

061: Ptolemaic Egypt – Greeks in an Egyptian Land

In episodes 058 and 059, I spent a significant amount of time covering the the internal workings of Hellenistic Egypt from a political and economic perspective. We are capable of doing this thanks to the large amount of surviving evidence from the region. Well-preserved papyrus fragments and potsherds allow us to reconstruct the mechanisms and processes of the Ptolemaic state. But within many of these archives and records, we find an astonishing number of personal documents that originate from all walks of life: men and women, soldiers and priests, Greeks and Egyptians. We have a grand mosaic of snapshots that enable us to view the experiences of those who lived and died under Ptolemaic rule. No contemporary society yields such a rich body of diverse and detailed evidence outside of the traditional written narratives, and so I wanted to dedicate two episodes to discussing the inhabitants of Ptolemaic Egypt. In this episode, I am going to try to paint a picture of the Greek experience in Egypt, as tens of thousands of immigrants sought a better life as strangers in an ancient land they now called home.

Prior to the arrival of Alexander and the foundation of the Ptolemaic dynasty, Egypt had played host to Greek immigrants for several centuries, who were attracted either by commercial enterprises or the chance to serve as mercenaries in the Pharaoh's army. A few Hellenic communities were established, the most famous of these being the city of Naucratis in the eastern Nile Delta, and they would be given a considerable amount of self-governance by the Egyptian state. But the turbulent period immediately following Alexander's death sparked a wave of immigration that saw tens of thousands of individuals from across the Greek-speaking world pack their bags and head to Egypt. Mainland Greece saw terrible fighting during the late 4th century, which devastated several regions and left many families impoverished. The chance to start a new life, either through independent means or by getting the financial backing of the Ptolemaic government, would prove to be irresistible. Much of this immigration would take place over the 4th and continue into the 3rd century. Estimates of the demographic change of Egypt during this time suggest that by the middle of the 3rd century, approximately 5-10% of the population was ethnically Greek.¹ By any metric, this is a significant increase. Its effects were amplified by the ruling dynasty's Greco-Macedonian origin, and who brought along a powerful military and economic elite who were also of Greek origin, or at least outwardly favored Greek culture.

The motivations to emigrate would largely be economic, and there were several paths that made permanent residence attractive. The most well-known institution would be through service in the Ptolemaic military. The perpetual bouts of warfare waged between the Successors of Alexander ensured that the demand for soldiers, especially those of Greco-Macedonian origin, would always be in high demand. Most of the earliest settlers would come from a military background, either as part of the garrisons left behind by Alexander, or those that were either hired or captured by Ptolemy I.² The institution of the cleruchic system, whereby mercenaries or military recruits would be given a tract of land to ensure their permanent residence and service in Egypt, enabled a steady pool of present and future manpower to draw from. Many of these properties would have been rented out or managed from afar, with the owners often being described as "absentee landlords". But even if they partitioned

¹ Manning, J.G. 2003: 47-49; Manning, J.G. 20: 368; Fischer-Bovet, C. 2014: 170; Clarysse, W. 2019: 299-300

² Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 18.21.7-9, 19.84.1-4, 19.85.3; Plutarch, *Life of Demetrius*, 5, 19; Arrian, *Anabasis*, 3.5.5

some of their land or sublet it, most cleruchs and their families would continue to live on their plots among the villages and various settlements.³

The highest concentration of these Greco-Macedonian cleruchies could be found in the Arsinoite nome, located within the Fayyum depression. This area was the site of a great reclamation project that greatly expanded the amount of arable land within the region. Because it was largely swamp or desert before the project, much of this new land was previously unclaimed, allowing for the settlement of Greco-Macedonian soldiers without the risk of alienating or creating instability from resident Egyptians. By the end of the 3rd century, its population may have swollen to just under 100,000 individuals across 145 settlements, with 1/3rd of all landowners being of a military background.⁴ The Arsinoite also is one of the nomes with the greatest amount of archaeological and papyrological evidence, so we can cautiously extrapolate the experience for Greeks in other nomes as well.

The size of land for the cleruchs varied by rank. Foot soldiers and infantrymen could be given about 25-30 *arouras*, about 20 acres or 8 hectares. Cavalry could receive upwards of 100 *arouras*.⁵ Wealthier families could possess estates that were extraordinarily large. One notable example in the village of Philadelphia belonged to a high ranking Ptolemaic official named Apollonios, which measured an astonishing 10,000 *arouras*, approximately 6,800 acres or 2,750 hectares.⁶ For most living spaces, we find a blend of imported Greek and Egyptian architectural traditions, such as the proliferation of courtyards and bathhouses in conjunction with local building techniques.⁷ Houses tended to be rather compact, and built vertically with a number of rooms – a consequence of living in one of the most densely populated regions in the world.⁸ Wood and marble, the latter of which is so typically associated with Greek architecture, were incredibly expensive and not easily accessible to your average soldier or farmer. Instead, houses were mainly built of mudbrick, the standard building material for Egypt and the Near East for thousands of years. Mud would be mixed with some sort of strengthening or binding agent, like straw or sand, and would be set to bake in the sun or was fired in a kiln oven.⁹ It was cheap, yet durable, and its porous nature enabled the dwelling to breathe in the Egyptian heat. More spacious dwellings could potentially have courtyards or central atriums to circulate air flow. In the more affluent residences, typically Greek amenities could be found: baths, mosaic flooring, frescoes, all intended to beautify the home. Even in the countryside the rich could still acquire luxury goods from the city with relative ease, as seen in a letter from a spoiled daughter to her father from the Arsinoite nome: *Tetos to her father, greetings... When you sail upriver, please bring... 2 medium-sized boxes and 3 smaller ones, 2 caskets, a case for alabaster ornaments, 2 tubes, 2 probes, an unguent box with a ring base and a Sikyonian goblet, 5 staters' weight of myrrh, 3 of nard oil, myrrh oil, oil for the girl for the head... 2 rings, a golden mirrorbox, medium-white linen cloths with purple... And bring up also 2 combs, 2*

