Village and Urban Elites in Roman Tebtunis

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Papyri are often said to provide us with immediate access to the ordinary people of the ancient world, allowing us to escape the elite monopoly on the means of communication that we find in the realm of literature. This claim is justified only to a very limited degree, because most of the population of Roman Egypt appears in the papyrological documentation only as objects—a name in a tax list, in a tax receipt, in a census declaration, in a lease—and not as a subject. The texts that present us with individuals acting as subjects stem in the main from the upper strata of society. But there are elites and elites. When historians refer to the Roman elite, they often mean the senatorial and equestrian aristocracy, which altogether cannot have amounted to more than a small fraction of one percent of the population, and of which Egypt in all likelihood possessed substantially fewer specimens than the number of people in this room. But if we allow a slightly more expansive view of things, perhaps the top tenth of society in terms of wealth, we probably capture most of the authors of letters, petitions, and similar texts in which we get a somewhat more intimate view of the mental universe of the ancient population.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that no one has made any serious effort so far to describe these elites for any part of Roman Egypt. There are fragments of such a picture in the scholarly literature but no general treatment, even of a single village or city. We may hope for an analysis of the Hermopolite elite when Peter van Minnen’s promised book on that city appears; for Oxyrhynchos the task still waits. The Fayum is in a class by itself, because there, and only there, of the nomes of Egypt do we have substantial finds from the villages. In Hermopolis or Oxyrhynchos we see the villages solely from the standpoint of the urban residents and administrators whose documents we possess. In the Arsinoite, by contrast, matters are inverted. Most of our documentation for Roman times from that nome comes from the villages: Philadelphopolis, Theadelphia, Karanis, Narmouthis, Soknopaiou Nesos, Euhemeria, Bacchias, and of course Tebtunis. Of these, it is arguably Tebtunis that gives us the best opportunity to analyze the wealthy governing stratum of a village and its relationship to the elite of the cities. I can hardly hope to carry out such an analysis in a paper of this scale, but I shall sketch something of the problem as I see it and the kinds of contributions that Tebtunis has made and can make to studying it.

We might begin with Greek literature, generally and rightly regarded as a sign of the culture of the Hellenic elite of Roman Egypt. Tebtunis is, after all, the source of a large part of the literary papyri found in the Fayum. Nearly a third of the Greek literary texts listed in Peter van Minnen’s recent enumeration of Arsinoite literary papyri are from Tebtunis (94 of 294). Tebtunis has about the same number of dated documents in Greek between 275 BCE and 375 CE as Karanis or Theadelphia (just under a thousand), but has as many Greek literary papyri as those two villages combined. For a long time it was thought that some of these texts constituted a rare case in which the owners of literary papyri could be known, because many of the papyri came, or were said to come, from the famous Cantina dei Papiri, and that in turn was associated above all with the so-called archive of the descendants of Laches. (For the moment I keep this name, but of course it has been shown that Laches was not a member of the family in question; more on this later.) The shakiness of this attribution, alas, was pointed out some years ago by Willy Clarysse [oddly not cited by van Minnen 1998 at 168], and it was subsequently shown by Claudio Gallazzi that the Cantina contained not only the archives of Laches, Kronion, and Pakebkis, but many miscellaneous documents as well—and hardly any literary texts, other than the famous Diegeses of Callimachus. Gallazzi has adopted the view that the Cantina was a receptacle for obsolete material destined to be used as fuel rather than any kind of archival repository.

Van Minnen made some other observations and suggestions in his article. One is that relatively few of the pieces that have come to us seem to derive from a school (166). Another is that the practical literature, like medical and astronomical or astrological works, may have belonged to Egyptian priests (168). There does not yet seem to be any direct evidence, however, for his claim (169) that “the priests were also actively copying (or collecting) Greek literature not immediately relevant to what they were doing in the temples.” At present, we cannot reliably claim to know the context in which most of the Greek literary papyri of Tebtunis were found. The case of the Egyptian texts seems rather clearer, even though most of them also were found discarded rather than in the houses where they were used; at all events it seems safe to say that most of what we have did not belong to a temple library, but to individual priests.
If we cannot attach the literary papyri from Tebtunis to individual owners or families, it remains true that the quantity and range of these papyri are altogether exceptional among Fayum villages. A priori we should expect on the basis of what we know elsewhere that the presence of these texts would correlate with considerable wealth and a relatively large number of people educated in Greek beyond the elementary level. Nor would this be surprising, given the other evidence for Hellenism at Tebtunis. Still, it does not get us very far.

