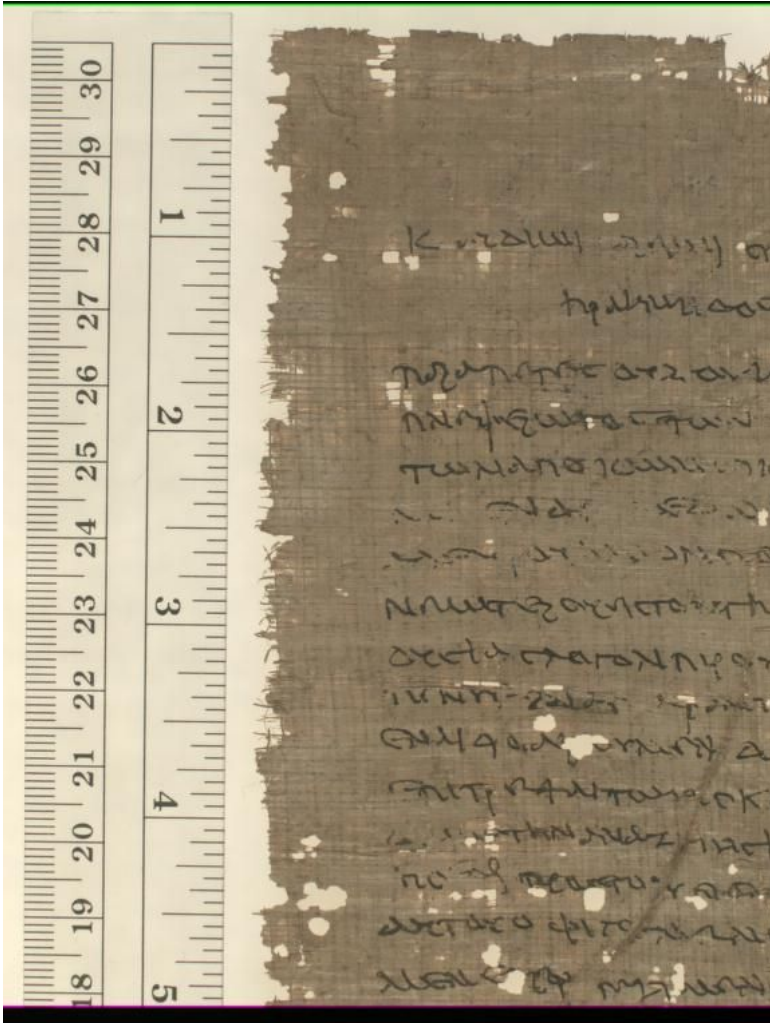


Karanis: Roman Bureaucracy and Obtaining Relief  
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### Karanis: Roman Bureaucracy and Obtaining Relief

(Greek) [Year 2] To Claudius Areios, strategos of the Arsinoite nome, division of Herakleides, from Petesouchos and Petsiris and Pnepheros, the three sons of Petheus, of the village of Karanis. We happen to have paid in behalf of Petesouchos the younger, our brother, to the account of the Camelian estate fifteen artabai of wheat because he has disappeared. We therefore ask {We therefore ask} that you direct the hegoumenos of Karanis to make a search for him in order that he may discharge his debts to us, that we may obtain relief.

(2nd hand) Petesouchos, about 65 years, old, with a scar on the second finger of his left hand.

Petsiris, about 60 years old, with a scar on the little finger of his left hand.

Pnepheros, about 46 years old, with a scar on the third finger of his left hand.

Year 2 of Emperor Caesar Trajan Augustus, 17th of the month Sebastos.<sup>1</sup>

On September 14, 98 AD, in a small farming town in Egypt, two brothers, named Petsiris and Pnepheros, wrote to their local governor, the *strategos* Claudius Areios. Like most people who contact local politicians, they were filing a complaint. Their third brother, Petesouchos, had gone missing, forcing his siblings to pay his portion of the rent. In response, Petsiris and Pnepheros wrote a petition to the governor to mobilize the *hegoumenos*, an especially elite priest and social leader, to locate and return their vagabond brother. This was not necessarily because they wanted to be reunited as a family, but rather so that “we may obtain relief.” Namely, they wanted Petesouchos to pay his share.