³ Fischer-Bovet, C. 2014: 239-242

⁴ Manning, J.G. 2003: 107; Monson, A. 2012: 40-41; Fischer-Bovet, C. 2014: 202-209

⁵ Fischer-Bovet, C. and Sanger P. 2019: 167

⁶ Lewis, N. 1986: 42

⁷ Boozer, A.L. 2019: 363-369

⁸ Redon, B. 2019: 520-522

⁹ David, R. 2003: 229-230

*hairnets, 2 scarlet ones, 2 hair clasps, earrings for the girl, a stater of sea-purple dye.*¹⁰

Many parents raising their children in a somewhat Egyptian environment nevertheless wanted them to pursue a traditional Greek-styled education. For wealthier families, hiring private tutors was one avenue, and for others patronizing a shared instructor to lecture in an outdoor communal space would be more commonplace. For most students, the aim of their education was limited to a basic sense of literacy, and in Greek education repetition was the name of the game: students would start with memorizing the basic alphabet, first by saying out loud or singing it in order, followed by imitating lines written out by the instructor on pieces of potshards or on wax tablets.¹¹ We have a well-preserved tablet from the 2nd century AD which shows the smooth and clean handwriting of the instructor presenting aphorisms for the student to copy. On the bottom half, we see the sloppier attempt on part of the pupil, and the reverse has a multiplication table.¹² Moving past the fundamentals, the teacher would provide passages of Greek literature for students to recite, or to generate moralistic discussions. The general canon of texts that students would read would include classics such as Homer, and perhaps newer works like the poetry of Callimachus.¹³

A major element of a Hellenic education would be through the Gymnasia, present in large urban centers and in most Hellenic villages. This is where young men from adolescence onwards would congregate to exercise and compete in events like wrestling or running. Though the health benefits of physical fitness cannot be discounted, the biggest draw to the gymnasium was that it conferred a marker of status and privilege.¹⁴ These were rigidly governed, and membership was initially restricted to citizens, who were almost entirely Greek in origin, or were able to prove Greek ancestry on both sides of the family.¹⁵ By the 2nd century, we increasingly find Egyptians and Greco-Egyptians in its ranks.¹⁶ Gymnasia were not maintained by the state, and although the government did give tax bonuses to athletic trainers and Greek educators, the majority of them had to be privately funded by wealthy patrons or organized collectively by villagers and residents.¹⁷ We also have examples of affluent patrons providing for the education of orphaned or poverty-stricken boys who were the sons of Greek immigrants or descendants of immigrant families.¹⁸

As with many modern immigrant or diasporic communities, it is not surprising that we find organizations and gatherings centered around their shared background, which could manifest in a couple different forms. One of these is known as the *politeuma*, a group made up of the adult males of the local community styled into a pseudo-governmental body. The *politeumata* were almost entirely military in origin and function, made up of active soldiers and veterans sharing a common ethnic or cultural

¹⁰ BGU 6.1300, Translated from Bagnall, R.S. and Criboire, R. 2006: 106

¹¹ Criboire, R. 2001: 133; Evans, J.A. 2008: 36

¹² Daley, J. 2019

¹³ Benaissa, A. and Remijsen, S. 2019: 386

¹⁴ Benaissa, A. and Remijsen, S. 2019: 389

¹⁵ Criboire, R. 2001: 35

¹⁶ Fischer-Bovet, C. 2014: 280-290

¹⁷ *P.Hal.* 1.261; Benaissa, A. and Remijsen, S. 2019: 387-388

¹⁸ *P.Cair.Zen* I 59060; *P.Lond.* VII 1941

background.¹⁹ Much of our surviving evidence comes from Jewish *politeumata*, but we can confidently extrapolate their behavior to that of the Greek ones. *Politeumata* were often divided by geographic origin – for instance, we have records of an organization of Cretans operating out of the Fayyum in 145 BC.²⁰ While there was no real effective political autonomy, its members could vote on motions that dictated the internal policy of the organization at large, who could collectively contribute to local projects or events – for example, the establishment of local temples or festivals to a particular deity. To draw a modern comparison, the *politeumata* are akin to modern veteran organizations, such as the American Legion. Beyond the countryside, large numbers of Greeks would congregate in cities, with the most well-known of these being Alexandria in the Nile Delta and Ptolemais in the Thebaid. As per their foundation by the Ptolemies, these would be Hellenic-styled cities, containing institutions befitting a Greek *polis*.²¹ Members could participate in the assemblies, and be organized into *demes* or tribes. This may seem odd for a state headed by a powerful monarch, but the cities were generally responsible for their own maintenance, and it would relieve some of the burden of the Ptolemaic government.

