The Province of Arcadia

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Abstract: Lexicon article on the Egyptian province of Arcadia from its creation (end of 4th century) to the Arab conquest (641 AD).

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The Province of Arcadia

Arcadia is the name of one of the Roman provinces located in Egypt in Late Antiquity. Created not long before 398 CE (P.Flor. I 66), the province was named after the young emperor Arcadius, who ruled the Eastern part of the Roman Empire since the death of his father Theodosius in January 395 CE. Arcadia’s territory resembled the Hellenistic and Roman Heptanomia, i.e. Middle Egypt from the top of the Nile Delta at Memphis to the border of the Thebais near Hermopolis. The capital of the province and seat of the governor was Oxyrhynchus. Beside the capital, other wealthy towns like Heracleopolis and Arsinoiton Polis also belonged to Arcadia. As these are main sites of papyrus findings, Arcadia is among the best documented areas of the Later Roman Empire. After the Arab conquest of Egypt in 640/1 CE, Arcadia remained an administrative unit well into the eighth century.

The province was under the authority of a civilian praeses (Not.Dig., Or. I 85). Like the governors of the other provinces in Egypt, he was subject to the praefectus Augustalis in Alexandria (Not.Dig., Or. XXIII), who, having the rank of a vicarius, was responsible for all Egypt since it was established as an independent diocese from around 381 CE. In the 5th and 6th centuries the praeses Arcadiae resided not merely in Oxyrhynchus, but occasionally also in a secondary residence at Heracleopolis (J. R. Rea, introduction to P.Oxy. LIX 3986).

As for the military organisation, Arcadia and the other provinces of Lower Egypt (Aegyptus and Augustamnica) belonged to the command of the comes limitis Aegypti (Zuckerman 1998). He commanded the limitanei (Not.Dig., Or. XXVIII). Approximately 10 of these units were stationed permanently in Arcadia. In addition, some comitatenses (superior troops under the authority of the magister militum per Orientem) were garrisoned in this province too. Potential enemies were the hard-to-control nomadic tribes of the desert, which represented a latent threat to the civilian population, but never became a serious danger for the province. The strategic importance of Arcadia lay in the fact that its territory controlled the access to Middle Egypt and the upper Nile valley.

Unlike the other Egyptian provinces (Aegyptus, Augustamnica, Thebais), which underwent further subdivisions during the 5th or 6th centuries, Arcadia remained undivided (Hierocles, Synecdemus 729; Polemius Silvius, Laterculus X 7; Georgius Cypr., Descr. orb. rom. 744; cf. Palme 1998). Even Justinian’s Thirteenth Edict of 539 CE, which fundamentally reformed the Egyptian diocese, seems to have left the administration of Arcadia unchanged. Despite the fragmentary state of preservation of the Edict – the chapter concerning Arcadia has been lost – it is clear that civilian and military powers in Aegyptus, Augustamnica and...
Thebais were once again held in a single hand: they were governed respectively by a *dux et Augustalis* (to whom a civilian *praeses* was subordinated). Contrary to earlier views (e.g., Gelzer 1909), in Arcadia, however, there was only a civilian *praeses* also after the Edict XIII (Keenan 1977; *CPR* XXIV pp. 202–204). Arcadia seems to have first received a *dux et Augustalis* only after the Sassanid attack that subjected Egypt to Persian rule for ten years (619–629 CE). After the Roman reconquest, a Flavius Theodosius, *dux et Augustalis Arcadiae*, is attested in *P.Prag*. I 64 (636 CE, cf. Carrié 1998, esp. 117f.), while prior to the Sassanid interlude only *praesides Arcadiae* (or their *officiales*) are documented in the papyri.

Thus, the unification of civilian and military authorities in Arcadia came later than in other provinces and was probably a reaction to the Sassanid invasion.

Papyri of the 6th and early 7th centuries reveal the names of a handful of prominent landowners (*geouchoi*), who exercised considerable economic power. A number of high ranking individuals and, above all, the Apion dynasty, had their headquarters in Arsinoitopolis, Hermacleopolis or Oxyrhynchus and apparently owned the lion’s share of landed property. To a larger extent than in other parts of Egypt, in Arcadia small peasant-farmers became dependent upon the large landowner and their *oikoi*, and only in Arcadia (namely on the Apion estates in the Oxyrhynchites), *coloni adscripticii*, peasants "registered" in the tax rolls of landlords, are attested. In the course of the 6th century, the *pagarchoi* became the most important local authority. Often members of the land owning aristocracy, they were responsible for the collection of taxes. The change of power brought by the Persian conquest was not without consequences for this ruling elite, associated with the Roman-Byzantine rule: even the Apion dynasty disappeared during the Persian dominion.

Arcadia was also immediately affected by the Arab conquest, as described in the Chronicle of the contemporary witness John, bishop of Niccuso (ed. R. H. Charles, Oxford 1916). The change from Byzantine to Arab rule is clearly documented. The *dux et Augustalis* Flavius Theodorus, attested in both papyri and the Chronicle of John, directed the defence against the Arabs and was defeated in the ill-fated battle of Heliopolis in July 640 CE. Theodorus’ successor, Philiades, known from the Chronicle, was probably still appointed by the Byzantine authorities, but held his office only for a short time, as already at the beginning of 642 a Philoxenus is attested papyrologically as *dux Arcadiae* (*SB* VIII 9749), about whom John of Niccuso expressly says that he was installed by the Arabs (*CPR* XXIV p. 204, notes 8–11). For the next years the Arabs adopted the administrative organisation without fundamental changes. In 655 CE a Ioannes still appears as *dux Arcadiae* (*CPR* XIV 32), but exercised no military power. A major reorganization took place, however, between 655 and 669 CE.
(P.Mert. II 100), when a Iordanes dux Arcadiae et Thebaidis occurs. The Arabs, therefore, merged Middle and Upper Egypt into one administrative unit or, more precisely, tax assessment area. As such, the name Arcadia survived as a geographical and administrative designation until the beginning of the 8th century (CPR VIII 82; P.Lond. IV 1332 and 1333).

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References and suggested readings