It is a peculiar request. A brother goes missing, and his two siblings want to find him. They go to the governor, asking for aid, but emphasize the economic ramifications of Petesouchos’s disappearance. A particular set of priorities and expectations are implicit in this

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<sup>1</sup> U-M Library Digital Collections. Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS UM). Accessed: November 8 2018.

seemingly entertaining-but-unimportant papyrus<sup>2</sup>. Namely, the role of the government to interfere and protect its populace, especially when there are economic repercussions.

Petsiris and Pnepheros matter, not because of their missing brother, but because of their expectations that the Roman government would intervene to remedy a personal disaster. Within the papyrus, brief as it may be, the Roman Empire's bureaucracy is present and illustrates the laymen Egyptian farmers' mechanics of obtaining aid. Why does the Roman Empire's system of "relief" matter? Petsiris's and Pnepheros's lived in Karanis, an Egyptian agricultural town occupied for nearly 700 years until its abandonment due to increasingly disastrous sandstorms. Yet, the decline and desertion of Karanis might be overstated, or at the least, not fully understood; the area was not so simply abandoned without thought or effort. Rather, a complex system of Roman interventionist structures regularly reacted to both environmental and personal disasters. One small example was when a rebellious brother skipped town without paying rent.

Karanis has often been touted in academic literature as a paradigm for "everyday" Egyptians<sup>3</sup>, especially in the Fayoum, due to its concentration of agricultural and textile production. From 300 BC to 400 AD, Karanis was an agricultural haven, most notable for its prolific yields of wheat. Located in the fertile Fayoum basin, Karanis sourced water from the

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<sup>2</sup> Another contender for interesting and bizarre papyrus was inv. 2978, which detailed a petition to the *strategos* Hierax, by a man named Gemellus. Gemellus complained of a man named Sotas, who along with his brother Iulius, and Iulius's wife, stole Gemellus's hay. The papyrus details the vagabond nature of the trio, who acted "with violence and arrogance", and in front of town officials, threw a *brephos* or fetus, in a magical rite. He appeals to the *strategos* and *prefect* for justice, but also a tax break, due to the wrongful harvesting of his crops. Wilburn, Andrew T. *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. doi:10.3998/mpub.233550.

<sup>3</sup> Gazda, Elaine K., and Terry G. Wilfong. *Karanis, an Egyptian Town in Roman Times: Discoveries of the University of Michigan Expedition to Egypt (1924-1935)*. Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, 2004.

Bahr Usif<sup>4</sup>, a side branch of the Nile. This area is notorious for its seasonal flooding and erosion, cyclically aiding and inhibiting the soil's fertility. Karanis was a wheat basket, originally for the Ptolemaic Kingdom, and later for the Roman Empire after Augustus's conquest of Egypt in 30 BC. Many papyri are devoted solely to the transport and receipts of wheat<sup>5</sup>. Karanis's agricultural productivity thus cannot be overstated. In the mid-second century AD, Karanis was home to an estimated 12,300 *arourai* of cultivated land, or nearly 34 square kilometers<sup>6</sup>. This is an extraordinary amount; in the same time period, Karanis produced an agricultural surplus of 38,692 *artabas*, which was a full 28% of their annual yield. An *artaba* is estimated at 27.13 liters of dry capacity<sup>7</sup>. 38,689 *artabas* is equivalent to an astonishing 1.05 million dry liters. This fertility did not last— or, at the very least, changed.

