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New Documents from the Roman Military Administration in Egypt's Eastern Desert: the Ostraca from the Praesidium of Didymoi

Abstract: The ostraca from Didymoi, recently published by H el ene Cuvigny, offer a host of new documents from the Roman military administration, spanning a period of some 174 years. In this article I take a closer look at a selection of them, asking to what extent they corroborate, extend and/or modify what we already know of the Roman army administration and its documentary procedures. The subjects dealt with include postal service procedures, the granting of transfers and *commeatus*, literacy and letter-writing as well as prostitution. The documents reveal, amongst other things, a certain amount of flexibility on the part of military authorities in Egypt's Eastern desert when it came to accommodating soldiers' requests for transfers, *commeatus* and sexual entertainment.

Keywords: Postal service, travelling passes, literacy, prostitution; praefectus montis Berenicidis, curator praesidii, praesidium, cornicularius, actarius, librarius, signifer.

The *praesidium* of Didymoi (modern Khashm el-Menih), one of several stations along the road from Koptos to Berenike¹, was founded by the prefect of Egypt, L. Iulius Ursus, who in the 9th year of the reign of Vespasian, while on the return leg of a journey to Berenike, gave instructions for a well to be sought in that place and, after it had been found, ordered a fort and cisterns to be constructed under the direction of M. Trebonius Valens, *praefectus montis Bernicidis*.² Didymoi, like all other *praesidia* in the Eastern desert, was garrisoned by a small detachment of perhaps a few dozen men from various infantry and cavalry units in the province.³ The task of these *praesidia* was principally to supervise and maintain security on the desert highways, provide escorts for entitled travellers and function as relay stations in the regional communications network.⁴ Each *praesidium* was headed by a *curator* of a rank below that of a centurion and directly answerable to the *praefectus montis Berenicidis*, the most senior

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¹ Another road through the Eastern desert ran from Koptos to Myos Hormos (Qusayr) on the Red Sea (cf. Strab. 17,1,45; Plin. *nat.* 6,26,102–103.) This route, too, was dotted with *praesidia*, one of them being Krokodil , from where 151 ostraca have already been published (O.Krok.); cf. Breeze 2011, 129–132; for the location of Didymoi and Krokodil  see Appendix 1.

² I.Did. 1 (76/77): [A]nno V[III Imp(eratoris)] V[e]s[er]pasi[ani] [Caesa]ris Aug[ustini] / [L(ucius) Iul]ius Ur[sus] praef(ectus) Aegy(pti) re]dien[s] a B[ernicid]e] hoc / [loco] hyd[reuma] quaeri praecepit. hoc] cum e[sset in]ventum p[raesidium et lacu]s a[edifica]ri i[ussit] curam] / agente [M(arco) Trebonio Valente praef(ecto) montis Bernicidis] / [The text of the dedication may have been modelled on a standard text sent to all curatores in the form of a circular letter by the *praefectus montis Berenicidis* (Bagnall et al. 2001, 328–329; O.Did., p. 40). Many *praesidia* in the Eastern desert seem to have been built in the period between the Flavian emperors and the early reign of Hadrian when «there was an upsurge in ‘barbarian’ activity in the region» (Sidebotham 2011, 166); cf. O.Krok. 87 in fn. 39. On Roman military sites in the region see Sidebotham 2011, 162–166; on the architecture of the *praesidia* see Cuvigny 2003, 73–185; on the prefects of the desert and their responsibilities see Magioncalda 2012.

³ Sidebotham (2011, 165) reckons that most desert forts housed «only a few dozen or a few score men and their mounts, in some cases less»; Maxfield (2000, 432) assumes a strength of rarely more than a century, often considerably fewer; cf. Breeze 2011, 131; for the units attested in Didymoi see Appendix 2.

⁴ Cuvigny 2003, 321–333.

officer in overall command of the desert of Berenike.⁵

Excavations at various sites in the Eastern desert in the past few years have furnished a wealth of ostraca giving unprecedented insight into both the official day-to-day running of the road stations and the private lives of soldiers and civilians at those *praesidia*.⁶ Of the ostraca found in and around Didymoi, a total of 465 documents (plus 13 «ostraca figurés») have recently been published by H el ene Cuvigny. They date from the late first to roughly the mid third century CE and cast fresh light on the Roman military administration. Compared with the ostraca from Krokodil o (published by Cuvigny in 2005) and Maximianon, those from Didymoi are exceptional insofar as they span a longer period of time and include more dated ostraca, thus adding a longer chronological dimension to the documents hitherto retrieved from that region. Interestingly, this chronology shows a gap in time, as none of the ostraca bears a date attributable to the period from the 7th year of the reign of Hadrian (122/3) to the 17th year of Marcus Aurelius (176/7) when Didymoi was recommissioned. This gap in the documentation prompted the excavators to divide the *praesidium*'s history into two periods, the first extending from 76/7 to c. 150 and the second from 176/7 to c. 250. As a result, the documents span a period of some 174 years and thus, unlike the ostraca from Krokodil o, provide us with a glimpse of both official and private communication at Didymoi from the late first to the third century CE. Remarkably enough, most official documents date from the second period, whereas those from Krokodil o stem from the reign of Trajan and the first years of Hadrian and comprise documents related to the postal service, copies of official correspondence and letters between curators.⁷ This raises the interesting question of what the official documentation tells us in terms of constancy and change in administrative procedures. How does it compare with that from Krokodil o and other sites in the region? To what extent does it corroborate, extend and/or modify what we already know of Roman army administration and its documentary procedures? In this article I do not pretend to look into the entire material and give exhaustive answers to these questions, but rather make some comments on a selection of mainly Didymoi ostraca which contain some peculiarity worth commenting on.