Outside of soldiering, how did Greeks make a living? As always, there was agriculture. As we discussed in episode 059, the fertility brought about by the annual flooding of the Nile River made Egypt the most productive region in the known world. It was therefore logical that for immigrants, many of whom came from family farms, planting crops and raising livestock remained the default profession. Even those who were wealthy enough to afford high ranking administrative or military positions still often sought to engage in farming as a side venture. To better acclimate to their new settings, Greek farmers and entrepreneurs introduced several crops from their homeland.²² The grapevine and viticulture were long known to the Egyptians, but for them beer remained the alcoholic drink of choice, and the wine industry exploded in response to the demands of the Greeks. The village of Oxyrhynca was specialized to produce Lycian clove garlic, and instead of emmer wheat the Greeks preferred durum.²³ The enormous size of the aforementioned Philadelphian estate of Apollonius made it possible to try cultivating more unusual species on spare land, such as the poppy plant from which opium could be derived.²⁴ The olive tree, a staple of Mediterranean life, was grown in great quantities along with other native oil-bearing crops like sesame and castor beans. The oil would then be extracted in government-run operations to process into food or fuel.²⁵

Women were also involved in the economic life of the region. Given that the Arsinoite nome was more Hellenized, we rarely find women possessing property in their own name, and their involvement in agriculture did not really extend into heavy manual labor beyond orchard and vineyard maintenance.²⁶ But the textile industry was by and large female-dominated: registries show that 784 women across only

¹⁹ Honigman, S. 2003: 64-67; Honigman, S. 2019: 318-319

²⁰ *P. Tebt.* 32

²¹ Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.42; Monson, A. 2012: 262; Chaveau, M. 1997: 57; Fraser, P.M. 1972: 93–131

²² Manning, J.G. 2003: 116; Clarysse, W. 2019: 300

²³ Crawford, D.J. 1973: 350-363

²⁴ Manning, J.G. 2010: 162-163

²⁵ *P. Hamb.* 24

²⁶ Pomeroy, S.B. 1984: 153-155; Schentuleit, M. 2019: 356-357

three villages in the Fayyum were responsible for the production or processing of wool, and a mill owned by a local estate owner was almost entirely staffed with female weavers.²⁷ Legally, Greek women in Egypt were given greater flexibility than those on the mainland or in the Aegean. They still were often required to have a male guardian cosign any sort of contracts or documents tied to business or legal transactions, but their rights to participate in any capacity had gradually expanded over time. By the early 2nd century, we have the case of Eirene, a woman of Macedonian descent living in the Fayyum.²⁸ From her records kept between 185-178 BC, we see that Eirene had personally managed pomegranate and olive orchards, a vineyard, and a garden containing caraway and henna. Though she is often seen paying off debts accrued from loans, the fact that she was able to take out such business loans or run a farm at all would have been inconceivable to a woman of 5th century Athens.

Another perspective to consider is the lot of the slave. While slavery had existed in Egypt prior to the arrival of the Macedonians, the Greek world was generally more accepting of the practice, and the institution has been thought to have expanded under the rule of the Ptolemies.²⁹ For the many military families stationed in the Fayyum, slaves would have been a common sight, either toiling in the fields or serving as attendants in the household. The persistent warfare and raiding in Syria between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid armies would allow the soldiers to enslave either prisoners of war taken in battle, or the civilians caught in the crossfire.³⁰ Many of them would end up on the estates of the settlers in the Arsinoite nome. Syria proved to be such a problematic region for enslavement that the Egyptian government had to step in to try and curb the behavior: according to an edict of Ptolemy II dating to 260, all slaves taken from Syria needed to be documented and registered, with the owner providing proof that they were not free Syrians upon the time of acquisition.³¹ We do have copies of wills being drawn up by more generous slaveowners granting manumission to their slaves upon their deaths (though calling the emancipation of slaves after you are unable to use them as “generous” may be going too far).³²

If the farmer’s life wasn’t for one, there were plenty of opportunities to pursue within the city. Urban workshops specialized in the production of glassware, perfumes, and metalwork were always in need of skilled craftsmen and women.³³ Individuals with a greater tolerance for risk could look into joining the merchant communities, who took advantage of Egypt’s advantageous position for trade and commerce. If they were especially daring, merchants could try and sponsor long-distance expeditions to get access to the networks of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

²⁷ *P.Cair.Zen.* II 59295; Men, however, also worked alongside women in these factories, sometimes earning double or triple the pay, see Pomeroy, S.B. 1984: 168-169

