteenth century onward. And while indeed it cannot be denied that these are unique, special, and important, they are part of the archeological record and should be interpreted in tandem with all other information (Chapter 2). Recent scholarship has shown that this is the way to go, not only for texts found during current excavations (e.g. O.Trim.), but also for those that were found during the earlier years of the discipline, when find circumstances were not always noted.

Similarly, it is important to explicitly acknowledge the particularities of the Egyptian landscape in every study of ancient Egypt, but especially in studies dealing with written sources. In many cases, such documents are the result of the particular landscape of the country and of the ancient residents’ way of dealing with it. It is only when these texts are brought back into their physical environment that their full potential for analysis becomes available.
Bagnall (2001) and Bagnall and Davoli (2011) provide good overviews of recent archeological activity in Egypt. The second article also provides a list of online resources for a number of these excavations (and their results). Bagnall (2009b) is the most up-to-date introduction to the field of papyrology. The gateway into the written world of Egypt from the eighth-century BC to the eighth-century AD is the Leuven-based Trismegistos project (http://trismegistos.org). Those working with Greek ostraca and papyri should consult the Papyrological Navigator (http://papyri.info); see Chapter 2.