A Postal Daybook and its Derivatives

O.Did. 22 (dumped c. 220–250) is classified as a postal daybook (journal de poste) containing entries from a 25-day period, O.Krok. 1 (8th Feb.–28th Mar. 108 or earlier) being mentioned by Cuvigny as a reference for this type of document. Both ostraca are concerned with the arrival and departure of letters and have a number of features in common: O.Did. 22 gives both the month (Mesor e) and the day for the first entry, but only the day for all other subsequent day-by-day entries within said month. The same holds true for O.Krok. 1.⁸ Both documents employ the same type of back-referencing, using, presumably for reasons of scribal economy, the word  omoiwos to refer back to the day and/or hour previously stated.⁹ When more than one letter was delivered, O.Did. 22 is unspecific throughout, speaking only of *letters* (plural), but neither saying how many arrived nor who sent them; O.Krok. 1 is mostly equally «taciturn» about the number of documents forwarded, mentioning the senders only occasionally, particularly if the letters etc. are sent by the prefect (of the desert) or the governor's *cornicularius*,

⁵ Cf. Bagnall 1977, 69. O.Did. 187 (cf. 188) (dumped c. 115–120) mentions a *signifer* as the *curator* of Didymoi. At the *praesidium* of Th onis Megal e a cavalryman (ιππεύς) may have been *curator* (O.Krok. 87, l. 111 [118]); on *curatores praesidii* see Cuvigny 2003, 313–320; id. 2010c, 37; Haynes 2013, 328.

⁶ See esp. Cuvigny 2003 and O.Krok.

⁷ O.Did., p. 2–3.

⁸ In O.Krok. 1 the beginning of the daybook is lost, but lines 18 and 49 also have the month and day at the beginning of the entries (1st Phamen oth; 2nd Pharmouthi), while the numerous day-by-day entries following 1st Phamen oth give the day only. Unfortunately, the text breaks off after the entry of 2nd Pharmouthi, so that this phenomenon cannot be further observed here.

⁹ O.Krok. 1, ll. 26, 35; O.Did. 22, l. 2.

presumably because these messages were deemed highly important.¹⁰ Both O.Krok. 1 and O.Did. 22 record the letters' provenance and next destination as well as the hour of arrival of postal deliveries. But while in the indication of arrival times O.Krok. 1 explicitly distinguishes between *hour of the day* (ἡμέρας) and *hour of the night* (νυκτός)¹¹, O.Did. 22 leaves out the day-time specification, adding this distinct piece of information only for night-time arrivals, which, however, does not hamper differentiation.¹²

In other respects, though, the documents differ quite considerably from each other: In O.Krok. 1 the beginning of each entry, which can be one to several lines long, is outdented¹³, obviously to aid recognition, presumably for consultation or checks, whereas in O.Did. 22 the entries are written as continuous text. While O.Krok. 1 mentions by name the couriers who arrived at the *praesidium* with the official post and those who forwarded it to the next *praesidium* along the route, O.Did. 22 contains no reference to couriers at all. The difference both in layout and detail prompts the questions whether we really have the same type of document before us and whether they served the same purpose. The arrangement and detailed nature of the entries in O.Krok. 1 is reminiscent of similarly arranged and detailed documents like Rom.Mil.Rec. 63 (c. 100–105) or 64 (156), while O.Did. 22 is more of a concise summary along the lines of the *renuntia* from Vindolanda, which do not provide many details but confirm, in a summary fashion, the execution of orders given. The outdenting in O.Krok. 1 makes it easy to find individual day entries. With its amount of details O.Krok. 1 could, for example, have been used to check the names of relay riders against working rosters such as Rom.Mil.Rec. 1 (219) and 2 (222) in an effort to ensure justice in detailing cavalymen to courier duty. O.Did. 22, in turn, only tells the reader that all post arriving at the *praesidium* on a certain day was dispatched within the hour. If this was standard procedure, O.Did. 22 only confirmed an expectation, namely that the *praesidium* went by the book and thus maintained the *disciplina militaris*.