²⁸ Discussed in Pomeroy, S.B. 1984: 158-160

²⁹ Thompson, D.J. 2011: 202-212

³⁰ Thompson, D.J. 2011: 206-208

³¹ *C.Ord.Ptol.* 22; Millar, F. 1987: 118-120

³² *P.Petr.* II 3.9–23

³³ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 15.689; Pomeroy, S.B. 1984: 164-170; Chaveau, M. 1997: 93-95

I have largely talked about the Greeks of Egypt as if they were an insular, closed-off community attempting to carve out a “Little Hellas” along the Nile River. As we have seen, many elements suggest that they were consciously striving to ensure that they were seen as Greeks, and sought to retain many ties to their ancestry. In part, the Greeks did occupy a higher position within the hierarchy of Hellenistic Egypt. But such an attitude can be tied to their status as part of a diasporic community, where immigrant families often seek out other groups that share the same cultural background or geographic origin. As attested to by our sources, the cosmopolitan populations of cities like Alexandria gathered (subconsciously or otherwise) into areas that could be broadly labeled with such terms like “the Greek district”, or the “Jewish quarter”.³⁴ However, the Greeks did not (and could not) live in a vacuum. Despite being one of the most Hellenized regions of Egypt, Greco-Macedonian settlers only made up about 30% of the total population of the Arsinoite nome, as internal immigration brought many Egyptians to the Fayyum to till the land of the cleruchs or work in the reclamation projects.³⁵ Daily interactions between the two groups was inevitable, something that I will be going into depth on later this episode, and especially the next one. But for now, I want to spend the remaining part of the episode looking at some of the faces and names that emerge in the papyrological record, giving us a personal insight into the experiences of what life was like in Ptolemaic Egypt.

The immense wealth of the Ptolemies allowed them to undertake several great building projects over much of their reign: the construction and beautification of Alexandria and other major cities, the reclamation of the Fayyum, the building of their great naval fleets. All of these required a horde of architects, engineers, artists, and shipwrights to carry out these tasks. Most of these roles would be filled by Greek professionals, who saw the chance to be bankrolled by the seemingly bottomless Egyptian coffers as an excellent career move. One of these ambitious artisans was an engineer named Kleon.³⁶ From the late 260s down to the early 240s, Kleon served as the head of the massive irrigation project in the Fayyum Oasis for Ptolemy II Philadelphus, and much of his paperwork has survived to the present. While we can gain a great deal of insight into the engineering feats required to turn desert into lush farmland, we find the records of a man struggling against logistical challenges and ever-increasing demands from his boss, the king.

Whether he was considered part of the *philoï* (the Royal Friends) is unknown, but Kleon probably was meeting directly with Ptolemy II on a regular basis and they likely had some sort of personal relationship. As per the exchange, Kleon was well compensated: his annual salary was about 15 times

³⁴ Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.12; Polybius, *The Histories*, 34.14; Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.4

³⁵ Clarysse, W. 2019: 299

³⁶ Treated in Lewis, N. 1986: 37-45; Vandorpe, K. 2019: 272-273

that of a skilled craftsman working 365 days of the year.³⁷ But the job also came with some considerable headaches. The objective of the project was to install drainage channels that would increase the amount of arable land in the Fayyum by reducing the water level of the nearby Lake Moeris, while also adding irrigation canals to funnel water and silt from the Nile for the crops. This was an incredible undertaking. Kleon faced struggles from both man and nature: the annual flooding of the Nile would either stall or outright undermine any progress, and the backbreaking and relatively low-paying work incited his workers to strike.³⁸ There was always a need for more supplies: tools, pack animals, wood. Kleon constantly begged his superiors for more of the resources necessary to continue the project, some of whom could only pass it on to the next person in the chain of command. His loyal subordinate Theodoros was able to shoulder some of the burden, but little could be done to cut through the red tape and limitations in travel time.

Of a particular source of annoyance was Apollonius, the chief finance minister of Ptolemy, who's enormous estate bordered the area. In a blatant display of corruption, Apollonius would harass Kleon into diverting manpower and time to take care of his property. Even when given the requested employees, Apollonius forced Kleon's men to work more difficult jobs that ended up damaging many of their tools and equipment.³⁹ And if Kleon attempted to ignore or failed in his duties, there was always the explicit threat of Apollonius smearing Kleon's reputation to the king. One of the letters from Apollonius' estate manager in October of 257 reads as follows:

Panakestor to Kleon, greeting. We sent you word already on the 29th to send a crew to reconstruct the bends of the small canal. But you obviously just passed us by on your way to the small lake. Now, you shouldn't have passed us by but have come over for a while and inquired, when you saw that the land is unwatered, why we do not irrigate. For you have been appointed commissioner of works not only for the small lake, but for here as well. So now at long last do come and meet us tomorrow at the sluice and direct what we must do to get the water past the bends, for we are inexperienced. We will provide you with the manpower and the rest of what you need, all that you order. But if you do not show up, we will be forced to write to Apollonius that in [all the Arsinoite nome] his land alone is not irrigated, even though we are willing to supply everything necessary. Goodbye.⁴⁰

From the letters, we see that Kleon was beginning to crack under the pressure. Deadlines seem to have been missed, and Kleon was publicly and verbally thrashed by Ptolemy for his failures. His wife Metrodora got wind of the king's anger, and wrote to her husband:

