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PRISONERS OF WAR AND HOSTAGES
IN GRAECO-ROMAN EGYPT

Prisoners of war (αἰχμάλωτοι) were not uncommon in Ptolemaic Egypt. The
Ptolemies engaged in frequent conflicts with Syria and also experienced
frequent rebellions within Egypt. This petered out in the early Roman period.
In the later Roman period conflicts between the Roman empire and the neigh-
bouring nations to the west, south and east of Egypt were not infrequent. In all
these conflicts soldiers were captured on both sides and treated as prisoners of
war. If they were mercenaries they were often incorporated in the army that
captured them. Civilians were also taken captive and could be enslaved, either
en masse[1] or individually, or ransomed for money as a kind of hostages. The
civilians enslaved *en masse* were predominantly women, because in a major
conflict most men were killed. Individual enslavements of captured civilians
could be the initiative of individual soldiers and were occasionally disap-
proved of by the authorities. The prospect of a ransom may sometimes have
been an incentive to start a minor conflict. The dividing line between a border
conflict and an ordinary raid is, after all, very thin. In any case, ransoming
prisoners of war (or hostages) from across the border is attested a couple of
times in documents from later Roman Egypt, and the evidence shows that it
was institutionalized. There is also some evidence from Ptolemaic and later
Roman Egypt showing how prisoners of war from across the border were
treated. The whole subject has not received much attention, and I will try to
present, more or less in chronological order, the documentary[2] evidence

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[1] Cf. H. VOLKMANN, *Die Massenversklavungen der Einwohner eroberter Städte in der hellenistisch-
römischen Zeit*, 2nd ed. by G. HORSMANN (Stuttgart 1990).

[2] For literary attestations of prisoners of war and hostages in Ptolemaic Egypt see *Pros. Ptol.* VI
16138-16155.

known to me in this article. I will not deal with the juridical intricacies of the matter.[3]

There is some evidence for the incorporation into the Ptolemaic army of soldiers, no doubt often mercenaries, taken captive in conflicts with other Hellenistic states. At least some prisoners of war from Asia Minor were settled as cleruchs in the Arsinoite nome, where they constituted a clearly recognizable group. Their settlement must have been the result of a deliberate policy on the part of the Ptolemaic state. *P. Petr.* III 104 of 244/3 B.C. is concerned with just such a cleruch (line 3: τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς ['A]σίας αἰχμαλ[ώ]των).[4]

As long as prisoners of war had not been disposed of in some manner, they had to be fed and clothed by the state. Thus we find in *P. Lille* I 3, 66 (after 216/5 B.C.) prisoners of war apparently receiving σιτομετρία. They also had to be put to work somehow, otherwise they might run away or make mischief. As an example of the latter I can mention *P. Köln* VI 261 of 213 B.C., a report from the Arsinoite nome about the illegal sale by prisoners of war of oil stolen from the government warehouse. As an example of the former I can point to *P. Petr.* II 29 E of 245 B.C., which mentions the concern that the remaining prisoners of war — in this particular case some prisoners of war had apparently already taken to their heels — might also run away. As long as they were in the vicinity of their place of origin, civilians taken captive during hostilities of any kind were also likely to run away. Especially those taken captive during rebellions within Egypt could and did run away successfully, because they received help from their relatives and friends.

For a clear example of this we have to turn to *P. Hamb.* I 91 of 167 B.C.[5] In this text a soldier reports that four slaves entrusted to him by his fellow-soldiers have run away. The slaves were part of the booty distributed in Tebetnoi in the Heracleopolite nome (lines 3-4: they derive ἀπὸ τῶν γενομένων σκύλ[ω]ν ἐν Τεβετνοί). He later discovered that one of the slaves, a woman, was put up for sale in Memphis. He took her back to the Heracleopolite nome where she promised to pay him a ransom (line 16: λύτρα) and deliver up the three other prisoners of war. The fact that the slave has run away a second time without paying the ransom and taken refuge in the local temple of Pois, a village where her father also lives, shows that in this case the prisoners of war were local

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[3] Is a prisoner of war if ransomed technically a slave? See on the Roman legal tradition on this and other problems E. LEVY, *'Captivus redemptus,' Bollettino dell'Istituto di Diritto Romano* 55-56 (1951), pp. 70-97 (also in his *Gesammelte Schriften* II, Köln 1963, pp. 25-45). The corresponding title is *Cod. Just.* 8, 50. I have not seen M. V. SANNA, *Ricerche in tema di redemptio ab hostibus* (Cagliari 1998).