The same may be true of a report from the *praesidium* of Iovis/Dios (Abù Qurayya),¹⁴ recording for the 19th Epeiph the arrival, at the first hour of the night, of the courier rider Nepotianos, who brought a covering letter together with letters of the prefect. Insofar it corresponds with O.Krok. 1. What distinguishes this report is what follows: One would expect the next relay rider to have left the *praesidium* within the hour¹⁵ (after the arrived circular had been read, registered in a daybook and copied), but not so here. The writer states that the next horseman, Hêraklês, departed with the letters only at the 10th hour of the night, i.e. about nine hours later, adding: ὁ καὶ δύνασαι ἐπιγνῶναι, μετὰ γυναικὸς κοιμώμενος (you can also verify this because he [i.e. Hêraklês] had lain with a woman). The explanatory remark shows that this departure from the standard procedure had to be accounted for. The writer seems to have been unable to avert this delay, which is strange because one would assume that it was the *curator praesidii* who was responsible for the receipt and swift dispatch of letters etc.; it appears that this *curator* (or his deputy?) somehow failed to do his duty, while Hêraklês, perhaps unconscious of the

¹⁰ O.Krok. 1, ll. 3, 6, 11, 44–45; in O.Krok. 30 (109) the horseman Arimmas had 22 letters of the prefect with him.

¹¹ O.Krok. 1, ll. 4, 13, 16, 17, 22–23, 24, 26, 32, 33–34, 35, 37, 46, 47–48; cf. O.Krok. 27; 29; 30 (109); O.BuNjem 67,7–8 (253–259); Stauner 2010, 67–68. According to Pliny (*nat.* 6,26,103), travelling in the Eastern desert was done mostly at night-time hours because of the heat (*maior pars itineris* [from Koptos to Berenike] *conficitur noctibus propter aestus*).

¹² Night-time hours: O.Did. 22, ll. 4, 7, 9; ὀψέ late in the day, 10.

¹³ Outdenting can also be observed in the fragmentary postal register O.Krok. 29 (109).

¹⁴ Abù Qurayya inv. 39 (2nd cent.), in Cuvigny 2008. Founded in 114/5, Iovis/Dios was situated between the *praesidia* of Kompasi and Xeron Pelagos (called Aristonion in the *Itinerarium Antonini*) on the road from Koptos to Berenike (s. Appendix 1). The prefect of Egypt M. Rutilius Lupus had the *praesidium* built or rebuilt under the direction of the prefect of the desert L. Cassius Taurinus (cf. Cuvigny 2010a, 246).

¹⁵ Cf. O.Krok. 29, ll. 2, 6, 12 (109).

arrival of Nepotianos, may have waited his turn, whiling away the time with a woman. In the left-hand margin, at the height of line 8 (which contains the beginning of said remark), is written, in the same hand as the entry proper, the abbreviation $\eta\upsilon\phi$ (ov?), «I have found».¹⁶ If expanded correctly, the word may have been meant to give special emphasis to the explanatory remark by underlining its veracity. It goes to show that such annotations were not a l'art-pour-l'art exercise, but were actually meant to be read and checked. The next day entry, of which only the beginning is preserved, bears the date 10th Phaôphi. The big time gap between the months of Epeiph and Phaôphi¹⁷ shows that this document is not a postal daybook in the sense of O.Krok. 1, where entries were made in close succession, but perhaps contained a compilation of incidents which somehow constituted departures from the standard procedure and therefore had to be reported back to head office. If O.Krok. 1 is taken as a yardstick for a proper postal daybook, O.Did. 22 and Abû Qurayya inv. 39 look like derivatives of it, drawn up upon request or as a matter of routine to document compliance with or (severe) departures from the *disciplina militaris*. The three documents span a period of far over 100 years and thus also attest to fundamental continuity both in the procedure of forwarding post from A to B and in the way this procedure was (routinely) documented.

Transmission of News from the Top to the Bottom of the Pile

O.Did. 29 (betw. Jan. and June 236) is an extraordinary piece of information that allows us a glimpse into how information about events at the very top of the imperial government was disseminated to soldiers at the very bottom of the command structure. It appears that the prefect of Egypt had been informed by an Imperial letter of the elevation of Maximus, son of emperor Maximinus Thrax, to the rank of Caesar and had given orders for this news to be passed on to all *praesidia*.¹⁸ To this end, the prefect wrote a covering letter to be sent out along with a copy of the Imperial epistle. The ostrakon tells us that the message was addressed to the *curatores* of the *praesidia* along the route from Phoinikôn to Berenike. Some other addressees may also have been mentioned, but the extant text is too fragmentary to be more specific. The copy of the message made at Didymoi contains instructions concerning the Imperial letter: the addressees of the message were to ensure that it be made known to their comrades, that, in accordance with the common vow, the inaugural sacrifices and acclamations be performed and that the (copy of the Imperial) letter be put on display (presumably in the *praesidia*) for the comrades.¹⁹ From the perspective of the Roman authorities, it obviously did not suffice to inform the headquarters of the units stationed in the province. It was essential that even the soldiers on outpost duty be updated about the change at the helm, which is not surprising, given that the emperor was not only the supreme commander of all Roman armies but also the focal point of their loyalty. It was to be ensured through publication of the message that all members of the provincial armed forces be in the know as soon as possible and perform the appropriate rites that publicly demonstrate their allegiance to

¹⁶ Cf. Cuvigny 2008, 320. This remark may have been a deliberate attempt on the part of the writer (the *curator*, or his deputy?) to put the blame on Hêraklê. Even if Hêraklê had received his marching orders upon the letters' arrival, the man in overall command apparently failed to see him off.

