The Administration of Egypt in Late Antiquity

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Abstract: Lexicon article on the provincial administration of Egypt 284–641 AD.

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Late antique Egypt exhibits the typical post-Diocletian fragmentation into smaller administrative units and the division between civilian and military authority which had been in effect since approximately 308 throughout the empire. The civil administration was still in the hands of the praefectus Aegypti, residing in Alexandria, but around 298 Upper Egypt (the Thebais) became a separate province under a praeses Thebaidis ranking below the praefectus. In the course of the 4th century the arrangement of the provinces underwent several changes. While the Thebais with Antinoupolis as capital and Philae as southern border remained a single province, Lower Egypt was divided into Aegyptus Iovia (western Delta) and Aegyptus Herculia (eastern Delta) in 314/5. In 322 Aegyptus Mercuriana, resembling the old Heptanomia (Middle Egypt), was split from the Herculia. A praeses headed each of the four provinces. But already in 324 the bipartite model of Thebais and Aegyptus under a praefectus returned. A major change came in 341, when the eastern part of the Delta and the Heptanomia became the province Augustamnica, governed by a praeses in Pelusium, while the western Delta (Aegyptus ipsa) remained under the praefectus and the Thebais under the praeses. These three Egyptian provinces, up till then part of the dioecesis Oriens, were organized as an independent diocese from around 381 (Lallemand 1964; Palme 1998). By 398 (P.Flor. I 66) the new province Arcadia with Oxyrhynchus as its capital was created by separating again the Heptanomia from the Augustamnica (Keenan 1977). This arrangement is found in the Notitia Dignitatum (Or. 23,1–14), the pars Orientis of which can be dated to around 400, and it remained in place for a considerable time: in 448 the Laterculus of Polemius Silvius reports the situation as being unchanged. Each province was under the authority of a praeses, apart from Augustamnica, which now had a corrector. All governors were subject to the praefectus Augustalis, who, having the rank of vicarius, was responsible for the whole diocese (Palme 2007).

As for the military organisation, since the Tetrarchy (AE 1934, 7–8 from 308/9) all troops stationed permanently in Egypt (the limitanei) had been under the command of a single dux. Probably soon after the creation of the diocese (381), the military command was also remodelled: since 391 (C.Th. XVI 10,11) a comes limitis Aegypti is attested as being responsible for Aegyptus, Arcadia and Augustamnica, to whom a dux Thebaidis in charge of Upper Egypt was subject (Zuckerman 1998: 138). From the middle of the 5th century the military commander of Upper Egypt was also promoted from dux Thebaidis to comes Thebaici limitis (I.Philae II 194, dating 449–468). Some papyri and C.Th. VI 28, 8 from 435
indicate that the authority of the *comes Aegypti* was not limited strictly to the military field but occasionally extended to civilian duties (Carrié 1998). From around 470 appear examples of the combination of civil and military authority with the title *dux Aegypti* (or *Aegyptiaci limitis*) *et praefectus Augustalis*, which marks a departure from Diocletian’s principle of the separation of powers.

Justinian continued this trend further in his *Edict* 13 of 539, in which he fundamentally reformed the Egyptian diocese, intending to strengthen those officials representing the central, imperial power (Demicheli 2000). Civilian and military authority in Aegyptus, Augustamnica and Thebais, which had been sub-divided before the Edict, were once again held in a single hand. Aegyptus I and II, as well as Thebais superior (in the south) and inferior (in the north), and presumably also Augustamnica I and II were governed respectively by a *dux et Augustalis*, to whom a civilian *praeses* was subordinated. However, an overall authority for the whole of the diocese similar to the earlier *praefectus Augustalis* no longer existed.

The authority of the governors was evident in the administration of justice and taxation. The governors resided not merely in their capitals but occasionally also in secondary residences (e.g. P.Oxy. LIX 3986 from 494). In addition, officials journeyed to the villages to solve pending administrative problems (e.g. P.Lips. I 45–55 from 371–375; P.Ant. I 33 from 465). Although in the 4th century few Egyptians rose to the office of governor, by the 6th century at the latest more and more governors were drawn from the provincial élite. Finally, Justin’s II *Novella* 149 from 569 ordered the provincial aristocracy to name the governors among them. According to Justinian’s *Edict* 13 the office of the *dux et praefectus Augustalis* contained 600 officials. If these figures are extrapolated, we arrive at hardly more than 2000 *officiales* for the offices of all governors of Egypt in total. The titles and hierarchy of the *officiales*, who were part of the *militia* and organised in a paramilitary way, were divided into a financial and a judicial branch (Palme 1999: 103–108). Tradition and routine guaranteed a certain measure of professional expertise in the bureaucracy.

