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Peter van Minnen

PATRONAGE IN FOURTH-CENTURY EGYPT

A NOTE ON P. ROSS. GEORG. III 8

P. *Ross. Georg.* III 8 is a fourth-century text of considerable interest. Ever since its publication in 1930 it has figured prominently in studies on Egypt in late antiquity and on the development of the later Roman colonate. It is a letter from the villagers of Euhemeria to their "master and patron" in which they try to redefine their relationship with him. Apparently something had happened that made them worry. Here is the text as presented in the edition followed by the German translation accompanying it:

Τω δεσποτη ημων και [πατρο]
νι Νεχω Ατρησ και Μα . . . υ
και Ανουφιοσ και Αβουσ και Απολλ-
4 ων και Ηλιασ και Νιλοσ και Χαι-
ρημων και οι παντεσ απο κω[μ]ησ
Ευημεριασ. Γινοσκιν σε θε-
λωμεν, κυριε ημων Νεχαι,
8 οτι ουδαι επι του πατροσ σου
ουδε επει τησ ευπνιασ σου
το σομα δεδωκαμεν. αλλα οσ
ηνιασιοσ ποιουμεν το ε[ν]τα
12 γιον, παρεχομεν ουδενει. [Ου]
διοσ ξενοσ εστιν εν τη κ[ω]
μη ημων, αλλα δυω πυ[ρ]σο[υ]ρ[ια]
εστιν και ουδιοσ δυνα[τ]α[ι] ε[π]ελ
16 ασαι εν τη κωμη η βαδην
ελτιν. Και ει τιw ανια του υκου,

20 ἀρηστον τεκνων ημ[ων],
 οὐκ ἀντιλεγόμεν σοι· [δ]ο
 κουν σοι πράξαι πράξον.

Ἐρρωσθαι σοι εἰ[ν]χομε
 θα πολλοῖσ χρονοῖσ

.....

On the back:

24 Τῷ δεσ[π]οτῇ ἡμῶν καὶ πατρῶνι Νεχω οἱ ἐπι κωμησ
 Ἐγήμεριασ

“Unserm Herrn und Patron Nechos von Hatrés, Ma ... u, Anuphios, Abús, Apollon, Helias, Nilos, Chairemon und den gesamten Dörflern von Euhemeria. Wissen sollst du, unser Herr Nechos, dass wir weder unter deinem Vater, noch unter deiner Wohltätigkeit, den Leib hergegeben haben. Vielmehr, da wir jahraus jahrein den Auftrag erfüllen, so stellen wir (uns selber) niemandem. Kein Ortsfremder ist in unserem Dorf zu finden. Es gibt zwei Feuersignaltürme, und da hat niemand die Möglichkeit, an das Dorf heranzureiten oder zu Fuss zu kommen (scil., ohne angehalten zu werden). Falls irgendetwas der herrschaftlichen Familie zu schaffen macht, unser bester Junker, so widersprechen wir dir nicht: dünkt es dich gut, Steuern zu erheben, so tu solches.

Wir wünschen, du mögest gesund sein viele Jahre.

Unserm Herrn und Patron Nechos wir, die vom Dorf Euhemeria.”

The comments in subsequent scholarship on this text limit themselves to a paraphrase of the text, often adhering closely to the translation in the edition. Thus, Johnson and West in their survey of the evidence for the economy of Egypt in late antiquity¹ regard this text as the earliest evidence for *patrocinium* in Egypt,² as did the editors, and merely suggest some improvements in the translation of lines 17-20, which they paraphrase as follows: “And if anyone does harm to your house or to your most excellent sons we do not oppose you (in exacting retribution?). Exact whatever seems fair for you to exact.” This is clearly wrong. *Ἀρηστον τεκνων ημ[ων]* does not depend on the verb *ανια* in the

¹ A. C. JOHNSON & L. C. WEST, *Byzantine Egypt: Economic Studies*, Princeton 1949 (= *Princeton University Studies in Papyrology* 6), p. 28

² On the development of *patrocinium* in Egypt see I. F. FIKHMAN, “Les ‘patrocinia’ dans les papyrus d’Oxyrhynchus,” [in:] *Actes du XV^e congrès international de papyrologie*, vol. IV, Bruxelles 1979 (= *Papyrologica Bruxellensia* 19), pp. 186-194. See now also G. GILBERTI, *Le comunità agricole nell’Egitto romano*, Napoli 1993, especially pp. 73-103 on CTh. XI 24.