¹⁷ Phaôphi: September 28 – October 27; Epeiph: June 25 – July 24; cf. Bagnall 2009, 181 Table 8.1.

¹⁸ The Imperial letter is to be seen in the context of a number of similar letters announcing an elevation or accession: P.Oxy VII 1021 (accession of Nero; 17th Nov. 54); P.Oxy. LV 3781 (accession of Hadrian; after 25th Aug. 117); P.Amst. I 27 (accession of C. Avidius Cassius; 1st–30th Apr. 175); P.Bub I 4, Col. XXIX = ChLA XLVII 1459 & P.Bub I 4, Col. XXX (Latin letter and covering letter concerning an accession; 26th April–24th June 221); P.Berl.Bibl. 1 = SB I 421 (concerning the organisation of festivities to celebrate the accession of Maximus to the throne; early March 236?); BGU II 646 = WChr. 490 (accession of Pertinax; 193); P.Oxy. LXVII 4592 = SB X 10295 = Campbell 1994, 186–187 no. 310 (letter of a Roman emperor, Avidius Cassius?, recently proclaimed emperor by soldiers [175?]); P.Oxy. LI 3607 (covering letter for an edict concerning the accession of Gordianus I (& II?) [before 13th June 238]); the wording in lines 13–15 bears some similarity to that in O.Did. 29, ll. 12–13; cf. O.Did., p. 90–91.

¹⁹ Cf. Culham 1989, 106: «posting [...] was the standard means for making information publicly available».

the emperor and his son. This procedure of informing the military community no doubt applied in principle to all provinces. That a similar updating effort was made when the reverse happened, i.e. when the memory of a former emperor was consigned to oblivion, can be glimpsed from the records of the Palmyrene cohort at Dura Europos.²⁰

Administrative Personnel

As the previous chapters have shown, communication between headquarters and the *praesidia* as well as amongst the *praesidia* relied heavily, if not exclusively, on the written word.²¹ Consequently, literate soldiers were needed at desert road stations to do the necessary «paperwork». Didymoi provides us with the now fourth attested *librarius* in the Eastern desert.²² The others are known from Krokodilô, Maximianon and Iovis/Dios.²³ The presence of administrative staff at *praesidia* underlines the importance of official record-keeping and written communication even at military outposts in the desert and highlights the military administration's ambulatory nature, which is also evident in the list entitled *logos porias* or account of the caravan, probably that of a *praefectus (montis Berenicidis)* who appears to have been travelling with a mixed party of civilians and military personnel, the latter apparently including members of his staff, namely a (the?) *cornicularius*, a *strator*, a *beneficiarius*, perhaps a *tabularius*, a *vexillarius* and a *signifer*.²⁴ The civilians include an *exêgêtês*, a *grammateus* and a trader (*emporos*); even a *caesarianus* may have been with the prefect. The overall composition of the group suggests an administrative purpose of the journey. The list obviously records the handing out of food supplies to the prefect and the men with him, but its cryptic details leave us in the dark as to its specific purpose or the criteria by which each traveller received what he got. The list with its mixed (i.e. civilian and military) recipients is reminiscent of a similar account of food supplies distributed amongst soldiers and civilians in Vindolanda.²⁵ Neither list gives any prices for the commodities nor tells us who paid for them and on what (contractual?) basis. All this information, which we would need to understand the mechanism of the supply system behind these notes, goes unmentioned, as is the case with the vast majority of all sorts of Roman military lists that neither have a heading nor expressly state their purpose because they were drawn up within a specific context in which all parties concerned knew what they were about and therefore did not need expressly to mention the obvious.

The titles *praefectus* and *cornicularius* also appear amongst the *tituli* on various containers which Cuvigny believes were prepared ahead of the visitors' arrival at Didymoi.²⁶ Another *cornicularius* appears in

²⁰ Rom.Mil.Rec. 99, Frag. a, recto, ll. 9–10; also see p. 349. As a result of the *damnatio memoriae* of Geta, the unit's documentation was updated by deleting Geta's name from documents; cf. Stauner 2004, 46.

²¹ See organisational chart in Stauner 2010, 85.

²² O.Did. 172 (dumped c. 96 or soon afterwards).

²³ Krokodilô: O.Krok. 105 (Trajan); Maximianon: M774; Iovis/Dios: inv. no. 1067 (2nd cent.–c. 250); cf. Cuvigny 2010a, 253 no. 4; cf. the *librarius* at Gholaia/Golas: Stauner 2004, 137–138, 147, 211–212, 437–438 no. 436; id. 2010, 69–70.