[4] The commentary to *P. Köln* VI 261, 2, refers to another presumably Arsinoite papyrus mentioning a cleruch from among the prisoners of war from Asia Minor. *P.Enteuxeis* 54 of 218 B.C. mentions a father and a son τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀσίας στρατιωτῶν.

[5] Willy Clarysse is preparing a new edition of this text.

people. The one slave woman is explicitly said to have been 'misled' by the priests and/or priestesses of the temple. The group as such had also been 'misled' by others. The text mentions that a battle (this time perhaps abroad) was about to begin requiring the presence of the complainant's fellow-soldiers. *C. Ptol. Sklav.* 9 of 197 B.C. is the registration of an Egyptian slave woman who was captured during a rebellion within Egypt. The registration is in accordance with a royal ordinance about this matter (lines 8-9: περὶ τῶν ἐχόντων σώματα Αἰγύπ[τι]α ἀπὸ τῆς ἐν τῇ χώραι ταραχῆς).

In the *Letter to Philocrates* 22-25 a royal ordinance of Ptolemy II Philadelphus is quoted (or rather concocted) in which the king orders the liberation of all Jewish slaves in Alexandria and Egypt[6] taken captive during the expedition to Syria and Phoenicia in the reign of his father Ptolemy I Soter. The present owners will receive an indemnity. This text seems to have been modelled on a genuine royal ordinance such as *SB* V 8008 of 260 B.C., in which the enslavement of free individuals in Syria and perhaps Phoenicia is pronounced illegal.[7] Another royal edict, *SB* III 6275 of 231/0 B.C., might be concerned with the tax on the sale of prisoners of war as slaves, but the text is unfortunately too much damaged at the vital spot (cf. *BL* IX, p. 64, to *C. Ord. Ptol.* 25).

The Ptolemaic state also took prominent foreigners hostage. I will not deal with the literary evidence for this (see note 2). *P. Lond.* VII 2052 of, perhaps, 241 B.C., describes one Alexander as a former hostage (lines 16-17: ὁμηρεύσαντος). In the text he is listed as the (former) owner of two runaway slaves from Babylon and Media respectively.

An inscription from early Roman Egypt (*SEG* XXXIX 1711, to be republished as *I. Varsovie* 75) tells the life story of an Egyptian woman. Valeria alias Thermouthis died after having been taken captive at age 4 and after having been a slave for 38 years. Her brother, a soldier called Publius Valerius, has bought her and her children (line 9: ἐλυτρώσατο) and set them free. The text is not dated (first century A.D. is the editor's guess), but the woman may well have been made prisoner of war during the conquest of Egypt in 30 B.C. or a little earlier, in the troubles of the late Ptolemaic period, or a little later, in the initial troubles under Roman rule. Her brother eventually joined the Roman army that enslaved her and thus earned the money to buy her and her children back to freedom. The children are called Cleopatra and Euphrosyne. These names were presumably given to them by their owner, i.e. their mother's owner, not too long after the death of queen Cleopatra.

P. Hamb. I 63 of A.D. 125/6 concerns the sale of two slaves who had previously been captured in an armed conflict (line 9: δορα[τόκτητα). Given the date

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[6] Not *les campagnes*, as A. PELLETIER translates τὴν χώραν in the *Sources Chrétiennes* edition.

[7] On the link between the *Letter or Aristeas* 22-25 and the royal ordinance preserved in *SB* V 8008 see P. DUCREY, *Le traitement des prisonniers de guerre dans la Grèce antique des origines à la conquête romaine* (Paris 1968), pp. 84-87. I have not seen the second edition of 1999.

of the papyrus one could think of Jews captured during the Jewish uprising in Egypt in 115-117. Unfortunately, the names of the slaves are not preserved. This and *SEG* XXXIX 1711 seem to exhaust the topic for the early Roman period.[8]

In the *Life of Pachomius* the case of a monk captured by barbarians is reported. As a prisoner of war — the victim of an ordinary raid — he is forced to serve the barbarians and to make a libation to the gods. In G^1 85 the barbarians are not identified, and the monk is not a member of a Pachomian community. In *Paralipomena* 9 he is, and the barbarians are identified as Blemmyes. This change probably takes the situation in the late fourth century into account, whereas G^1 85 seems to preserve the incident as it occurred in the first half of the fourth century (Pachomius died in 346).[9] Somewhat later it is the turn of the Nubians. In a letter of about the middle of the fifth century, Tantani, the φύλαρχος of the Nubians, is addressed as the father of all the captives — the man who ultimately decided their fate (*FHN* III 322). Whether Tantani was in charge of captured Roman soldiers the Nubians (and the Blemmyes) were supposed to return without a ransom under the terms of the treaty of 452/3 is not certain. The treaty, which also involved the handing over to the Romans of hostages (children of the Blemmyan and Nubian elite), was broken when the chief negotiator of the Romans died (Priscus fr. 21; see *FHN* III 318).