Data from later years show a staunch decline of Karanis's agricultural production. In the early fourth century, the tillable land in Karanis was 1,198 *auroras*, and its surplus was 7,326 *artabas*. This is an 81 percent decrease from the surplus reported in the second century. However, this production decline is not so clearly due to climate change affecting crop yields. Scholars Alan Bowman and Andrew Wilson attribute this stark decline to multiple factors, including population variances and land privatization, and especially, changes to tax collection processes. The productive second century was during a "period of significant demographic expansion." Population growth during famine or decreased agricultural yields seems unlikely. An

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<sup>4</sup>Römer, Cornelia. "The Nile in the Fayum: Strategies of Dominating and Using the Water Resources of the River in the Oasis in the Middle Kingdom and the Graeco-Roman Period." In *The Nile: Natural and Cultural Landscape in Egypt*, edited by Willems Harco and Dahms Jan-Michael, 171-92. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxsz.9>.

<sup>5</sup> U-M Library Digital Collections. Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS UM). Accessed: November 15, 2018.

<sup>6</sup>Blouin, Katherine. *Triangular Landscapes: Environment, Society, and the State in the Nile Delta under Roman Rule*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

argument can thus be made for Roman reconfiguration of tax rates; the mechanism of raising revenues changed, so that “had to be paid in cash...in effect, by commutation of the agricultural ‘surplus’”<sup>8</sup> thus explaining, in part, the drastic lower amount of grain taxed in the 4th century. The Roman Empire might have taxed at a lower rate in order to help struggling farmers, or perhaps changed their preferred payment to coins over crops, and so fewer crops were reported as taxed. If this is the case, which is compelling<sup>9</sup>, then the Roman Empire expressed clear pliability in policy. The Roman change in taxation would allow agricultural workers to retain more of their wheat, rather than being forced to pay it to the state. In times of environmental crisis, this tax relief would be vital, allowing families to eat the grain otherwise paid to Rome. Bowman et. al likewise proposes a flexible Rome, writing the Fayoum region had “an agrarian economy that is flexible, entrepreneurial, and deeply monetized, even at the village level, as the significant number of cash payments for rents and purchases show.”<sup>10</sup> This seems reinforced in the record of papyri.

Roman administration was based on a wealth of information and revered the written record above all other bureaucratic mechanisms. The Roman system involved hyper-organization. Egypt was divided into *nomes*, or provinces. As written in the heading of the brothers’ papyrus, Karanis was in the Arsinoite nome. Each nome had its own *strategos*, or local magistrate, and each also had a *basilikos grammateus*, or royale scribe, who was second-in-command to the *strategos*. Each nome also had *sitologoi*, grain clerks, and *praktors*,

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<sup>8</sup> Bowman, Alan K., and Andrew Wilson. 2013. *The Roman Agricultural Economy: Organization, Investment, and Production*. 246

<sup>9</sup>Bowman, Alan K., and Andrew Wilson. 2013. *The Roman Agricultural Economy: Organization, Investment, and Production*.

<sup>10</sup> Bowman, and Wilson. *The Roman Agricultural Economy: Organization, Investment, and Production*, 246

or tax collectors<sup>11</sup>. Listing these positions delineates the hyper-organization and delegation of the Roman imperial presence, at all levels of government, from tax collection to scribes. Every possible political position had a delegate with a title, responsibilities, and a superior to whom to report, leaving behind a hefty set of papyri left in their wake.

Interestingly enough, most Egyptian *sitologoi* were from the metropole, but in the Arsinoite nome (to which Karanis belongs), many “were certainly villagers.”<sup>12</sup> Bowman notes the large size of the Fayum villages, therefore allowing elite and ambitious townspeople into the Roman administration. This speaks to a tentative, reciprocal relationship between Rome and Egypt. Karanis was a colonial village, and yet, Egyptian social mobility was not impossible. Real agency and political efficacy are shown time again, in the writing of petitions and the appointments of Karanis townspeople in positions of authority. Papyri is certainly evidence of Roman hegemony in Egypt. According to Trismegistos, a database on Graeco-Roman Egypt specializing in megadata, 82.2% of all material excavated from Karanis has been papyri<sup>13</sup>. The Roman “empire of information”<sup>14</sup> is laced within the appeal of the papyrus. Its structure emphasizes the methodical aspect of governance, and indeed lends itself to Roman political legitimization. A hyper-structured government laden with political officials, some of whom are colonial subjects themselves, can be easily perceived as an effective and legitimate government. Disaster relief plays no small role in the hegemony of Roman rule; rather, Rome’s interventionist

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<sup>11</sup> Bowman, Alan K., and Dominic Rathbone. "Cities and Administration in Roman Egypt." *The Journal of Roman Studies* (1992): 107-27.