²⁴ O.Did. 84 (dumped c. 230–240); *strator*: cf. Haensch 2010, 118–119: «Im kaiserzeitlichen Heer gibt es *stratores* [...] als einzelne Funktionsträger (u.U. auch zwei oder drei) an der Seite ritterlicher Auxiliarkommandeure, also von Befehlshabern kleinerer Einheiten der römischen Armee.»; *tabularius*: cf. CIL VI 37295 = CBI 939 (2nd–3rd cent.); according to Schallmayer (CBI 939) the *tabularius* was «keine eigentliche Charge» but a «Registaturbeamter»; cf. Nelis-Clément 2000, 92, 395; *vexillarius*: cf. I.Portes 85; O.Did., p. 14; *signifer*: cf. the *signifer* sent on a mission to purchase materials for the army (Stud.Pal. XXII 92 [= Doc.Eser.Rom. 62] & P.Freib. IV 66 [194]; cf. Stauner 2010, 51, 77–78).

²⁵ T.Vindol. II 180 (ca. 105–122): a *ratio frumenti em[ensi]*, drawn up by a civilian trader.

²⁶ *Praefectus*: O.Did. 224–225 (found in a filling created c. 240); *cornicularius*: O.Did. 230 (dumped c. 220–250); another *cornicularius* is mentioned by name, Bêsariôn: O.Did. 235 (dumped c. 230 or 250); cf. O.Did., p. 180, 201. Also mentioned amongst the *tituli* are a *procurator* (ἐπίτροπος; O.Did. 226–227 [dumped c. 220–250]) and an εἰσ-αγωγεὺς (O.Did. 228–229 [dumped c. 220–250]); cf. Haensch 1995, 276: «Im Stab des *praefectus Aegypti* war lange Zeit – zumindest bis in die sechziger oder siebziger Jahre des 2. Jh. – ein ansonsten nirgendwo greifbarer Amtsinhaber mit dem Titel *Eisagogeus* zumindest für einen Teil der Funktionen zuständig, die in anderen Provinzen oder bei den rö-

an ostrakon from Maximianon, and the *cornicularius praefecti Aegypti* dispatched sealed *acta*, probably to the *praefectus montis*, via Krokodilô; another of the governor's *officiales*, his *actarius*, is referred to at Iovis/Dios.²⁷ The mention of all these functionaries shows that regional and provincial headquarters were in close contact with far-away addressees and outposts through either written communication or administrative functionaries sent on missions. Even the prefect of the desert went on inspection tours in the Eastern desert, which goes to show that the most senior officer had to attend personally to tasks at grassroots level in his area of responsibility.²⁸

Moving or being moved from A to B

Transfers and the relief are recurrent subjects in the ostraca from Krokodilô and Didymoi. The soldiers speak of ἀλλαγὴ, κλῆρος or σουκκέσωρ.²⁹ What they basically mean is their relocation from one post to another. The ostraca give us an insight into how transfers or secondments came about and what it meant, possessionwise, for soldiers to move from A to B. For example, we learn of a Iulius who urges his comrade C. Valerius Iustus to come to his *praesidium* (probably that of Aphrodites Orous), as this, he says, is a «better *praesidium*» (*melior praesidium*), encouraging Iustus to ask the centurion permission.³⁰ It seems Iulius is talking about a transfer or secondment and not about a leave of absence (*commeatus*; see below). In another letter some friends or comrades propose to approach the authority in the *praesidium* to get someone transferred, which gives the impression that a vicarious application for a transfer was acceptable.³¹ The casual way in which these men offer their help to secure someone's transfer suggests that this was, principally, a possible way of obtaining it; however, the request was probably not a mere formality, as the words *opera dare* (l. 5) in Iulius' letter suggest, but may have called for some pecuniary persuasion on the part of Valerius.³² The letter also tells us that the centurion was the authority to grant such requests. Not all transfers were sought after, as we learn from the reaction of two men who were quite disheartened when their comrades Apuleius and Herianus were relocated

mischen Präfecturen wohl den *a commentariis / commentarienses* oblagen. Denn als Protokollant und Archivar von Gerichtsverfahren war der Eisagogeus unzweifelhaft für einen zentralen Teil der Aufgaben im Zusammenhang mit den *commentarii* des *praefectus Aegypti* zuständig.» The bare title in O.Did. 228–229, however, does not tell us whether he was a member of the governor's *officium*. The εἰσαγωγεῖς attested in Didymoi could just as well have been subaltern assistants of other functionaries (cf. Haensch *ibid.*, 276 fn. 57; O.Did. 228, commentary on l. 2).

²⁷ *Cornicularius*: O.Krok. 1, l. 45; *actarius*: O.Dios inv. 1460; see fn. 41.