In *P. Merton* I 45 verso, a letter on the back of a late fifth or sixth century text, the writer seems to report that his slave has incorrectly been regarded as a prisoner of war (line 4: ἐν αἰχ]μαλώτω[ν τ]άξει ἀπήγατο). The text is unfortunately too much damaged.

In the later Roman period ransoming prisoners including prisoners of war was an early Christian charity. Cyprian (*Epistulae* 62) mentions a large sum of money (HS 100,000) raised by the church at Carthage to ransom hostages taken by Numidian raiders. Basil the Great (*Epistulae* 70 ad Damasum papam) mentions money sent to Cappadocia from the church at Rome to ransom prisoners of war taken by the Goths. Both cases are dated to the middle of the third century, and, as Basil shows, such acts of charity were not quickly forgotten. In the later Roman period the government allowed churches to sell their property only in case the money was needed to ransom prisoners of war or to feed the poor (*Nov. Just.* 65; 120, 9-10; and 131, 13; cf. *Cod. Just.* 1, 2, 21, 1-2 and *Nov. Just.* 7, 8). The evidence for this type of Christian charity has not been collected.[10] In what follows I will restrict myself to Egypt.

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[8] *P. Dura* 28 (A.D. 243), a Syriac sale of a slave woman who had been taken captive, is not from Egypt.

[9] For both texts see also *FHN* III 296. According to *FHN* III 302 it would seem that the Blemmyes had taken prisoners of war in a raid in 372/3.

[10] See A. VON HARNACK, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, 4th ed. (Leipzig 1924), vol. I, p. 190, n. 1, for some references, and pp. 208-211, for the two

According to the *Life of Shenute* by Besa (89-90) the great archimandrite managed to redeem captives taken by the Blemmyes for nothing. The incident is placed in the neighbourhood of Ptolemais.[11] Shenute himself claims that at one time (more specifically in the second year after he built the great church known as the White Monastery) he took care of 20,000 refugees and redeemed 100 captives from the Ethiopians (Nubians).[12] I am not sure if this is not the same incident as reported in the *Life*.

A long Greek will from Antinoopolis (*P. Cair. Masp.* III 67312, of 567) stipulates in lines 63-70 that the proceeds of the sale of a house should be used for ransoming prisoners of war (line 69: ἀνάρρησιν – for ἀνάρρυσιν – αἰχμαλτων). In fact, this charity is mentioned first, before other charities.[13] Perhaps the testator in the papyrus, an *exceptor* from the governor's office, had a special reason to be concerned about the fate of prisoners of war. R. Rémondon[14] thought that he could connect this with the 'third Blemmyan war' he detected in various texts (on flimsy grounds). There could also have been a personal reason for the testator's concern (perhaps he or a family member had been a prisoner of war once). But the traditional Christian concern for prisoners of war is sufficient an explanation for this. Thus *Nov. Marc.* 5, 1 mentions the will of a lady in which she also made a special provision for the ransoming of prisoners of war out of concern for their fate. The executor of the papyrus will is the archimandrite of Shenute's monastery in the Panopolite nome. In other cases the local bishop will have taken care of the ransoming of prisoners of war with the testators' money. At least this is what the legal codes stipulate (*Nov. Just.* 131, 11).

A Coptic ostracon from Elephantine also belongs in this context. It was published with a German translation by F. Hintze[15] and republished as *KSB* I 30. It was translated into English in a corpus of texts from Elephantine.[16] I will adopt and adapt this translation here:

> The association of the *priores* (senior soldiers) of Elephantine and the whole camp write to Paham son of Abraham (known from other texts as apparently first a soldier, then a centurion) as follows:

cases mentioned in the text. Victor Vitensis, *Historia persecutionis* 1, 25, records the case of a North African bishop who sold church movables to ransom prisoners of war taken by the Vandals in 429.

[11] For the text see also *FHN* III 301.

[12] For the texts see J. LEIPOLDT, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 40 (1902/3), pp. 126-140. I have not seen J. LEIPOLDT in *Festschrift für Ernst Barnikol zum 70. Geburtstag* (Berlin 1964), pp. 52-56, which once more discusses the evidence.

[13] In *P. Mon. Epiph.* 178 redeeming captives is also mentioned first as a typical Christian charity (in lines 12-14).

[14] R. RÉMONDON, *Recherches de Papyrologie* 1 (1961), pp. 77-78.