<sup>12</sup>Bowman, Alan K., and Dominic Rathbone. "Cities and Administration in Roman Egypt.", 126.

<sup>13</sup>K. Vandorpe / W. Clarysse / H. Verreth et al., *Graeco-Roman archives from the Fayum* (Collectanea Hellenistica - KVAB 6), Leuven - Paris - Bristol: Peeters 2015, 496 pp.

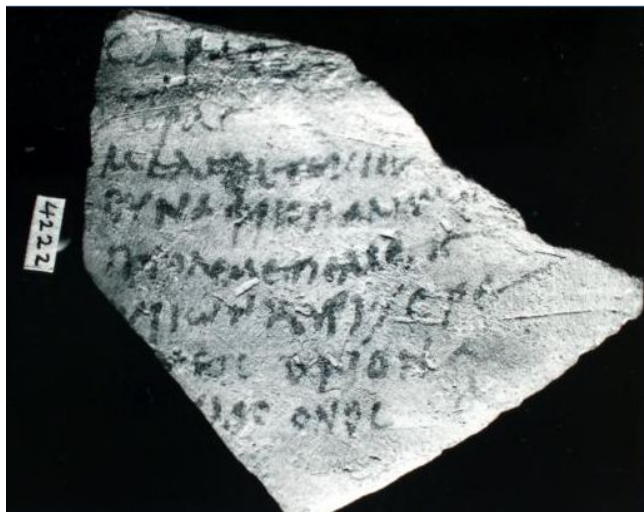
<sup>14</sup>“Mechanics of Empire: The Karanis Register and the Writing Offices of Roman Egypt.” ResearchGate. Accessed January 27, 2019.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/295405221\\_Mechanics\\_of\\_Empire\\_the\\_Karanis\\_Register\\_and\\_the\\_Writing\\_Offices\\_of\\_Roman\\_Egypt](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/295405221_Mechanics_of_Empire_the_Karanis_Register_and_the_Writing_Offices_of_Roman_Egypt).

strategies displays a level of benevolence, doubtlessly helpful in justifying a foreign polity's power.

Petesouchos's brothers are not removed from Roman administrative culture, rather, they are a reflection of it. Their petition to their local *strategos* exemplifies Karanis's view of Rome's role in disaster: to intervene. The farm brothers legitimized this request, too, in terms of the financial repercussions of Petesouchos's default on his obligations. The Roman Empire is expected to come to their aid in part because of the financial burden involved. The brothers were forced paid "fifteen artabai of wheat because he has disappeared." Immediately after referencing their fiscal damages, they "therefore ask" for Rome's relief— because of their financial losses, the logic follows, Rome ought to intercede. Disaster, in the view of these Egyptian farming brothers, is contextualized in monetary damages, and corrected through the government appeals process. In Karanis, an agricultural powerhouse, appealing based off lost grain is a specific strategy rooted in the value of economic production. Roman intervention might be due to benevolence, or to aid political legitimization, but the preservation of a taxable profit is likewise present. The Roman government relies on the success of Karanis farmers, after all, for both tax revenues and food imports. The brothers' ability to frame their disaster relief in economic repercussions would appeal to Roman motivations to intervene.