²⁸ I.Did. 1 (see fn. 2); O.Did. 46 (dumped c. 220–250): The *curator* of Phoinikôn informs his counterpart from the neighbouring *praesidium* of Didymoi, Antonius, of the passage of four «barbarians», three children, nine camels and four asses, so that Antonius can pass this information on to the prefect. Since Didymoi is further away from Koptos (s. Appendix 1), the prefect was obviously not at headquarters in Koptos but perhaps on an inspection tour. O.Krok. 1, ll. 44–45, mentions *acta* which were sealed, probably because they were meant to be read not at the *praesidia* but by the prefect of the desert. Since they were forwarded from Krokodilô to Persou, the prefect was probably on an inspection tour of the desert (cf. O.Krok., p. 27 commentary on line 44). In a comment on CEL I 158 (mid–end of 2nd cent.) Gilliam (1976, 59) suggests that the prefect addressed in the document may have been «moving about inspecting detachments and outposts.» Cf. M54 (ostrakon from Maximianon, s. fn. 34); T.Vindol. III 581, ll. 96–97 (c. 98–105): governor dining at Vindolanda; Arr. *per.p.E.* 6,2: the Cappadocian governor on an inspection tour of the garrisons on the eastern coast of the Black Sea; cf. Stauner 2010, 37. At the imperial level, even the emperor regularly attended to matters at subordinate levels; cf. Eck 1995, 28; id. 2003, 77.

²⁹ κλῆρος: In a Roman military context may mean relief or (re)secondment; cf. O.Did., p. 23.

³⁰ O.Did. 326 (dumped c. 78–85).

³¹ O.Did. 412 (dumped c. 140).

³² Cf. Tac. *ann.* 1,17: *saevitiam centurionum et vacationes munerum redimi*. P.Mich. VIII 468, ll. 38–41 (see fn. 40). For the Greek version of *operam dare* (διδόναι ἐργασίαν) see SB XVIII 13303 (1st cent.); it is a phrase «well established in Greek usage of the Roman period, particularly in letters exchanged by military and bureaucratic personnel» (Hanson 1985, 95).

elsewhere.³³ In an ostrakon from Maximianon the writer, Aphrodisios, knowing that a general (re)distribution to the *praesidia* was forthcoming, asks the addressee, Psenosiris, whom he calls κύριος, to intercede, on his behalf, with the prefect, whose visit was expected, so that he, Aphrodisios, may be permitted to remain at Maximianon.³⁴

The casual mentions of transfers raises the question as to how soldiers were distributed along the *praesidia*. Were personnel assignments to specific *praesidia* usually decided on at headquarters, with lists of soldiers and their postings drawn up in e.g. the office of the *praefectus montis Berenicidis*, so that the whereabouts of each and every soldier would be known at any given point in time? The remark by the aforementioned Aphrodisios suggests that general (re)distributions were subject to central planning, an assumption supported by the fact that soldiers from different units were posted to one and the same *praesidium*³⁵, which presupposes central co-ordination and personnel allocation.³⁶ Interestingly, Aphrodisios is using the same vague expression (εἰς τὰ πραισιδία) as is Saturnilos, who in a letter to his mother says that if he cannot come to her within the following two months he will have eighteen more months of sitting in garrison until he enters Pselkis again.³⁷ Saturnilos apparently knew in advance how long he would again be away on duty.³⁸ He is not referring to a particular garrison where he would be stationed, but is speaking of *praesidia* in general (εἰς τ[ὰ] πραισιδία καθήμενος). This may mean that he, presumably with a whole group of comrades, was sent to a certain district and deployed as the local military authorities saw fit. Such a scenario could explain Iulius' advice to Iustus, with the centurion being the local authority who was in overall charge of (some of?) the *praesidia* and either kept records of the whereabouts of the soldiers in his area of responsibility himself or reported transfers, permitted by him, back to headquarters for the updating of personnel distribution lists.³⁹ The centurion(s) may

³³ O.Did. 424 (dumped c. 125–140); cf. fn. 38. More transfers: O.Did. 374 (dumped c. 88–96); O.Krok. 97 (early in the reign of Hadrian). O.Did. 325 (dumped c. 77–92) indirectly refers to the transfer of an apparently most disagreeable soldier.

³⁴ M54, ll. 3–7 (Cuvigny 2003, 298): ἐὰν ἀναβῆ ὁ ἔπαρχος, πραγμάτευσαι περὶ ἐμοῦ, ἵνα εἰς Μαξιμιανὸν μείνω; ὡς γὰρ ἀκούω, σκορπιζόμεθα εἰς τὰ πραισιδία.

³⁵ I.Did. 5 (post 176/7, ante 219?): a collective dedication by four soldiers, two of whom are identified as *Palmyreni*, while for the other two, Asklas and Maximus, no unit is given; I.Did. 6 (176/7 or later): base of a statue (disappeared) dedicated by three soldiers from two units (*cohors III Ituraeorum* and *cohors II Thracum*); O.Did. 70, see fn. 103. For the units mentioned in the Didymoi ostraca see Appendix 2.

³⁶ Personnel requirements must have been determined centrally and communicated to individual auxiliary units where detachments were formed by drawing soldiers from individual *centuriae* and *turmae*. See composition of the working party in CIL III 6627 (see fn. 96); The *cohors XX Palmyrenorum milliaria equitata* based at Dura Europos manned outposts up to 250 km away from Dura. Some of these outposts had a strength of approximately a *centuria*. However, as Breeze (1977, 3) noted, «in no case was a complete century seconded from the unit to serve on detachment duty. Rather these men were drawn in apparently haphazard fashion from all the centuries and *turmae* in the unit.» That the selection was made haphazardly is unlikely (cf. Veg. *mil.* 2,19,3; see fn. 72); it is rather that the principle by which soldiers were selected escapes us.

