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Private Letter about Criminals in the Desert

P.Prag. Wessely Gr. inv. II 294 verso

The text is a small rectangle of papyrus, c. 10 × 6.7 cm, written on both sides¹. Along the fibres on the front (recto) is the beginning of a covering letter from the strategos of the Athribite nome to the strategos of the Bubastite, enclosing a letter from the prefect Taius Sanctus. At the top, the remains of two lines in the same hand give a column number (?) and a date, suggesting that this was a file copy which had been made for inclusion in the strategos' correspondence book. It is not possible to say whether it was copied in the Athribite as outgoing correspondence or in the strategos' office in the Bubastite as incoming correspondence. File copies were kept of all outgoing correspondence², but a roll of incoming correspondence might also sometimes consist of copies of incoming letters made by a clerk in the office and numbered and dated according to when they were received.

The text on the front reads as follows³ (Gr. II 294 recto):

1 κόλ(λημα) β [(ἔτους) .]
2 Μ[ε]χέρη
3 [μετ' ἄ]λλο ὄντως· Ἀγαθὸς Δαίμων
4 στ(ρατηγός) Ἀθριβεΐτου στρατηγ[ῶι]
5 τοῦ Βουβαστείου τῶι φιλ(τάτῳ) χείρει[v.]
6 [Ἐ]πιστολὴν γραφείσαν ὑπὸ Ταίου Σάγκτου
7 [τ]οῦ λαμπροτάτου ἡγεμόνος περὶ διαπ[
8 [] . των [] φ . . . [

“Sheet 2, [Year *n.*] Mecheir 8. [After] another, as follows: Agathos Daimon, strategos of the Athribite, to the strategos of the Bubastite, his most dear friend, greetings. (I enclose) a letter written by Taius Sanctus, the most illustrious prefect, concerning ...”.

Although the papyrus breaks off just at the point where details are first given about the subject matter of the prefect's letter, enough survives to give us some useful information. There is the name of another strategos of the Athribite, Agathos Daimon, which brings the number now known to the grand total of four⁴. There is confirmation also that the *nomen* of Taius Sanctus was indeed Taius⁵. Just as importantly, there is a provenance for the document from the region of the S. E. Delta on the Damietta branch of the Nile⁶, and a date, since Taius Sanctus is known as prefect between August 179 and spring 181⁷.

¹ The text is among a number of papyri which I was able to work on in Prague and Florence in 1999, thanks to the kindness and generosity of Rosario Pintaudi. They will appear in due course in P.Prag. IV. For a brief account of Wessely's collection, now in the National Library, Prague, see P.Prag. I, pp. 3–7.

² Cf. P.Oxy. LX 4060 (161), copies of correspondence to the strategos copied onto sheets and numbered by a first hand, but dated by a second hand who attached the sheets to the *tomos synkollesimos*.

³ I am indebted for suggestions for improved readings to J. Rea (lines 1, 3, 6) and K. A. Worp (lines 3, 5), in particular the name of the strategos in line 3.

⁴ To be added to G. Bastianini, J. Whitehorne, *Strategi and Royal Scribes of Roman Egypt*, Florence 1987, 58.

⁵ For Taius Sanctus' *nomen* see the discussion by J. Rea, P.Oxy. XXXVI 2760, 1 note.

⁶ The Athribite was the 10th nome of Lower Egypt, see A. Calderini, *Dizionario*, s. v., J. Baines and J. Malek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, London 1980, 15. The Bubastite, which adjoined it to the south east, was the 18th nome in

The strategos' correspondence book was subsequently cut up and the back of this piece was reused for a private letter. It was turned vertically so that the first surviving line of the new text written across the fibres on the back (verso) is the almost exact obverse of the last line of the text on the front. The hand is clearly different. It is less practised and uses less ligatures than the hand on the front (recto), but it is nevertheless not much later in date (or so it seems to me). It is this text on the back on which I want to concentrate here (Gr. II 294 verso):