At the local level, the old division of Egypt into districts (*nomoi*) with an elaborate hierarchy of mostly liturgical personnel, was replaced by the *civitates* (usually the former metropoleis of the *nomoi*) and their territory, like in the rest of the empire. During the first half of the 4th century the *strategoi* were restyled as *exactores*, interacting closer with the *civitates* and the members of the *curiae* (city councils), who had to perform various administrative tasks as *munera*. At their regular meetings, the *curiae* had to manage a wide range of tasks. Beside tax collections, the richest among the *curiales* had to perform functions in the security system (*riparii*) and jurisdiction (*defensores civitatis*). The territories of the
civitates were subdivided in 307 into pagi under the direction of praepositi pagi, responsible for the taxation. At the villages, the komarchai and various liturgical officials maintained the bureaucratic services.

Toward the end of the 4th century, members of the curial class attempted to escape the increasingly onerous burdens imposed on them by entering the imperial service. The 5th and 6th centuries witnessed the polarisation of the curiales into those becoming progressively impoverished and those becoming richer. Those attaining influential offices in the imperial administration acquired higher social status and more economic power by accumulation of landed property. As pagarchoi, who in the mid-5th century replaced the former nome officials (above all the exactores and the praepositi pagi) under not quite clear circumstances (Mazza 1995), local potentates became the most important authority in the course of the 6th century. Responsible for at least the administration of taxes, the pagarchoi appear as the most powerful officials of the Egyptian countryside toward the end of the 6th and in the 7th centuries.

The intertwining of state power and the personal power of great landlords was once seen as evolving feudalism at the cost of imperial administration (Gelzer 1909). But Gascou 1985 demonstrated that the great households (oikoi) did not usurp state power but were rather entrusted with it by the government. In many cases the landlords took over responsibilities from the curiae. This is reflected by the composition of the curiae, in which the traditional functions and titles were replaced in the course of the 5th century by a less clearly defined group of proteuontes, who now determined the civitates (Laniado 2002). With the decrease in the municipal administration and the liturgical system, the imperial government relied increasingly on the landowners whose estates and influence grew. A good part of tax administration was "outsourced" to those social strata, which were economically in a position to perform bureaucratic duties as long-term munera.

Provincial administration was efficient in as much as it was able to ensure the administration of justice and to raise sufficient taxes to support Constantinople, the army and the civil service. A snapshot of the troop-deployment in around 400 is offered by the Notitia Dignitatum, which lists 31 limitanei-units under the command of the comes Aegypti (Or. 28,13–46) and 44 units under the dux Thebaidis (Or. 31,22–37). The number of soldiers is estimated as approximately 22,000 (Mitthof 2001: I 217–231), somewhat higher than in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Under Justinian changes are evident in terms of old units disappearing and new (élite) ones appearing (Mitthof 2008).
these changes remain hidden from us. The Egyptian evidence suggests that we cannot speak in terms of either the militarisation of society or of an extensive bureaucracy.

But the army could not overcome the attacks by the Sassanids (619–629) and the Arabs (640/1). The short phase of the Byzantine restoration 629–641 remains obscure in institutional terms. Arcadia now also received a dux et Augustalis (P.Prag. I 64, dated 636) and apparently quite exceptional powers over Lower Egypt, in both the fiscal and the administrative areas, lay in the hands of Kyros, the archbishop of Alexandria (and praefectus Augustalis?). It is proof of the efficiency of the administration that it outlived even the Byzantine retreat from Egypt. Both the Persians and the Arabs retained the civilian administrative apparatus without fundamental changes. A reorganisation took place between 655, when there still was a dux Arcadiae (CPR XIV 32) and 669 (P.Mert. II 100), when a dux Arcadiae et Thebaidis occurs. The Arabs, therefore, merged Middle and Upper Egypt into one administrative unit or tax assessment area. Until well into the 8th century Greek remained the language of the administration and the accounting system.

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References and suggested readings