Metrodora to Kleon, greetings . . . You have been urging me to come to you, and I would have left everything behind and come; but now I am in no small fear about how things will turn out for you and us. For the [Royal] huntsmen who arrived early this morning reported to me what had happened to you, that the king treated you harshly when he came to the Lake . . .⁴¹

³⁷ Reekmans, T. 1970: 17-24

³⁸ *P. Petr.* II 4(8)

³⁹ *P. Petr.* II 4(1), 4(9); Metrens, B. 1985: 61-66

⁴⁰ *P. Petr.* II 13(5), Translation from Lewis, N. 1986: 43

⁴¹ *P. Petr.* II 42 H (8), Translated from Bagnall, R.S. and Cribiore, R. 2006: 110

His eldest son Philonides wrote to him as well, urging Kleon to not overwork himself to death and try to retire:

...for in this way you will be able to obtain the king's favor again in the future. Absolutely nothing will be more important to me than to care for you for the rest of your life in a manner worthy of you and worthy of me...both as long as you live and when you have departed to the gods. So please make every effort to be released permanently... Just bear in mind that you will experience no disgrace, and that everything will be seen to by me for your being free of pain and sorrow.⁴²

By the year 252, Kleon gradually stepped down from the project and handed it to Theodoros. We aren't sure of his fate, either enjoying a quiet retirement or ending his career in public disgrace. But his letters allow us to get a better picture of the highly competitive nature and politicking of those looking to maintain their position among the king's favorites.

Continuing within the world of civil service, the bureaucratic nature of the Ptolemaic government meant that positions overseeing law and order within the nomes were excellent opportunities for social mobility. One major archive belonged to Diophanes, the military governor of the Arsinoite nome from roughly 222-218 BC. The archives themselves don't really give us that much information about Diophanes the man, but instead we have access to a vast collection of petitions relating to civil and legal disputes from the Fayyum villagers. Most of them are addressed to King Ptolemy, but the role of the *strategos* was delegated enough power to selectively filter these requests and provide judicial oversight whenever possible. The records themselves are notated by Diophanes or his subordinates, usually dictating the course of action and the outcomes of those proceedings in a fairly formulaic manner. Diophanes' response usually is to try and have a settlement between the two parties, before getting it sent to one of the courts. The courts themselves were organized based on ethnicity: Greeks would go to Greek courts, Egyptians to Egyptian courts, Jews to Jewish courts, etc. Court proceedings generally conformed to the culture of the tribunals. Egyptians would often go in front of Egyptian tribunals based on the preexisting legal framework, whereas Greeks would be subject to the laws using terms and structures based on Greek definitions and frameworks.

Most of these are tied to business conflicts, theft, and property damage. In one case, a woman named Philista sued a bathhouse attendant:

To King Ptolemy greeting from Philista daughter of Lysias resident in Tricomia. I am wronged by Petechon. For as I was bathing in the baths of the aforesaid village... and had stepped out to soap myself, he being bathman in the women's rotunda and having brought in the jugs of hot water emptied one (?) over me and scalded my body and my left thigh down to the knee, so that my life was in danger... I beg you therefore, O king, if it please you, as a suppliant who has sought your protection, not to suffer me, who am a working woman, to be thus lawlessly treated...⁴³

Another was submitted by a farmer who's fields were damaged by the irrigation of a neighboring plots:

⁴² P. Petr. II 13(19), Translation from Lewis, N. 1986: 44-45

⁴³ P. Ent. 82; Translation from <http://www.attalus.org/docs/select2/p269.html>

To King Ptolemy, greetings from Idomeneus [of the village of Kaminoi]... I am wronged by Pteobastis son of Taos and Horos son of Keleesis, of the same village. I am the lessee of two arouras on the estate of Chrysermos, and after I planted the land to chickling, Petobastis and Horos flooded my field, washing out the seed, so that my chickling is a total loss and I cannot even recover my out-of-pocket expenditures on the land. O king, if it please you, to instruct Diophanes the strategos to write to Hephaestion the police chief to send Petobastis and Horos... and if I demonstrate that they flooded and washed out my sown field, [I beg] that they be compelled to take over my field and pay the rent, and that I be given out of the land that they farm an equal tract in exchange for the one they flooded. When that is done, fleeing for refuge to you, O king, I shall be able to pay my rent to Chrysermos, and I shall have experienced your benevolence. Farewell.

