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Diversity in Detention: Ptolemaic Prisons

The papyri provide a wealth of details on the Ptolemaic prison system. Many scholars have made valuable contributions to the study of its organization, but much work remains. In this paper I argue for three modifications to prevailing views on Ptolemaic imprisonment: that incarceration followed a variety of offenses; that a number of specialized prisons served specific classes of offenders; and that very lengthy detention was not uncommon. These findings could suggest that we need a new model of the Ptolemaic prison system, one that differs dramatically from those observable in other ancient states.

The prevailing view holds that imprisonment in the Greek world was primarily imposed for public and private debts. Of 101 references to incarceration in the Ptolemaic period, 17 seem to refer to prison stays for debts. Yet more than half of these are dubious and may not even concern imprisonment for debt. Further, at least 15 additional texts detail detentions carried out for crimes ranging from assault to theft, from poor workmanship to disturbing the peace. Unlike the prisons of other ancient Mediterranean states, Ptolemaic holding-cells were employed for far more than tax cheats.

It has likewise been argued that private offenders were imprisoned in *desmôtêria* and fiscal offenders in *praktoreia* or *logistêria*. Yet in the majority of cases the offenses for which individuals were imprisoned in *desmôtêria* are unclear. Further, it seems that many private offenders were placed in *phylakai*. As for fiscal offenders, we know of only one public debtor incarcerated in a *praktoreion* and none imprisoned in a *logistêrion*. But three texts describe incarceration in *heirktoi* for such offenses, and a handful of royal decrees specifically prohibit detention for private violations in these same buildings. Another text mentions detention in the *synochê* for a debt to the crown. As the evidence demonstrates, regulations for the incarceration of suspects were more flexible than has previously been allowed.

Periods of detention in Ptolemaic jails were also flexible, as previous scholars have indicated. In almost two dozen instances we know precisely how long offenders were kept in prison. A dozen incarcerations were shorter than one month. On the other hand, seven, and perhaps eight or nine lasted more than one month, one as long as three years. This startling split in the evidence and the oft-repeated fear of prolonged suffering in jail, even death, that we find expressed in letters from inmates suggests that very lengthy stays in the lock-up may have been a regular occurrence: a striking contrast to the common belief that detention in the ancient world was generally short-term.

The evidence for imprisonment in Ptolemaic times demonstrates that the Greek rulers of Egypt provided their police officials with a variety of options for the incarceration of offenders in a number of specialized prisons: a surprising discovery, given the prevailing view of the Ptolemaic state as a rigid, autocratic entity. The data also suggest that the Ptolemies encouraged an active approach to arrests and incarceration, in contrast to the generally hands-off methods of crime-fighting and detention of criminals observable in

other ancient Mediterranean states, among these Athens and Rome. The evidence for imprisonment in Ptolemaic times provides a window into a strikingly original, diverse and flexible entity.