same way as *του υκου* (read: *οίκου*) does, because there is no conjunction ("or"). Even so, it should have been "your excellent son" in the singular, because the verb *αυια* goes with the accusative. Moreover, the addressee is always addressed in the singular, never in the plural, which *ημ[ων]* (read: *ύμῶν*) would imply. Johnson and West also suggest that the reason for the dispute between the villagers and their "lord and patron" was as follows: "Apparently the villagers were accused of harboring fugitives who may have inflicted some damage on the property of Nechos. The village seems to recognize his judicial powers but repudiates with dignity his attempt to control their personal liberties. Whatever the powers of Nechos, it is clear that the villagers were by no means the submissive serfs of the Western Mediterranean whose status at the end of the fourth century differed little from slavery." This seems a little better than the view of the editors, who make the incredible suggestion that the villagers invite Nechos to tax them if he needs the money. Still, it is odd that they would support their claim that there was no stranger in their village by referring to the two signal posts. A stranger would perhaps not be able to enter the village unawares, but the complaint of Nechos would surely have been that the villagers were deliberately hiding strangers. The signal posts seem more likely to be designed to ward off any attempt on the part of Nechos or his men to enter the village.

In his article on the development of the *patrocinium* in Egypt,³ Diósdí uses the text to demonstrate that the institution was fully developed by the fourth century and that the relationship between the patron and his protégés was already of long standing. The relationship between the villagers and Nechos indeed dates back at least to the time of Nechos' father. Diósdí believes that the text is the villagers' answer to a letter from Nechos, for which the only indication in the text seems to be the verb *αυτιλεγωμεν*. According to Diósdí, Nechos claimed that the villagers were hiding strangers and threatened them in case of non-compliance to his orders. This bullying by their previously benevolent patron put the villagers in a far worse state of subjection than any they had experienced so far. Their answer, according to Diósdí, is deferent (*demütig*) and probably did not result in a change of behaviour on Nechos' part.

More recently, Bagnall in his book on Egypt in late antiquity⁴ uses the text as the least dubious example of the collective dependency of whole villages on wealthy landowners and adds a few helpful observations. Lines 17-20 are paraphrased by him as follows: "But if your household needs something, we'll not refuse you; if you think it necessary to act, do so." In a footnote Bagnall retains *αρηστον τεκνων ημ[ων]* as an address and takes it to mean that Nechos (not Necho, as is clear from *Νεχαι* — read *Νέχε* — in line 7) was a young man

³ G. DIÓSDÍ, "Zur Frage der Entwicklung des Patrociniums in Ägypten," *JJP* 14, 1962, pp. 63-64.

⁴ R. S. BAGNALL, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 1993, p. 218.

at most. He thinks that Nechos had demanded some kind of personal service from the villagers. Bagnall regards the text as basically deferent towards the "master and patron" and even quotes a statement to the effect that many ordinary people in the premodern world had internalized their own lowliness.⁵ He adds: "Despite the note of pride, the deference at the end is unmistakable, in keeping with the tone throughout." Clearly, the views of Johnson and West and of Diódsi and Bagnall are mutually exclusive. The villagers cannot be proud and humble at the same time.

Even more recently, Marcović in her discussion of the later Roman colonate⁶ uses the text to demonstrate that patronage did not necessarily entail the total subjection of the patronized. The villagers did not regard themselves as Nechos' slaves, even if they were paying their taxes through him.

I believe that the text is too oddly worded as it stands to bear these interpretations without qualifications. Let us examine the trouble spots as I see them.⁷ In lines 11-12 the editors take *ποιουμεν το [ε]ντάγιον* together. They need to explain it in a note; to "do" an *ἐντάγιον* (the taxes the village has to pay) is to write one out, not to pay one. In line 12 the phrase *παρεχομεν ουδενει* also caused the editors trouble. They assume *το σομα* has to be supplied from line 10, where the verb, however, was *δεδωκαμεν*, not *παρεχομεν*. I think a slight change in the interpunction would radically change the meaning of this passage. If we put the comma after *ποιουμεν*, the meaning becomes more straightforward. Just as the villagers do every year, they are now also supplying the *ενταγιον* – *ουδενει*? Would the addition *ουδενει* mean that the villagers never paid their taxes, whether directly or through Nechos? This is hardly likely. Could it mean that they did not pay their taxes through an intermediary, such as Nechos, but directly? They would be supplying their taxes "to no one (but the state)." This also seems hardly likely, and Nechos must somehow have been responsible for the villagers' taxes. I would therefore propose yet another change in the interpunction. If we put a full stop after *παρεχομεν* and remove the full stop after *ουδενει*, the villagers would merely claim that they are in fact paying this year's *εντάγιον* and that they have no outstanding obligation towards Nechos. The reason for the trouble seems to be that Nechos was getting impatient. Apparently he tried to seize some villagers to turn them into slaves (or serfs) to pay off their debt. This is in fact not far from the interpretation of