While we today might be somewhat cynical towards the idea of lawsuits, and certainly there are a few “mundane” examples, I think that the petitions above are much more serious in the context of an ancient agrarian labor society. A serious burn is bad today for obvious reasons, but in the absence of antibiotics it could easily be fatal. It is also important to note that Philista was mainly concerned by the fact that she could not work, as was Idomeneus. For your average peasant-farmer, the threat of destitution seems to be ever-present, even in a kingdom as powerful and wealthy as Ptolemaic Egypt. The domestic disputes that found their way to the desk of Diophanes gives us a look into the sad and sometimes absurd realities of everyday people. In this instance a father lays a charge against his son: *To King Ptolemy, greeting from Pappos. I am wronged by Strouthos, my son. I sent him to school and gave him a good education. When I grew old and could not provide my own subsistence, I appeared in the village of Arsinoe before Dioskourides, your deputy, who ordered him to furnish me with one artab of wheat and four drachmas per month... But despite that he has given me nothing of what was agreed to, and whenever he meets me he abuses me most shamefully. What is more, he forces his way into my house and each time he makes off with whatever piece of houseware is handy, disregarding me because I am old and losing my sight.... restrain [Strouthos] from violence and make him furnish sureties for my pension, so that he will pay it regularly in the future...⁴⁴*

In a similar situation, a father bemoans his neglect by his daughter and her boyfriend: *To King Ptolemy greeting from Ctesicles. I am being wronged by Dionysius and my daughter Nicē. For though I had nurtured her, being my own daughter, and educated her and brought her up to womanhood, when I was stricken with bodily infirmity and my eyesight enfeebled she would not furnish me with any of the necessaries of life... Now, however, corrupted by Dionysius, who is a comedian, she is not keeping any of her engagements to me, in contempt of my old age and my present infirmity. I beg you therefore, O king, not to suffer me to be wronged by my daughter and Dionysius the comedian who has corrupted her, but to order Diophanes the strategos to summon them and hear our case; and if my words are true, let Diophanes deal with her corrupter as seems good to him and compel my daughter Nicē to yield me my rights... For by this means I shall no longer be wronged, but having sought your protection, O king, I shall obtain justice.⁴⁵*

⁴⁴ P. Ent. 25; Translation from Lewis, N. 1986: 67

⁴⁵ P. Ent. 26; Translation from <http://www.attalus.org/docs/select2/p268.html>

Diophanes' papers also reveal the simmering tensions that could bubble up to the surface between Greeks and Egyptians. About 25% of the archive is related to cases between Greeks and Egyptians, and of those about three-quarters of them are charges laid by the former against the latter.⁴⁶

One particularly noteworthy petition was related to the assault of a Greek traveler by an Egyptian woman:

To King Ptolemy, Greeting from Herakleides... I went to Pysa in the [Arsinoite] nome on a personal matter. As I was passing by [her house], an Egyptian woman, who's name is said to be Psenobastis, leaned out of a window and emptied a chamber pot of urine over my clothes, so that I was completely drenched. When I angrily reproached her, she hurled abuse at me. When I responded in kind, Psenobastis with her own right hand pulled the fold of my cloak in which I was wrapped, tore it and ripped it off me...she also spat in my face, in the presence of several people whom I called to witness...O king, if it not please you, not to ignore my being thus, for no reason, manhandled by an Egyptian woman, whereas I am a Greek and a visitor...⁴⁷

It is important to note that in many of these instances where Greeks charge Egyptians with assault or other personal damages, the petitioner explicitly emphasizes their status as Greeks to magnify the severity of the crime – a reminder of the hierarchical position the Greeks held over the Egyptians. However, not all interactions between the two cultures were strained. We do find evidence of Greeks acting as witnesses on behalf of Egyptian petitioners, such as the Egyptian woman Tetosiris who attempted to bring in a wealthier Greek landowner to argue on her behalf.⁴⁸

Moving from the legal and bureaucratic aspects of society, let's turn over to the spiritual side of life. Greeks have always had a peculiar relationship with Egypt when it comes to divine matters – Herodotus famously asserted that the Greek pantheon had either come from Egypt or had resided there at some point or another.⁴⁹ Alexander the Great interpreted the Egyptian god Amun as a horned version of Zeus known as Zeus-Ammon.⁵⁰ Then Ptolemy I took an additional step further by intentionally crafting a new god, Serapis, by pulling elements from the Hellenic and Egyptian pantheons into a single hybridized deity. This was allegedly done to create a common ground for Greeks and Egyptians alike in order to try and keep the peace between the two groups, making it easier for the Ptolemaic government to rule over both parties.⁵¹ But other Egyptian gods and goddesses became highly venerated by Greeks on their own terms, albeit with a few twists: the Hellenized Isis was carried throughout the Mediterranean world; and the deified pyramid architect Imhotep was associated with Asclepius, the Greek god of healing.

The veneration of the new Greco-Egyptian pantheon could be quite powerful to its believers. Recovered from the Serapeum of Memphis, we have a fragment of a papyrus that invokes Serapis to issue a curse on a woman's neglectful former lover and father of their deceased child:

⁴⁶ Translation from Lewis, N. 1986: 59-60

⁴⁷ *P. Ent.* 79; Translation from Lewis, N. 1986: 61

⁴⁸ *P. Ent.* 86

⁴⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 2.50

⁵⁰ Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 26-27; Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 3.3.1-3.4.5

⁵¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.83-84; Pfeiffer, S. 2008: 387-408; Naether, F. 2019: 439-440