1] . [
2	δη κοινωνῆς . [. . .] . ς ἀνά
3	τὸ χωρίον . Διὸ Ψᾶ ἐπαγρυπν[εῖ]
4	ἐν τῇ κόμῃ τὰς νύκτας
5	ἐπὶ μετέδωκέν μοι ὁ στρα-
6	τηγὸς ὡς πολλῶν κακού[ρ-]
7	[γ]ῶν ἐν τῷ ὄρει ὄντων .
8	[Ἄ]φικέτω δέ τις πρὸς τῆν
9	[. . .] α . τῶν ἡμετέρων ἐπαγ-
10	[ρυπν]οῖ νύ[κτα] ν[. . .] ἴν] α ἴδης

“... you may take share in ... up to the farm. Therefore Psa is keeping watch in the village during the nights since the strategos informed me that there are many evildoers in the desert. And let someone go to the ... Let him keep watch at night over our property ... that you may know ...”.

This is all very vague. There is of course little or no chance of any direct connection between “the strategos” of this letter and the strategoi on the recto. There can also be no certainty that the private letter on the back was written in the same area of Lower Egypt as the official letter on the front. It was quite common (how common we do not know) for officials like the strategoi to take their official as well as private papers back home with them at the end of their term. As strategoi were not normally appointed to serve in the nomes in which they resided, it is therefore arguable that the private letter on the back is not likely to be from the same area as the official letter on the front. So perhaps this letter refers to somewhere other than the Bubastite or the Athribite. But there is also no evidence that it was the strategos himself who had taken the original roll away elsewhere. It could well have been a lesser official in the nome or a scribe in the strategos' office, someone living permanently in the nome who had purchased the roll for his own private use. It is therefore not possible to rule out entirely the possibility that the roll remained in the same area after it was removed from the office archives.

So the date of this text is fairly firm — the last decades of the second century A.D. — but its provenance is not. Theoretically this letter could have come from anywhere in Egypt if it was the strategos who had taken the roll home with him. Bearing this in mind, I want to suggest two possible contexts in which this document could be situated, firstly by supposing that it comes from somewhere outside Lower Egypt, secondly supposing that the papyrus remained in Lower Egypt, was reused there and that therefore the letter on the back refers to events which took place in that region.

If the letter on the back was written outside Lower Egypt, where else in the country might it have come from? The collection which is now in the Czech National Library in Prague was originally purchased by Wessely in 1904 from an Armenian dealer in Paris⁸. The provenance of the papyri is accordingly unknown, but internal evidence, where it exists, suggests that it is quite varied. The majority of the texts come from the Arsinoite (many are from Theadelphia from the Heroneinos archive), Hermopolite, Cynopolite,

the Greco-Roman period. The names survive as Tell Atrib and Tell Basta, both with extensive ruins, see M. V. Seton-Williams and P. Stocks, *Blue Guide Egypt*, 2nd ed., London, New York 1988, 677, 683.

⁷ See G. Bastianini, *ZPE* 17 (1975) 299, W. Eck, *RE Suppl.* XIV 4022–4158, s. v. *Aius*. His predecessor, T. Pactumeius Magnus, is last attested in office on 27 July 197 (SB XVI 12678. 35), and his successor, T. Flavius Piso, probably held the conventus in spring 181 (Bastianini, *op. cit.*, 300).

⁸ P.Prag. I, p. 3, n. 6.

Prosopite, Antinoopolite, and Aphroditopolite nomes, i. e. from the area commonly known as Middle Egypt. “Anywhere in Egypt” can therefore probably be safely narrowed down to this area. The term ὄρος in line 7 is the technical term regularly used for the “desert” in Egypt. Since its primary meaning is a “hill” or “upland” it would not be difficult to locate this letter imaginatively in the landscape of Middle Egypt where the desert on either side of the Nile rises sometimes quite steeply in rocky outcrops on the edge of the cultivated area. Or perhaps in the Fayum region where the land rises more gently to the desert beyond the towns and villages at the edge of the arable land around Lake Moeris.