⁵ "We will never comprehend the distinctiveness of that premodern world until we appreciate the extent to which many ordinary people still accepted their own lowliness."

⁶ M. MARCOVIĆ, *The Later Roman Colonate and Freedom*, Philadelphia 1997 (= *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 87.2), pp. 26 and 125.

⁷ In BL 7, p. 171 the reading *[πατρο]νι* in lines 1-2 is questioned. It is, however, certain from the address on the back. In line 9 the editors and the subsequent commentators regard *ευπνιαιος* as a misspelling of *εὐποιίας* ("your beneficence," as a polite way of saying "you"). I would prefer *εὐφύιαις* ("your goodness," also as a polite way of saying "you").

the editors, who thought Nechos was trying to turn his protégés into *ἐναπόγραφοι* or *Leibeigene*. In their reconstruction of the text, however, there was no apparent reason why Nechos should have done so at this moment. If my interpunction of the text is accepted, we at least have some idea why he did it: a presumed failure on the part of the villagers to pay this year's taxes. Their protest also makes excellent sense: there was no reason for debt-slavery on their part, because they were in the process of supplying the *ἐντάγιον* as in previous years.

If my interpunction is accepted, *ουδενει* would have to go with what follows. *Ουδενει [ου]δισ ξενος εστιν εν τη κ[ω]μη ημων* must in that case mean something like: "We all know one another in the village," in accordance with similar idiomatic expressions.⁸ Whether they were hiding strangers in the village would not be the issue. The editors and Johnson and West and Diósdí in their wake were mistaken in thinking that it was, because hiding strangers would not have constituted a case for Nechos to turn the villagers into slaves. But what do the villagers mean by saying that they all know one another? It seems that they want to stress their collective responsibility for paying their taxes. If Nechos would try to seize some of them for defaulting on their taxes, the others would not allow it. The villagers are trying to talk Nechos out of taking any such initiative. This at least seems to be implied by what follows. To impress on Nechos that he should not try to enter the village unawares, the villagers add⁹ that they have two *πυρρσουρ[ια]*, "signal posts," to spot anyone approaching the village on foot or on horseback, not just strangers but also Nechos and his men. Instead of the rare *πυρρσουρ[ια]*, which is too long for the traces at the end of line 14,¹⁰ as one can tell from the plate in the edition (Tafel 2), I would propose *πυρργ[ι]α*, "watchtowers," which makes even better sense.

In line 17 the text is corrupt as it stands. The verb *ανια* is much stronger than the editors and the subsequent commentators think. Translations such as "zu schaffen machen," "oppose" (Johnson and West) and especially Bagnall's paraphrase ("if your household needs something") are impossible. The sentence certainly started with *και ει τινα*.¹¹ From the plate one cannot clearly make out the rest of the line, but I do not see the *iota* of *ανια*. Instead of *-νι-* I think I see another *alpha* followed by a *ny*. Thus the sentence started with *και εἴ τινα ἄν α-*. What the editors read as *του υκου* at the end of the line cannot be

⁸ *Οὐδείς οὐδέν* occurs in papyri in phrases such as "Nobody has paid anything." Cf. *P. Cair. Zen.* III 59308, 5; *P. Mich. Michael* 28, 4; and *P. Abinn.* 5, 10.

⁹ I would take *αλλα* in line 14 to mean "what is more" as in fact it also has to mean in the editors' reconstruction.

¹⁰ At the end of line 15 *δυνα[τ]α[ι] ἐ]πελ-* is also too long for the traces. Reading just *ελ-* would yield *δυνα[τ]α[ι] ἐλάσαι* in lines 15-16, which is a good possibility.