A more promising direction is the various family dossiers or archives found at or concerning Tebtunis. Most of these still await serious study as documents for social and economic history, and I can offer only some very preliminary remarks, stressing (in our organizers’ words), “directions in which future study of the Tebtunis material might be taken.”

Let us start with the papers published in *A Family-Archive from Tebtunis*, by B. A. van Groningen. The texts in this volume, along with a couple more published subsequently (*SB* 14.13555, in Copenhagen; *PSI* 12.1227), are scattered among a number of collections, and it is not known with certainty just where they were found. Van Groningen hesitated between Antinoopolis, where the family held citizenship from 133 on, and Tebtunis, the center of their Arsinoite landholdings and evidently their Arsinoite seat before their acquisition of Antinoite citizenship. In the end he thought Tebtunis more likely, but uncertain. This archive has never received serious investigation, and no one has even dared to name it. For the sake of convenience, I shall call it the archive of the descendants of Lysimachos. There are many problems with the archive, including great difficulty in identifying members of the family; the family tree in the edition is far less solid than it might appear, and there are numerous individuals who seem to be members of the family but whom we cannot attach to the tree. This is not a small point, and I shall return to it presently.

Although the earliest documents surviving from the family’s papers date from the later first century, there is enough information to deduce that the oldest generation of which we know anything significant was born in the 30s and 40s, and we know the names of two generations before them who must have been born under Augustus. In the earlier stratum the men have relentlessly Macedonian names: Ptolemaios, Lysimachos, Herakleides, in particular. Both Roman and Egyptianizing names become more common with time. We know that the family was registered in the metropolis of the Arsinoite, and that they belonged to the classification of Hellenes, i.e., members of the so-called “settlers” usually thought to have claimed descent from the military colonists of the Hellenistic period. One member married a bibliophylax of the Arsinoite, a supervisor of the archives. But no other archer is mentioned with the name of any male member of the family, even in contexts where in other archives we do find such offices mentioned. It seems likely, therefore, that they were not active in providing the leadership of the Arsinoite metropolis. Quite possibly this quiescence is a result of their relatively modest means, although the documents do not allow us to form a clear impression of whether they were merely comfortable or downright wealthy. The fact that one family member married the daughter of a weaver may also suggest an economic standing below the top echelon.

In 133, at least one branch of the family’s papers belonged, it appears, took citizenship in Hadrian’s new foundation at Antinoopolis, and after that point family members are always referred to as Antinoites. One member of the family was nominated to serve as nyktostrategos in Antinoopolis in 176. This is the earliest attestation outside Alexandria of this liturgy, which Lewis supposes to be largely or entirely a function exercised by members of the bouleutic class, a standing we have no other evidence for in this family. Despite this Antinoite residence and activity, they retained their base in Tebtunis and spent at least some time there, and they continued to be property owners in the Polemon District of the Arsinoite: documents in the archive show at various points land in at least seven villages in the region around Tebtunis.

Now, I must come back to the point raised earlier about the difficulty of identifying individuals and their relationships. No member of the family, as far as I can see, can be securely identified in the papyri found at Tebtunis and published in *P. Tebt.* 2. But there is, for example, a Lysimachos son of Didymos (*P. Tebt.* 2.383.27) attested as a property-owner in AD 46, and this combination of names occurs a number of times in papyri which van Groningen attributed to the family but was unable to place with any confidence in the family tree. As several of these were born in the 50s, and we do not really know how many of them can be identified with one another, it is possible that the person in the excavated papyrus might be identical with one of them. One can only guess whether the unpublished material from Grenfell and Hunt’s excavations may contain further appearances of family
members. But I believe that concentrated study of the archive could permit considerable progress over van Groningen's reconstruction.

Let us now move up the socio-economic scale to the archive of the descendants of Patron, as one might now call what was once denominated after Laches, who turns out to be no more than a steward in the employ of this family. The first Patron died in 108, and our knowledge of his descendants spans approximately a century, the last identified text in the dossier belonging to 204 (P.Tebt. 2.358). I am using the term "dossier" (rather than "archive") advisedly, because the text in question comes from Grenfell and Hunt's excavations, not from the Cantina, as do some other texts concerning this family. From the fact that one member of the family is identified as a member of the 6475 Greek settlers in the Arsinoite, it is likely that this status passed through Patron to his descendants. More importantly, many members of the family exercised the chief civic magistracies of Ptolemais Euergetis, including gymnasiarh, exegetes, and kosmetes. They certainly had the wealth to support that kind of civic activity, with holdings that may have aggregated 500 arouras or more, spread around many villages of the southwest Fayyum. At no point are we explicitly informed about the place or places of residence of family members, nor do we have any documents indicating where they were officially registered for the census. Some important indications are (1) that the documents assembled in Tebtunis and stuffed into the Cantina included not only the sort of agricultural operations that might have been in the hands of one of the family's phrontistai, but personal papers like a property division; (2) the Cantina contained nothing directly pertinent to the magistracies held by family members; (3) the Cantina contained no texts related to personal status, like census or epikrisis documents; (4) the Cantina did contain letters addressed to phrontistai as well as intra-family correspondence. Although arguments from silence are not worth much in such a context, the most economical explanation is certainly that the family had residences in both places. They probably kept most of their personal and office-holding related documents in the city, and many of the economic materials in the country. That their presence in Tebtunis was much more than that of absentee landlords, however, seems evident.