In both areas we are on the margins of settled life, perhaps with a movement outwards from the relative safety of the village (line 4) to an isolated farmstead⁹ (line 3) on the boundary between civilisation and desert. This marginal area away from the villages always constituted a sort of badlands beyond the pale of communal life. Nothing and nobody was ever really secure there. Even without the concomitant dangers of personal violence, property might be spirited away, sometimes mysteriously, sometimes before its owner’s very eyes. Theft in its many forms remains the most commonly attested crime in the papyri¹⁰. Hence the large number of guards of every description found among the village liturgies in Roman Egypt¹¹. So the letter writer’s concerns here for his family’s property are easy for us to understand.

In this first scenario therefore we have perhaps little more than yet another indication of a widespread fear about a type of crime which was a constant fact of life in the Egyptian countryside. Taking flight into the desert to avoid one’s fiscal and liturgical obligations was a standard feature of village life in Roman Egypt, and there are several prefectural decrees concerned with this problem. The connection between this process of *anachoresis* and the fugitives’ subsequent life of crime is first made clear in an edict of Sempronius Liberalis (BGU II 372) issued in 154. More relevant to the time of this letter is P.Oxy. XII 1408, an edict of Baebius Juncinus (210–214) instructing the strategoi of the Arsinoite and the Heptanomia to direct their efforts against those sheltering such bandits¹². Significantly he also refers in the preamble to an earlier letter of his on the same subject. Aiding and abetting malefactors of this type is also the focus of P.Oxy. XLVII 3362, a collection of documents including a letter from and a petition to the prefect Subatianus Aquila. There is also evidence for night attacks on villages by groups of bandits¹³.

If on the other hand the papyrus had remained in Lower Egypt and been reused there¹⁴, then we would potentially have a much more interesting historical scenario in which to locate these happenings. P.Thmouis I gives a series of tax payments going back to 128/9. It was written in 170/1 by the royal scribe of the Mendesian nome, which lies to the north of the Athribite and Bubastite nomes in the same area of the E. Delta. The tax payments recorded show a gradual decline of the villages there due to a number of interrelated factors. Here too we see the insidious effects of *anachoresis*. Villagers unable to meet their tax obligations simply abandoned their homes and landholdings and melted away to a life of banditry on the desert margins. Starting in the first half of the second century, this process continued in the Mendesian and elsewhere throughout the period covered by the accounts. But this progressive depopulation was also exacerbated later in the period by two interlinked events which put further pressure upon the social fabric of the region. First there was the economic dislocation caused by the impact of the Antonine plague which had reached Egypt in 165¹⁵. Then in 171 law and order in this area had received a further serious blow in the form of the revolt of the Boukoloï, a group of native Egyptian herdsmen under the leadership of an Egyptian priest Isidorus. According to Cassius Dio (72. 4) they managed to defeat the Roman forces in pitched battle

⁹ For the word’s meaning see R. S. Bagnall, *The Date of P.Kell. I G. 62 and the Meaning of χωρίον*, CdE 74 (1999) 329–333.

¹⁰ See B. Baldwin, *Crime and Criminals in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, *Aegyptus* 43 (1963) 256–263.

¹¹ See N. Lewis, *ICS*, 2nd ed., Florence 1982, 30–31, 51–52.

¹² For discussion now of these edicts see B. C. McGing, *Bandits, real and imagined in Greco-Roman Egypt*, *BASP* 35 (1998) 159–185, esp. 174–177.

¹³ Cf. BGU I 325.

¹⁴ That is, supposing that the correspondence book had been cut up and reused in the same locality either because the strategus himself came from that area, or because it was recycled by another lesser functionary who was resident there.

¹⁵ There has been much recent discussion on the effects of the Antonine plague on the economy of Egypt, see R. P. Duncan-Jones, *The Impact of the Antonine Plague*, *JRA* 9 (1996) 108–136; M. Sharp, *The village of Theadelphia in the Fayyum*, in: A. K. Bowman and E. Rogan (edd.), *Agriculture in Egypt from pharaonic to modern time*, London 1999, 185–189; R. S. Bagnall, *P.Oxy. 4527 and the Antonine plague in Egypt: death or flight?* *JRA* 13 (2000) 288–292.

and would have taken Alexandria itself had they not been put down by the arrival of Avidius Cassius and his troops from Syria.