³⁷ P.Mich. III 203 (98–117); Stauner 2010, 67 fn. 148.

³⁸ Terentianus, too, knows of his imminent secondment to Syria: *s[cias] autem [ra]pi me in Syriam exiturum cum vexillo*. The way he phrases his secondment (*rapi me*) suggests that he was not too happy about it (P.Mich. VIII 467, l. 8 [early 2nd cent.]). Also see O.Did. 456 in fn. 44.

³⁹ Cf. CEL I 158 (mid–late 2nd cent.): The centurion Severus in or near Latopolis Magna wrote to his prefect: *...turma Procli dimisi ex cursu*, which means that he had relieved a cavalryman from courier duty; (this, i.e. Gilliam's reading [1976, 60], looks more convincing than the original editor's: *...e turma Proclidis misi excursu* [...sent a cavalryman on an expedition]). Interestingly, since cavalrymen were usually under the command of *decuriones*, it appears that Severus was in charge of more soldiers than just those in his *centuria*; perhaps he was in command of infantry and cavalry soldiers detached to outpost duty and deployed as he, Severus, saw fit. The message also shows that he reported his arrangements back to his prefect. Cf. O.Krok. 87 (118): Cassius Victor, centurion of *cohors II Ituraeorum*, informs the prefects (presumably of the auxiliary units in the region) as well as the *centuriones*, *decuriones*, *duplicarii* and *curatores* of an attack by «barbarians» on the fort of Patkoua. The fact that Victor did not forward this message to his next

not have been the only officer(s) in a position to grant transfers: In one ostrakon from Krokodilô we learn of a soldier who tried to obtain a transfer from or with the aid of a *tesserarius* who apparently had a say in this matter. But things did not progress to his satisfaction, so he called upon Proculus, whom he calls κύριος and who may have been the *curator* of Krokodilô, asking him to help him get his transfer and adding that he would reimburse Proculus his outlay (for bribing the decision-maker?).⁴⁰ In yet another ostrakon an *actarius* was also somehow involved in a transfer.⁴¹ Another *actarius* was the man whom one Ischyron, apparently stationed in a *praesidium*, urges his friends (at the main camp?) to approach in some matter (perhaps concerning their leave, transfer or discharge).⁴² The fragmentary letter also mentions «16 months» and «the desert», which is reminiscent of Saturnilos' 18-month stint in the desert. The length of tours of duty may have varied quite considerably, depending, amongst other things, on the distance between the outposts and the unit's home base.⁴³ As Aphrodisios' letter shows, even the prefect himself may have been approached about a soldier's desire for service at a particular *praesidium*.

It appears that personally requested transfers from one *praesidium* to another have to be distinguished from the relief. The recurrent question as to when the relief would come shows that the soldiers had only a vague idea about the duration of their stay in the *praesidia*⁴⁴ and were therefore keen on news about the arrival of the κλήρος or σουκκέσσωρες⁴⁵. The ostraca mentioning the relief stem mainly from

immediate superior only, but spread it in all directions could mean that he considered the matter so urgent that all parties concerned should be informed as quickly as possible; however, it could also mean that Victor was a local central authority and acted upon the news as he saw fit, sending messages to all those in a command position.

⁴⁰ O.Krok. 95 (c. 108–115). As regards the outlay, cf. P.Mich. VIII 468, Col. II 38–41 (early 2nd cent.): *hic a[ut]em sene (!) aer[e] / [ni]hil fiet neque epistulae com/mandaticiae nihil val<eb>unt nesi (!) / si qui sibi aiutaveret (!)*.

⁴¹ O.Did. 465 (dumped late 2nd–early 3rd cent.); interestingly, the writer asks the addressee to forward to him the letter which had arrived for him at Didymoi; the writer was apparently away from Didymoi, perhaps transferred elsewhere or despatched with some task. An *actarius* is also mentioned in a text from Iovis/Dios O.Dios inv. 1460: ἡγεμονικὸς ἀκτάριος (O.Did., p. 399) who appears to be the *actuarius praefecti Aegypti*.

⁴² O.Claud. II 235 (mid 2nd cent.). The contexts in which these *actarii* are mentioned suggest that these men were concerned with personnel-related matters (cf. Stauner 2004, 129–131; id. 2010, 76 fn. 191; id. 2010a, 137). Discharge: see Ostrakon Skeat 11, ll. 2–3: the *curator praesidii* was to discharge a cavalryman; Gilliam (1952, 55) assumes that the *curator* had «to share in the paperwork and see to it that all the necessary entries were made in the unit's or detachment's records.» Cf. P.Oxy. IX 1204 (299): soldiers stationed at the Small Oasis were to be discharged.