A text from the Patron dossier will serve as a link to another Tebtunis file, that called by the editors the archive of the descendants of Pakebkis. This family is by no means of a status comparable to that of the Patronid or Lysimachid clans. In 144, Ptolaron and Patron the sons of Paulinos, one a former gymnasiarh and the other gymnasiarh-designate, acknowledged receipt from Kronion the younger, son of Pakebkis, of all rents in kind and in cash owing on a parcel of katoikic land near Theogonis, also in the Polemon division near Tebtunis, for a period of three years. The receipt concludes with the phrase, "the lease remaining valid" (P.Mil. Vogl. 2.54). No amounts are given, suggesting that Kronion had finally succeeded in paying off several years' arrears on the land. The landlord's forbearance and evident desire to keep the tenant are in keeping with Kehoe's thesis about the bargaining position of good tenants and suggest a longer-term relationship. Vandoni suggested that this Kronion was the phrontistes of that name who worked for the Patronids (P.Mil. Vogl. 2, p. 121), and she assigned two more pieces published in that volume, both letters of a woman named Diogenis (P.Mil. Vogl.2.76-77) to the same man and thought they might also be connected to the Patronids. That is rather speculative, and we do not know who Diogenis was; it is possible that she was indeed one of the female members of the Patronid family, about whom we otherwise have little information.

There are two other points of interest about the sons of Pakebkis. One is that a Kronion son of Pakebkis is a well-known figure in the documents pertaining to the priests of Soknebtunis, some thirty years and more later, which come both from the excavations of Grenfell and Hunt (P.Tebt. 2.292, 293, 303, etc.) and in the material purchased by them subsequently and published by John Tait (P.Tebt. Tait 47, introd., and 48). His grandfather was named Harpokration, and his precise relationship to the family I have been discussing is not evident. The other is that the older brother Kronion the elder son of Pakebkis leased a parcel of land in 133, extending the lease in 138 and 143, from one Didymos alias Lourios, son of Lysimachos, grandson of Herakleides alias Lourios. In one case the lease is for seven years, an unusually long term (although it was actually replaced after four years). It is clear that Kronion was a very long-term tenant for this landowner (P.Mil. Vogl. 2.78-79, 4.220). What is more, the lease renewals are of the variety called "prodomatic," in which the tenant pays the rent in advance. This transaction is usually a sign that the landowner is effectively the debtor of the lessee (Vandoni called Kronion "il piccolo capitalista").

You will probably have noticed the lessor's names. A Didymos son of Lysimachos, grandson of Herakleides sounds very much like a member of the Lysimachids whom we looked at earlier. But he does not appear anywhere on the stemma in P.Fam. Tebt. Nor is he one of the unplaceables enumerated by van Groningen. Didymos alias Lourios son of Lysimachos does, however, appear in a
document from the Grenfell and Hunt excavations, *P. Tebt. 2.394*, dated 149, when he would have been about 40
(in *P. Mil. Vogl. 2.78* he is 30 years old in 138/9). I rather imagine that he is just one of those Didymoi not quite placeable but
certainly part of the family.

If all of my suggested connections are correct, the sons of Pakebkis form links between the two grander families, the Patronids and
Lysimachids, and perhaps also with the priestly population of Tebtunis. Kronion the younger also (if Vandoni is right) functioned not
only as a tenant but as a local manager of property for the Patronids. That is, the family can be taken to stand for significant points
of connection between the Hellenic landowning elite, with its dual residences and its involvement both in the village and in cities
(Ptolemais Euergetis in one case, Antinoopolis in the other), and the more influential villagers.