However, Rome had expectations of the Egyptian role in their environment as well, notably in water irrigation and maintenance. Roman Egypt had a reciprocal system of relief, with petitions for aid from the populace, but also public work obligations fulfilled annually by the Karanis townspeople. Cornelia Römer writes in Harco Williams's *The Nile: Natural and Cultural Landscape in Egypt*, "from the Roman period, we have abundant evidence of *corvée*

work which had to be carried out by the locals to keep the canals clean. Every male inhabitant had to do 5 days of cleaning every year, mostly in June, before the flood, when the level of the water in the canals was at a minimum.”<sup>15</sup> Compulsive non-military service was a norm in Roman Karanis, as was the extensive irrigation system of canals. The corvée system is paramount to the eventual abandonment of Karanis as it reveals Roman sociopolitical attitudes towards the environment. The compulsory labor system demonstrates how Roman organization savvy benefited its subjects and mitigated environmental hazards. The Roman government repeatedly and intensely worked on systems devoted to the maintenance of an unruly environment, for centuries, as written ledgers show<sup>16</sup>. Manipulating of a treacherous environment through



irrigation was prioritized, hence the extensive record of labor receipts. Indeed, the following *ostrakon*, or a sherd of pottery used as a writing surface, is one example of the prevalence of compulsory labor on public works.<sup>17</sup>

The pictured ostracon is a record of the names of Karanis villagers who contributed labor and donkeys to work on the canals, dated to the late III century or early IV century. Interesting about this particular ostracon is fundamentally

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<sup>15</sup> Römer, Cornelia. "The Nile in the Fayum: Strategies of Dominating and Using the Water Resources of the River in the Oasis in the Middle Kingdom and the Graeco-Roman Period." In *The Nile: Natural and Cultural Landscape in Egypt*, edited by Willems Harco and Dahms Jan-Michael, 186. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxsz.9>.

<sup>16</sup> U-M Library Digital Collections. Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS UM). Accessed: November 9, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> O.Mich.inv. 4222; Recto.” <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-70/4222o.tif>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed: November 8, 2018.



how *uninteresting* it is; records of labor on canals in Roman Egypt are profoundly ordinary. The choice of this ostrakon is not due to its exemplary status, rather is one example of many possible selections<sup>18</sup>. Its importance lies in its banality. Many Karanis citizens were obligated to work on the canals, or on flood embankments, or other public works projects, showing a repeated pattern of state-led environmental intervention. A certain social contract is at play in Rome's Karanis, involving the intervention of the government in farmers' quarrels, and in maintaining water supplies. The Karanis laymen were required to work on their environment, just as Rome was expected to intervene in disasters. The complex irrigation system found at Karanis is a testament to government and civilian intervention. Ronald James Cook's 2011 dissertation on Fayum irrigation notes the significance of Karanis's water system: "canal systems are not static. They cannot simply be constructed and then maintained with only limited annual attention; canals are dynamic features which are extremely susceptible to exterior changes in flood regime and environment."<sup>19</sup> The sheer amount of effort is not remarkable. Karanis's irrigation required constant upkeep and sustained involvement, due to habitual damages that needed to be repaired, especially with seasonal changes. The sheer size, too, of Karanis's canal system likewise shows the time, energy, and resources devoted to controlling the water supply. Karanis had a large-scale

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<sup>18</sup> "P.Mich.inv. 6353; Recto." <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-2822/6353r1.tif>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed: November 9, 2018.

"O.Mich.inv. 9656; Recto." <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1019/9656o.tif>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed: November 9, 2018.

"O.Mich.inv. 9639; Recto." <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-1005/9639o.tif>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed: November 9, 2018.

"O.Mich.inv.9550; Recto." <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-937/9550o.tif>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed: November 9, 2018.

<sup>19</sup>Cook, Ronald James. *Landscapes of Irrigation in the Ptolemaic and Roman Fayum: Interdisciplinary Archaeological Survey and Excavation near Kom Aushim (ancient Karanis), Egypt*. PhD diss., University of Michigan, Diss, 2011.

hydraulic schema, reflective of a long history of human development in the area, and an attempted mastery of a sometimes inhospitable environment.