O lord Oserapis and the gods who sit with Oserapis, I Artemisia the daughter of Amasis [direct a prayer?] to you, against the father of my daughter, who has deprived her of her funeral rites and burial. So if he has not treated me and his children rightly, indeed has treated me and his children wrongly, may Oserapis and the gods grant him that he does not receive burial from his children, and that he does not bury his own parents. While the cry for help lies here, may he and what is his be destroyed evilly on land and on sea by Oserapis and the gods who sit in the house of Oserapis, and may he not receive the favour of Oserapis or of the gods who sit with Oserapis. Artemisia has deposited this appeal, begging Oserapis and the gods who sit with Oserapis to give judgement. While the appeal lies here, may the father of the young girl receive no favours at all from the gods. If anyone [removes] this document and wrongs Artemisia, may the god inflict punishment on him...⁵²

One of the most unique stories to emerge from the papyrological record is that of a deeply religious individual named Ptolemaeus.⁵³ The eldest of four sons of a Macedonian soldier named Glaukias, Ptolemaeus was born just before the turn of the 3rd century BC in the Herakleopolite nome. While the second and third brothers left home to pursue their fortunes as businessmen, Ptolemaeus had experienced something of an epiphany regarding his purpose in life at the age of 30. In about 172 BC, he changed his trajectory from a business career and took up residence within the complex of the Serapeum in Memphis, dedicating the rest of his life in service of the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis. We aren't quite sure what exactly Ptolemaeus' role in the temple was – some scholars believe he might have voluntarily become a temple slave, or he adopted the lifestyle of a reclusive ascetic. He possessed little in the ways of material goods, living within a small, shared cell inside of the Temple of Astarte immediately adjacent to the Serapeum. Ptolemaeus was not allowed to freely leave the complex except for matters of importance, such as weddings or funerals. He was given a small monthly allowance of grain and oil, along with some money, but he does not appear to have functioned in any official capacity to the same degree as the established priesthood.

While restrictions were placed upon his unique position, Ptolemaeus nevertheless kept close ties to his brothers. In part, this was because the monthly stipend was not enough to provide for his daily upkeep of food and drink. But of all his siblings, Ptolemaeus would form the strongest bond with the youngest, Apollonius. Their father Glaukias had been killed by rebel forces in 164, when Apollonius was no more than the age of 10, and so Ptolemaeus became the legal guardian and father figure for the young boy. Apollonius would be his eldest brother's main point of contact with the outside world, and frequently served as his scribe, a change that is distinctly recognized by papyrologists given Apollonius' poorer handwriting and grammar.⁵⁴ Ptolemaeus meanwhile was responsible for overseeing the lad's future: one petition to Ptolemy VI and Cleopatra II was sent in 160 demanding justice for Apollonius, as their family home was plundered by unscrupulous neighbors, which put his inheritance in jeopardy.⁵⁵ It seems that Apollonius tried to follow in Ptolemaeus' footsteps, and briefly became a devotee of the Serapeum as well. It must have not been what it had cracked up to be, and he was soon enlisted into the army on

⁵² UPZ 11; Translation from Rowlandson, J. (1998): 65

⁵³ Treated extensively in Lewis, N. 1986: 69-87; Chaveau, M. 1997: 123-134

⁵⁴ Lewis, N. 1986: 76

⁵⁵ UPZ 10

behalf of a petition to the King Ptolemy from his eldest brother – a document that has become quite famous for demonstrating the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the Egyptian government, and how Ptolemaeus had to go through a significant amount of effort to make his request.⁵⁶

Bureaucratic drudgery aside, the documents of Ptolemaeus provide an image of a man who held a deeply personal connection to his particular deity. I spoke of him undergoing an epiphany prior to his seclusion, but that's only an assumption. Ptolemaeus never revealed the reason behind his decision to become a devoted servant of Serapis. His many petitions and letters regarding affairs that he could only be involved with through intermediaries reveals the extent to which he devoted himself to his secluded lifestyle, even in the face of legal battles or personal harm. Despite the idealized conception of Serapis' existence, a god that was allegedly created to unify both Greek and Egyptian alike, Ptolemaeus' writings also show a man struggling to be accepted by his predominately Egyptian peers. He did get along with his roommate and fellow recluse, an Egyptian named Haremhab, and both he and Apollonius were able to speak and write in Egyptian to some extent.⁵⁷ But in less than seven years Ptolemaeus had sent at least three petitions (that we know of) describing how he was violently assaulted by Egyptians. The perpetrators were not only local Memphites, but also members of the Egyptian clergy. In one complaint, Ptolemaeus describes an attack that took place in 161:

"...from Ptolemaeus, son of Glaukias, a Macedonian, a recluse in The Great Serapeum these twelve years. As I have been outrageously wronged and placed at risk of life by the temple cleaners named below, I [hereby] flee to you for succor, thinking thus to obtain my rights. On [November 9th] they appeared in the Astarte shrine...and they tried, some with stones in their hands, others with rods, to force their way in, in order to plunder the temple on some pretext and to kill me – and that despite the fact that I'm Greek!... I beat them to the door and locked it, and at the top of my voice exhorted them to withdraw in peace, but even then they did not depart, and when a certain Diphilos...expressed his indignation at how they were carrying on in such a holy place, they shoved him and maltreated him and beat him outrageously, so that their lawless violence was plain for all to see..."⁵⁸