¹¹ The editors do not tell us what they do with the odd *τω* (they presumably took it as a mistake for *τι*). In *WB* 4 it is printed as *τω* with elision (taking *τιωα* as an equivalent of *τι*).

read. Above the presumed *κο* one sees a curled stroke suggesting *ypsilon*, not *ny*. The preceding *ypsilon* is written slightly above the line, which suggests that a vowel preceded it (e.g. *ου*). After *καὶ εἴ τινα ἄν* one could read the traces in that case as *ἀπὸ τῶν . ου*, perhaps just *ἀπὸ τῶν τῶν*, “from here,” although the *tau* is no improvement on the editors’ *kappa*.

This leaves us with the crux in line 18. Is it an address as the editors and Bagnall have assumed? In addressing someone as *τέκνον* one would not normally add *ἡμῶν*. *Ἀρηστον* for *ἄριστον* is also odd.¹² If we split *αρηστον* into *αρησ του* (read *τῶν*) the text would run smoothly: *τινα ... τῶν τέκνων ἡμῶν*, “one of our children.” The verb *αρησ*, a subjunctive (*ἄρης*), as one expects after *εἰ ... ἄν*, refers to Nechos. If he would seize (or take away from here, if *ἀπὸ τῶν τῶν* is read in the previous line) any of their children, the villagers would ... do what? The following *οὐκ ἀντιλεγόμεν σοι* (“We are not disputing you”) seems to destroy the point. The villagers were on the verge of threatening Nechos and now add this seemingly awkward statement. Perhaps they mean that they will not limit themselves to verbal protests in the future: if Nechos has already tried to seize some villagers, perhaps children playing outside the village, the present document would be a letter of verbal protest against it; if Nechos would again try to seize some villagers, they now warn him that they would no longer resort to verbal protests (but to something else: violence, which they could not well say in so many words). Perhaps the villagers leave the sentence *εἴ τινα ἄν ... ἄρης τῶν τέκνων ἡμῶν* unfinished (aposiopesis) and then continue with a new statement, *οὐκ ἀντιλεγόμεν σοι*, to put on record that they are not being insubordinate to their patron,¹³ but merely asserting their rights. In either case, their threat would not be spelled out, only implied. This seems to be confirmed by what follows. In lines 19-20 the phrase *[δ]οκοῦν σοι πράξει πράξον* (for *τὸ δοκοῦν σοι πράξει πράξον*) must be an idiomatic expression. Although the verb *πράσσω* is often used in a technical sense (“to collect taxes,” “to exact [something]”), the interpretations of the editors and Johnson and West have to be rejected. Bagnall’s is better, but can still be improved upon. “Do whatever you please” rather than “If you think it necessary to act, do so.” “Do whatever you please” (or “Take it or leave it”) would make perfect sense. Between the lines the villagers have threatened Nechos: if he tries to force his way into the village and seize some villagers, they will resort to violence. He can ignore this written warning and face the consequences or leave the villagers in peace.

In this letter, then, the inhabitants of Euhemeria are protesting against the attempted violation of their personal rights by their “master and patron” and threatening him with countermeasures other than verbal protests, if he sticks

¹² These objections were first pointed out to me by W. CLARYSSE.

¹³ The verb *ἀντιλέγειν* is thus used in, e.g., John 19:12.

to his course of action. This constitutes an act of defiance rather than deference, as Diósdí and Bagnall would have us believe.

The text is dated palaeographically to the fourth century. We know that nearby Theadelphia was in trouble in the fourth century, because they could not keep up the water supply necessary to flood their fields.¹⁴ Everywhere on the edge of the Fayum, villages with much reduced populations were struggling to keep their land fertile and to meet the tax demands of the state. The state was struggling to maintain its income by making villagers collectively responsible for the taxes on the land near their villages or by making a wealthy landowner responsible for the whole amount (the *ἐντάγιον*) and have him recuperate the tax amounts from the villagers. Something similar will have happened in Euhemeria. To extract the taxes Nechos would have to pay to the government, he tried to resort to violence to make the villagers pay for their dues. *P. Ross. Georg.* III 8 shows that the villagers did not go down without a fight.

[Leuven]

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¹⁴ See J. W. ERMATINGER, "The economic death of Theadelphia during the early fourth century A.D.", *Münstersche Beiträge zur Antiken Handelsgeschichte* 16.1, 1997, pp. 1-9.