Sometimes inhospitable is an understatement. Karanis, to understate matters, was a challenging habitat. As previously mentioned, seasonal flooding was a reality of life by the Nile. Water in Egypt is and was vital and scarce, and the periodic fluctuations were not negligible. Too much water could result in aggradation of soil, and too little could cause famine.<sup>20</sup> In fact, historians Jean-Daniel Stanley, Michael D. Krom, Robert A. Cliff, and Jamie C Woodward, note new discoveries in the riverbeds of Egypt might have caused previous disastrous shifts in Egypt. In *Geoarchaeology: An International Journal*, Stanley et. al writes, “new geoscience data indicates major changes in annual flooding and baseflow of the river Nile, marked short-term paleoclimatic-related events that may in part have led to the collapse of the Old Kingdom.”<sup>21</sup> The Old Kingdom collapsed around 2100 BC, or over 2,500 years before the proposed date of Karanis’s abandonment. The Old Kingdom’s collapse is relevant here as it shows the legacy of environmental turbulence in the region. Roman Karanis thus inherited a millennia-long history of an antagonistic environment and intervention efforts.

Written documents, in this case the brothers’ papyrus and the ostrakon, are one example of Roman intervention, but so is the sheer stratigraphy of Karanis. Elaine Gazda and Terry Wilfong note, “Houses were built and rebuilt at different rates as the sand blew in from the desert, filling up houses with debris mixed in with the rubbish residents were depositing

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<sup>20</sup> Cook, Ronald James. *Landscapes of Irrigation in the Ptolemaic and Roman Fayum: Interdisciplinary Archaeological Survey and Excavation near Kom Aushim (ancient Karanis), Egypt*. PhD diss., University of Michigan, Diss, 2011: 87.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley, Jean-Daniel & Krom, Michael & Cliff, Robert & Woodward, Jamie. (2003). Short Contribution: Nile Flow Failure at the End of the Old Kingdom, Egypt: Strontium Isotopic and Petrologic Evidence. *Geoarchaeology*. 18. 395 - 402. 10.1002/gea.10065.

themselves.”<sup>22</sup> A total of six occupation levels were found, as Karanis villagers built houses one on top of another as the sand level rises. This speaks to a sort of resiliency. The people of Karanis, for centuries, literally rebuilt their homes higher, and higher, and higher again, in an attempt to survive the harsh environment and protect themselves. Every year, they were also conscribed to service on canals and flood embankments. They wrote petitions to their local governors, too, to protect their land and crop rights. In sum, the people of Karanis displayed a remarkable amount of resiliency and effort to control their natural circumstance.

The definitive reason for Karanis’s abandonment might never be known. Yet, it seems recklessly simplistic to claim that the desert simply washed Karanis away. The Roman systematic bureaucracy and legacy of environmental intervention are far too compelling to claim a quick retreat. The readiness to make appeals like those of Petsiris and Pnepheros lends itself to a certain political efficacy. The people of Karanis had faith in their government's ability to intercede on their behalf. And, indeed, it seems reciprocal; the Romans would intercede on behalf of the inhabitants of Karanis, and in exchange, Karanis’s farmers dutifully paid their taxes, exported their wheat, and took their turn at the *corvée*. It is unlikely that the people of Karanis left without a fight, as they had been warring with their environment for millennia. Rome inherited that struggle and built a bureaucratic infrastructure in response. Though perhaps it made no difference, in that Karanis was eventually abandoned, the resiliency displayed and the accomplishment of flourishing for centuries in the challenging Fayoum should not be readily dismissed. The people of Karanis would never simply concede to the desert. Surrendering was not in their nature.

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<sup>22</sup> Gazda, Elaine K., and Terry G. Wilfong. *Karanis, an Egyptian Town in Roman Times: Discoveries of the University of Michigan Expedition to Egypt (1924-1935)*. Ann Arbor: Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, 2004: 5.