The period leading up to the revolt is reflected in several references in P.Thmouis I. In col. 104, 9ff. a komogrammateus reports that about 167/8 the village of Kerkenouphis had been attacked and burnt by the “impious Nikochites”, i. e. the Boukoloi¹⁶, and that the majority of the men there had been killed. In col. 98, 21ff. the komogrammateus of nearby Petetei and associated villages declares that in the same year the disturbances had attracted the attention of the military to his area. A detachment of soldiers had been sent in who had attacked and killed most of the inhabitants with the result that the villages had been completely abandoned. In col. 114, 3ff. we hear of another village, Psobthon Haryoteos, attacked and burnt in Year 7 (166/7). A report had been made to the prefect Blassianus and the population had fallen from a large number to only two men who had subsequently fled. Finally in col. 115, 21ff. we hear of yet another village, Zmoumis, attacked by the “impious Nikochites”. Many of the survivors were killed. The seriousness of the situation is shown by the fact that a report to the prefect was made by both the strategos and the centurion, i. e. by both the civil and military powers in the area¹⁷.

All of these references of course antedate the present text. Yet the Boukoloi were not a one-off problem which the authorities were able to solve at a single stroke. P.Thmouis I shows their presence in the area of the E. Delta immediately before the revolt itself erupted in 171. Their appearance in a romanticised form in the third century novels of Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius suggests that they also continued in existence after the time of the revolt. Furthermore the appearance in Egyptian demotic romances of the early hellenistic period of a very similar group of marsh-dwelling bandits called the “herdsmen” (*ʿ3m.w*), who are also led by an Egyptian, suggests that they had been around for centuries already in this region of Egypt¹⁸. Perhaps for millennia even, if they could be identified with the Hyksos, Manetho’s “Shepherd Kings”, Egyptian *hekau-khasut*, the semitic pastoralists who had succeeded in establishing themselves permanently in the E. Delta, with their capital at Avaris, during the Second Intermediate period¹⁹.

So which of these two scenarios — the Delta or Middle Egypt — is to be preferred? When I first worked on this text, I saw it as a further piece of evidence, however tenuous, for the revolt of the Boukoloi. Now I am less sure. But there may be one further slight clue. The letter writer gives us a personal name, Psa (line 3), which is surprisingly not very common in the papyri. As we know, many Egyptian personal names are very localised in their occurrence. A search of the DDBDP via Perseus showed the majority of the 40 or so known examples of the name Psa come from Hermopolis in the late period (v–vii A.D.). But the name is also attested from the Arsinoite in the second century, and there seem to be no examples from Lower Egypt.

Much as I would like it to be otherwise, I therefore think that we must conclude that this text is yet another example of a strategos who had served away from home, in the Athribite or the Bubastite, and had then taken his papers back home with him, in this case to somewhere in the Arsinoite, when he left office. This is presumably how this papyrus ended up in the collection acquired by Wessely back in 1904.

¹⁶ Achilles Tatius IV 12, 7–8 identifies Nikochis as the headquarters of the Boukoloi.

¹⁷ For discussion see S. Kambitsis, P.Thmouis I, pp. 25–30; R. Alston, *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt*, London 1995, 83–84; B. C. McGing, *BASP* 35 (1998) 181–182.

¹⁸ I. Rutherford, *The Genealogy of the Boukoloi*, *JHS* 120 (2000) 106–121, esp. 109–116, and ‘*3mew and Boukoloi: Exploring a pattern in Greco-Egyptian fiction*, *Atti XXII Congresso Int. di Papirologia*, Florence 2001, 1145–1453.

¹⁹ For the identity of the Hyksos see D. B. Redford, *Egypt and Western Asia in the Old Kingdom*, *JARCE* 23 (1986) 125–143, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times*, Princeton 1992, 98–122, and 1–44 in: E. D. Oren (ed.), *The Hyksos: New Historical and Archaeological Perspectives*, Pennsylvania 1997.