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'The King is Dead -- Long Live the King!' An analysis of recognition dates on Egyptian papyri

Recognition of the authority of the emperor by his meaner subjects is one of the most fundamental expressions of provincial loyalty and the most basic form of the reception of imperial ideology. Determining the wider extent of this among provincials is difficult, however, due to the often elite and anecdotal nature of the evidence and the problems involved in studying ignorance or inefficiency in past societies. Papyrus dates which name the emperor, however, demonstrate this kind of basic recognition of imperial authority, and can be used to gauge the wider extent of the reception of imperial ideology in the provinces. Dates on papyri constitute menial bureaucratic conventions, but also expressions of loyalty to the reigning emperor by numerous provincial scribes.

The first and last Egyptian papyri dated to the reigns of each emperor are often used as one of the best measures for the absolute chronology of a given reign. In this scenario, the news of the death of one emperor and the accession of another spread slowly down the Nile, and, when they got the message, village scribes would stop using the previous emperor's name by which to reckon regnal years, and begin using the name of his successor instead. The systematic implementation of the new titulature in these provincial villages is taken to be a testimony to the efficiency of the imperial administration and a demonstration of provincial loyalty.

However, statistical analysis across nearly six thousand Egyptian papyri and ostraka securely dated (month, day, and year) to the 180- year period between 76 and 255 AD raises some troubling questions about these interregnal periods. Across these preserved papyri, the length of time between the last papyrus dated by an old emperor and the first papyrus dated by the new emperor is, on average, nearly five times longer than the average length of time between surviving papyri dated by the same emperor. There are, in other words, five times fewer papyri dated to interregnal periods than we would expect. This is the case even when the succession in Rome was very quickly determined. Accounting for seasonal and yearly variations in papyrus-output, using multivariable linear regression, confirms the significance of this interregnal situation.

In the absence of any obvious sampling bias due to the archaeological preservation and academic publication of the corpus of papyri, the overall evidence of papyrus-dates suggests that upon the news of the death of an emperor, many scribes may have been ignorant of, or hesitated to use, a new emperor's name, and used other means, if any, to date their papyri. Ignorance of the new emperor's name, anticipation of official news or ceremony, lack of faith in the new regime, and administrative apathy may have all led to fewer scribes using a new emperor's name in dating formulae during these periods. More importantly, this has important implications for how we view the dissemination and reception of news and imperial ideology in provincial towns. Inefficiency and public ignorance may have characterized the reception of imperial news and events, balancing and tempering the opposite view based on epigraphic, numismatic, and juristic evidence. Loyalty to the existing regime, measured by simple recognition of the emperor's

authority, seems to have waned upon the death of an emperor. This analysis thus has important implications for how we understand the functioning of imperial ideology in the Roman Empire, and certainly complicates the paradigm of quick, smooth efficiency in the dissemination of news within the Roman provinces.