Didymos alias Lourios offers yet another potential connection to other Tebtunis circles, however. His grandfather’s name,
Herakleides alias Lourios, is of considerable interest, as it also appears in the first-century documents from Tebtunis in the Michigan
collection. Strikingly, the first-century Herakleides alias Lourios had a mother named Ptolema, and the Didymos alias Lourios
of *P. Tebt. 2.394* is handling a transaction involving Ptolema daughter of Didymos, who was (as the editors remark) very likely his
daughter. The earlier man received a fairly modest 15 1/2 arouras of katoikic land plus a little over an aroura of vineyard and three
slaves from the fairly ample estate of his father, which had to be divided among six children in AD 48. What the precise relationship
of this family to the Lysimachids is, I do not know. But no one looking at the family trees on p. 17 of *P. Mich. 5* could fail to be
impressed by the very strong coincidence of the onomastic repertory with that of the Lysimachid archive. Unfortunately, we do not
know enough about the status of the people in the Michigan dossiers to be certain what their legal position was, but their
substantial holdings of katoikic land as early as the reign of Tiberius suggest that they were “settlers” in the official sense, part of
the delimited group of Hellenes.

All of what I have said amounts to little more than forays into a large body of documentation, and it would be overreaching to offer
broad conclusions. I shall, however, present a working hypothesis about the fate of the elites of Tebtunis and other major villages
of the Fayyum, and then say something about what seem to me to be the prospects for future work on Roman Tebtunis. First the
hypothesis, which I emphasize is just that in the proper sense, a possible framework into which the evidence might fit but which is
very much subject to being altered or even demolished by further study. Early Roman Tebtunis had both a thriving Egyptian temple
community, with numerous priests who had interests at least in the religious and technical literature pertinent to their status, and a
sizable Greek elite drawn from landed military settlers, many of whom still called themselves Macedonians and whose onomastic
repertory suggests that this claim may not be entirely fictitious. It must have been at least as Greek as any village in the nome.
From it were eventually drawn a significant part of the elite who filled civic offices in the nome metropolis, and from it also some of
the citizenry of the new foundation of Antinoopolis were drawn. When Ptolemais Euergetis received a council and full civic
government from Septimius Severus, it probably drew many of the elite who did not go to Antinoopolis into spending more of their
time in the nome capital and less of it in the village around which their landholdings were scattered. They became focused in the
city, in other words, and it is hard to imagine that they did not turn into largely absentee landlords. Similarly, their resources were
increasingly called on for the development of the metropolis and its civic competition with other cities for glory in games and public
building. Tebtunis was left behind. In this perspective, the drastic decline in village documentation in the third century may not be
purely a fact of hydrological and agricultural decline, nor yet an artifact of archaeology (although seems to be true that much of the
late antique sector of Tebtunis was destroyed by sebakhin), but a real reflection of the progressive withdrawal from active local
presence and participation by this Greek elite. No doubt the next layer down in the hierarchy, the managers and priests, were for
the most part left behind, and of course the estates remained. But the owners were elsewhere, and I suspect what stayed behind
was less wealthy than it once had been.

Now, about prospects for research. It is obvious that the Tebtunis papyri of the Roman period come in several masses, from
different origins: the papyri excavated by Grenfell and Hunt; those found clandestinely and now in many collections, but especially
the huge mass of early material in Michigan and the Lysimachid archive (if indeed that was found at Tebtunis rather than
Antinoopolis); the Cantina dei Papiri and other scattered finds from the Italian excavations of the early 1930s. No one so far has
made a serious effort to connect these masses with one another, and my efforts today have been directed at showing that there
are links to be found; there are undoubtedly many more. The onomastic repertory of the Greek elite seems to me not to have been
terribly large, and names by themselves can be deceiving. But it looks as if the main settler families were (not surprisingly) thoroughly interconnected by marriage, emphasizing the local character of their social existence in the first two centuries of our era. A serious attempt to reconstruct both those families and some of the more significant priestly clans on the Egyptian side seems to me very much worth the effort. Of course, a significant part of this must be cooperation with the new French-Italian excavations at Tebtunis, which I suppose are in full swing again as we meet here. They have found large numbers of papyri, according to the preliminary reports, and these or future finds may (one fondly hopes) provide some of the missing links. Like Karanis, of course, Tebtunis offers also the potential for putting these documents into an archaeological context, a context only partly recoverable for past finds (but more recoverable than one might have thought, as some of Gallazzi’s articles and Ian Begg’s paper here show) but surely establishable for the newer material. The splendid volumes of Tebtunis papyri may in this perspective look not so much like the end of the task as its beginning.

References

D. Kehoe, Management and Investment on Estates in Roman Egypt during the Early Empire (Bonn 1992).