[15] F. HINTZE, *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache* 104 (1977), pp. 104-106 (no. 7).

[16] L. S. B. MACCOULL and S. J. CLACKSON in B. PORTEN (ed.), *The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change* (Leiden, New York & Köln 1996), no. E8.

We have received a *solidus* from you as a loan and now we have taken a *trimesion* (a third *solidus*) on your behalf out of it (i.e. out of the *solidus*) as your contribution, just as the whole association has given it (i.e. a *trimesion*) for the expenditure on the poor (?). Now we owe you the other two *trimesia*. We will pay them back to you whenever you ask us for them. Pachon 30, 10th indiction.

(second hand) We, the association of the camp of Elephantine, agree to this: 2 *trimesia*. I, the deacon David, am witness at their request.

(at the top) Written by me, Papnouthios.

There are two odd things about this text. In the first place, the debtors rather than the creditors document a deduction from the debt. Clearly this is not an ordinary debt. The 'debtors' received the money from the 'creditor' earlier and now use part of his 'account' with them for a specific purpose. The money they deduct has indeed been used as a contribution in the creditor's name towards the relief of the poor (?). All members of the association of senior soldiers stationed on Elephantine were supposed to contribute to this. As a centurion the 'creditor' certainly belonged to this association. The 'debtors' are in other words the financial officers of the association. The members have 'accounts' with them out of which occasionally payments are made (the Coptic calls the payment in this case an 'expenditure,' an ⲁⲛⲅⲁⲗⲱⲙⲁ, in line 10). The members apparently received statements of all 'transactions' made with their money.

The second oddity is the word supposedly used for the poor (?) in line 11. Hintze read ⲅⲟⲙⲟⲓⲣⲟⲥ, which he connected with Greek ἄμοιρος This literary word is never used in papyri and is not a word one would expect to be used for the ordinary 'poor' in any case. I think we are here dealing with an orthographical variant of ὅμηρος, 'hostage.' This makes good sense. Elephantine is located on the southern border of the Roman empire, and in this period conflicts with the Nubians and the nomads across the border were frequent. To ransom those taken as hostages the association of the senior soldiers on Elephantine put some money together. This is an early Christian tradition, still alive in this period. On the other hand, the association of the senior soldiers on Elephantine also had a personal stake in this. If the Nubians and nomads raided the island, their own persons and their own family could be taken as hostages. Establishing a fund to ransom hostages was in this case also some sort of fund for mutual aid. The association of the senior soldiers on Elephantine itself is perhaps best interpreted as a mutual aid society.[17]

One could perhaps argue that the hostages in this case were not those taken by the Nubians or the nomads, but by the Persians. The date of the ostracon is

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[17] The case reported by Theodoretus, *Epistulae* 70, is different. In the absence of the bishop, Christian soldiers in Cyrrhus put some money together to set a North African girl free who had been sold as a slave after having been captured by the Vandals.

uncertain, but it could be in the period of the Persian occupation.[18] The tenth
indiction would in that case be 622. But it would be odd to find the association
of the senior soldiers on Elephantine active at a time when the island was
occupied by the Persians. Prisoners of war taken by the Persians are, however,
recorded in the *Life of John the Almoner* by Leontius of Neapolis (7 Gelzer). The
Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria accomodated escaped prisoners of war
from Syria.

Another case of prisoners of war, presumably taken by the Blemmyes,
seems to be presented by *BKU* III 361 from the later sixth century. It is an
acknowledgement written on leather of a debt incurred by the debtor, a
woman, when she was in captivity[19] and when the creditor, another woman,
ransomed her and her daughter. The text also appears in the *Fontes Historiae
Nubiorum* (no. 332), but unfortunately not all corrections to the text have been
taken into account in that edition.[20] Again I will adopt and adapt the English
translation here.

> I, Trempioh, write (lit. she writes) to ... I owe you sixteen *solidi* and one *tri-
> mesion*. And these encumber (lit. come to) my share of land. Take it as a
> pledge in your hands. You are the possessor. Take it and exploit it and its
> pasture and take them until I meet you. No one has a claim on it (?). You
> gave them (i.e. the money) for me and my daughter in captivity.

> Written by me, Sansnos, Epeiph 29, ... indiction.

The creditor may have acted out of charity when she paid the money to
ransom the debtor and her daughter. But in the legal codes a provision was
made to the effect that ransomed captives should pay the ransom back to the
persons who ransomed them. In case the ransomed captives were too poor to
do so, they were supposed to work for five years for the person who ransomed
them (*Sirm.* 16). At any rate, after the debtor in the leather acknowledgement
of debt had been ransomed together with her daughter, she was eager to pay

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[18] This happens to be what L.S.B. MACCOULL, B. PORTEN and J.J. FARBER in B. PORTEN (ed.),
The Elephantine Papyri in English, p. 572, unconvincingly argue on the basis of the formulas used.