Yet, these horrible experiences did not deter Ptolemaeus from his duty to Serapis. Dreams are a recurring theme within Ptolemaeus' writings. Serapis was an oracular god, thought to visit his followers as they slept to provide answers for their questions or to give prophecies. Oneiromancy was a phenomenon that was common to the Greek world, especially when it came to deities like the healing god Asclepius, and the injured or sick would sleep at the temple or shrine to be given a cure for their ailments.⁵⁹ Egypt was no stranger to it either, perhaps most famously exemplified by the writings of Thutmose IV on the appropriately-named Dream Stele, where the soon-to-be pharaoh was visited in his sleep by an apparitions of the great Sphinx at Giza promising that he would be given the throne in return for restoring the monument to its previous glory.⁶⁰ Ptolemaeus' recorded several of his, unfortunately they aren't so clearly structured as Thutmose's. Some of them are short and sweet, others are more

⁵⁶ UPZ 14

⁵⁷ Tovar, S.T. and Vierros, M. 2019: 490

⁵⁸ UPZ 15, Translated by Lewis, N. 1986: 86

⁵⁹ Bonnechere, P. 2007: 153-154

⁶⁰ See <https://hmane.harvard.edu/dream-stela>

detailed. For example:

I seemed in my dream to be calling repeatedly upon the very great god Ammon to come to me from the north in his trinity. At last he arrives. It seems to me there is a cow in the place and she is heavy with young. He takes hold of the cow and lays her on the ground. He inserts his hand into her swollen belly and draws out a bull.

Curiously, Ptolemaeus' dreams appear to have been bilingual. In a letter written to his friend Achilles, Ptolemaeus attempted to describe one of his dreams, before pausing and elaborating how he was going to write in Egyptian to convey the details and meaning more accurately.⁶¹ Despite his relatively brief stint as a devotee, Apollonius' writings indicate that he dreamt in Egyptian as well.⁶² Evidence for Greeks learning Egyptian – either in its Demotic or Hieroglyphic form – is not common, but it did happen. Those living in Upper Egypt, as was the case for Ptolemaeus, would need to pick up at least some of the language if they were going to interact with the Egyptian community. Bilingualism seems to have been considered a valuable trait: one surviving letter between family members congratulates the other for learning a how to write in Demotic.⁶³ From the same letter, we can also grimly determine that slaves who were also proficient in Egyptian would be considered more valuable on the market.

A common subject of Ptolemaeus' dreams were the Egyptian twins Taus and Thaues. Abandoned by a neglectful mother who attempted to have their father killed by her secret lover, the twins and their older sister Tathemis sought refuge at the Serapeum without any money and unable to speak a word of Greek.⁶⁴ Fortunately for them, the girls arrived at the temple at just after the death of the sacred Apis bull in April of 164 – twins were seen as a good omen, and so they were able to act as stand-ins for the sister goddesses Isis and Nephthys during the funeral procession.⁶⁵ But they were more fortunate to have become wards of Ptolemaeus, a friend of their father, who took responsibility for overseeing their well-being and legal protection. Although Ptolemaeus may have gained some tangible benefits for doing so (in the form of some of the temple allowances granted to the sisters), he believed he was commanded by Serapis to safeguard them. He at one point describes it as his "divine custody", making sure to issue petitions on their behalf to ensure that they receive their inheritance and are protected from the schemes of their unscrupulous mother and half-brother. In his dreams, they frequently appear: *The dream that Ptolemaeus saw at the Moon Festival on Pachon 25th: I seem to see Thaues singing aloud in a rather sweet voice and in good spirits; and I see Taous laughing, and her foot is big and clean. On the 29th: Two men are working in the vestibule. Taous is sitting on the steps and joking with them, and on hearing the voice of Khentosney, she immediately turns black.*⁶⁶

Our records of Ptolemaeus last down to 152/151, but it seems to have not ended particularly well. Apollonius had deserted his post in the army during the troubles of 152, and the twins left the Serapeum in 158, thus depriving him of the necessary income. Ptolemaeus was now utterly alone. One of his last

⁶¹ Renberg, G.H. and Naether, F. 2010: 49-71

⁶² Chaveau, M. 1997: 131-132

⁶³ UPZ 148

⁶⁴ UPZ 18, UPZ 19

⁶⁵ UPZ 19, UPZ 42, UPZ 57,

⁶⁶ UPZ 77-80, Translated by Lewis, N. 1986: 81-82

records is bitter in tone, resentful towards the god he had dedicated so much of his life to:
*...for it is [the gods] who have cast us into the mire, where we are all but dead...I should be ashamed when we have devoted ourselves to chimeras sent by the gods and to belief in dreams in which we have made errors.*⁶⁷

As we bring the story of Ptolemaeus to a close, so too do we bring a close to this episode. But the next time we meet, I want to give the same treatment to the other side of the story. We will be looking at Hellenistic Egypt from the point of view of the native Egyptians themselves, to see how they reacted to a new political, social, and cultural elite brought about by the Macedonian conquests.

⁶⁷ UPZ 71, Translated in Chaveau, M. 1997: 134

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