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Archiphylakitai in Ptolemaic Egypt: a Hierarchy of Equals?

For the past half-century, scholars have subscribed to the view that police administration in Ptolemaic Egypt was uniform across the nomes (provinces) of the kingdom, and that police chiefs (*archiphylakitai*) in the villages were connected to nome-level chiefs by a lengthy chain of command (*cf.* Kool [1954]). This paper argues that neither was the case: that administrative structures varied from nome to nome, and that the hierarchy of police chiefs in Ptolemaic Egypt was flat. These two important observations suggest that the Ptolemaic system of law and order was easily accessible to the population and surprisingly efficient.

The official domains of police chiefs were varied. They are most commonly attested for villages, but also for villages and neighboring districts, *merides* and toparchies (provincial subdivisions), the nomes themselves, and even temples. Yet the pattern of local organization was not always the same. Chiefs of the Arsinoite and Pathyrite nomes are attested; yet whether every nome had one of these officials is uncertain. Moreover, the types of police chiefs within each nome varied from nome to nome, as did the geographical schemes of the nomes themselves. There were chiefs of the Arsinoite *merides* and Herakleopolite toparchies, but no such mid-range officials in the Pathyrite. One might speak of a police chief of a village and the associated areas (*memerismenoi topoi*) in the Arsinoite nome, but apparently nowhere else. The same appears to have been true for the temple of Anubis in Memphis.

Further, the hierarchy of police chiefs within each nome seems only to have represented a hierarchy in terms of titular prestige. That is, police administration within the nomes was hierarchically flat. The evidence suggests that chiefs at all levels of administration within the nome reported to a nome official (such as the *epistatês* or *epistatês tôn phylakitôn*). There is no evidence that lower-ranking chiefs (*e.g.*, at the village level) within a given nome reported to higher-ranking ones (*i.e.*, those at the level of the *meris*, toparchy, or nome). It also does not seem to have been necessary for appeals to begin with the local (*i.e.*, city or village) chief.

As the most immediate level of judicial appeal, *archiphylakitai* were intimately connected to their local populations. They received petitions from victims of crime, arrested accused parties, carried out investigations of reported wrongdoing, interrogated potential criminals at hearings, and generally saw to it that justice was done on behalf of those who sought them out. The apparent lack of communication between police chiefs at the various administrative levels of the nome suggests that their widespread occurrence was designed to provide petitioners with fast and relatively direct access to government redress, an important and surprising revelation, in light of the common view of Ptolemaic justice as a rigidly structured system based on a generally lengthy, and correspondingly slow, chain of command. The Ptolemaic system of law and order was an exception to the rule: a surprisingly diverse and efficient entity.