[19] The Greek word in line 8 is αἰχμαλωσία, which is occasionally used for ordinary prisoners as
in *P. Mon. Epiph.*, 177, 3-4 and 190, two requests for provisions. It is conceivable that the creditor in
BKU III 361 incurred expenses in provisioning, rather than in redeeming, the debtor and her
daughter, but the amount involved seems rather high for this.

[20] Notably the corrections of H. SATZINGER in *Lebendige Altertumswissenschaft. Festgabe zur Voll-
endung des 70. Lebensjahres von Hermann Vetters* (Wien 1985), p. 330. Note that H. HARRAUER offers
a palaeographical analysis of this and other *Blemmyerurkunden* on pp. 330-331, and that Satzinger
points out on p. 329 that *BKU* III 350, 2 is not concerned with a captive (so still *FHN* III 331), but
with a slave. I have taken the loose-leaf *corrigenda* to the reedition of *BKU* III 361 in *FHN* III 332 into
account. I have not yet seen *FHN* IV.

the money back. She would apparently do so as soon as she and the creditor would meet, but for the time being she let the creditor use some land of hers, presumably in lieu of interest.

According to the *Life of Samuel of Kalamun* by Isaac the presbyter, "barbarians" (Libyan nomads) took John the *hegoumenos* of Scetis captive while he was hiding for Cyrus the Chalcedonian bishop of Alexandria in the 630s, at the very end of Roman rule in Egypt (7 Alcock). Shortly after, Samuel was himself taken captive by the same "barbarians" in Kalamun (17). He was their slave for three years (40). He was forced to worship the sun, but stubbornly refused (18). He also refused to "breed" and produce additional slaves for his masters (19-20). After some miracles the "barbarians" allowed him to return (21-23).

Of course, prisoners of war were also taken on the Roman side. Several papyri document how they were taken care of. In *SB* VI 9613, 12,[21] expenditures for prisoners of war are listed among other outlays for the military. Unfortunately the text is undated, so that a link with a 'third Blemmyan war' (see above) rests on shaky grounds. In *SB* XIV 11844 of the seventh century large-size rations for soldiers and small-size rations for prisoners of war are listed. *SB* XVIII 13267, also of the seventh century, is a list of blankets for prisoners of war. Just as in the Ptolemaic period, the late Roman state had to take care of prisoners of war as long as they had not been individually enslaved or otherwise disposed of.[22]

From several documents from the Theban area, it appears that prisoners of war could also be entrusted to the care of private individuals. In two letters, *P. Mon. Epiph.* 167 and 187) the addressees are requested to have pity on them — it seems as if the prisoners of war acted as letter carriers. In another letter, *O. Crum* Ad 27, the addressee is requested to send the prisoner of war to the writer who needs help in the harvest. Presumably the prisoner of war would earn some money — the writer asks the addressee to have pity, not on himself, but on the prisoner of war, who therefore stood to gain something from helping in the harvest. Whether these private individuals had voluntarily taken over the care of prisoners of war from the state is not clear, but if so, they probably regarded it as an act of charity.

From the examples given above it appears that we cannot always be very specific about the conflicts in which the prisoners of war (and the hostages)

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[21] Where one should probably read [ἐ]κ τῶν περισ⟨σ⟩ευθ[έν]των ἐχμαλώτων for αἰχμαλώτων, and perhaps translate 'because of the prisoners of war who have been given too much.' Ration sizes varied, as is clear from *SB* XIV 11844, and perhaps the prisoners of war had in this case received the larger rations to which they were not entitled.

[22] Where the late Roman state failed to take proper care of its prisoners of war, a local bishop might sell church movables to ransom them and return them home, as is illustrated by the case reported by Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7, 21, 1-4. For a similar case see W. E. KLINGSHIRN, "Charity and power: Caesarius of Arles and the ransoming of captives in sub-Roman Gaul," *Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985) 183-203.

were taken captive. For the Ptolemaic period we can point in general to the rather frequent conflicts outside and within the borders of Egypt. For the later Roman period it seems obvious that growing pressure from the Nubians and the nomads was the cause of many border conflicts. For the earlier Roman period things are less clear, but maybe we can interpret the dearth of evidence as an indication of the relative peace that reigned in Egypt in that period. Of course, we should make an exception for the Jewish uprising of 115-117.

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