⁴³ ILS 9142 = AE 1996, 1647: The cavalryman Dida of *ala Vocontiorum* did five months at Krokodilô (*feci stationi meses(!) quinque*). Cuvigny (2003, 312) and Sidebotham (2011, 166) assume a length of at least three to seven months. Speidel (1992, 277) conjectures that legionaries at Lambaesis in Numidia were detached to far-away Gholaiia in Tripolitania in the early 3rd century for some 18 months. Cuvigny (2003, 312), however, voices reservations about the comparability between Gholaiia, which had few outposts of its own, and the *praesidia* in Egypt's Eastern desert. Breeze (1977, 4) believes that detachments of *cohors XX Palmyrenorum milliaria equitata* served three years at the outpost of Appadana. From the fact that only one *curator praesidii* seems to be mentioned more than once in the ostraca from Florida, Bagnall concludes that this may be due to «either the brief duration of the commands or the small number of men in each and the large number of such commands; or both factors may play a part, more likely.» (O.Florida, p. 24–25); Maxfield (2000, 431) suggests «a stay of several months».

⁴⁴ However, one Aelius Silvinus indicates a precise date until which he would be sitting at his outpost or *praesidium*: *scias me ...[us]/que pentecedecate hic falcere* (O.Did. 456, ll. 2–4 [first half of 3rd cent.]). Interestingly, in his letters A. S. repeatedly asks the addressee for foodstuffs, saying that he has nothing to eat (O.Did. 455–457 [3rd cent.]; 456, ll. 4–5: *scias me iam olim n[il] / habere*). Is this *nil habere* to be understood literally or did A.S. want some *extra* food to spruce up his diet (cf. T.Vindol. III 628, Col. II, ll. 4–5 [c. 98–105]: *cervesam commilitones / non habunt*)?

⁴⁵ The plural (σουκκέσσωρες = *successores*) indicates that the relief concerned groups of soldiers and not just individual troops. In I.Did. 5 (s. fn. 35) the list of the four dedicants is preceded by the words κλήρος π[ρ^ο]ῶτος, which presumably means that the men were on their first secondment (to Didymoi?) or on their first tour (of some duty, perhaps guard duty). Theoretically, it could also mean «oracle obtenu par tirage au sort» (O.Did., p. 50), but this is rather unlikely. The idea of collective reliefs is further strengthened by M54; see above fn. 34.

the late first and the early second centuries, but there is also one from the first half of the third century, which suggests that the army's personnel secondment policy remained unchanged for well over a century.⁴⁶ As we have seen above, this policy with its central planning of personnel distribution had a certain amount of in-built flexibility that allowed for accommodating individual soldiers' requests for transfers between *praesidia*.

When a soldier received his marching orders, he had several options as to what to do with his goods and chattels: He could take them with him by having all or part of them shipped to his new posting, as did someone in Didymoi who received a letter informing him that the donkey driver Titus would bring him the bedstead and the mat.⁴⁷ He could also leave some items for his successor, as did Apollon and Memmius, who seem to have swapped places and left their mattresses and *cellas* (the contents of their lodgings?) in place for each other.⁴⁸ A third option was to sell (some of) their belongings, as did the Claudius who wanted to sell the *contubernium* (= *cella*?) to his successor.⁴⁹

Another recurrent subject is *commeatus*. The most striking thing is again the casual way in which soldiers talk about it: Iulius, for instance, urges Annius to take leave (λαβεῖν κομεᾶτον) and come to him, as he, Iulius, cannot come because his horse has glanders, which he proffers as a satisfactory reason for Annius' *commeatus*.⁵⁰ One Numerius offers to ask for leave on behalf of Longinus if the latter so wishes⁵¹, and Harpokras urges his friends to take care that the *curator* writes the permit for leave of absence.⁵² These ostraca date from the late first and the first half of the 2nd century and give the impression that for long decades it was not as difficult to obtain *commeatus* as Vegetius makes it out. At least Vegetius' comments cannot be taken as having been applicable at all times and in all situations.⁵³ It could be that a more or less liberal granting of requests for transfers and *commeatus* did not, strictly speaking, constitute an infringement of military regulations - because, as has been suggested above in the context of the postal service, compliance with the *disciplina militaris* was being monitored⁵⁴ -, but it may have been a deliberate attempt, on the part of the military administration, to boost the morale of the troops at those lonely desert outposts.

Travelling in the Desert

Travelling from A to B in the Eastern desert was possible only with a permit authorising travellers to pass through the military checkpoints along their route. These permits usually come in the form of brief instructions or passes written on ostraca and issued by military officers, principally centurions.⁵⁵

⁴⁶ O.Did. 339 (dumped c. 77–92): In his letter C. Antonius asks Longinus Crispus to write back as soon as he hears anything specific (ἀκριβέστατα) about the relief (σουπκεσσόρων); O.Did. 462 (dumped first half of 3rd cent.): Cassius, writing from the *praesidium* of Aphroditis Orous to his comrade Tiberius at Didymoi, asks whether he had heard anything more recent about the κλήρος; enquiries about the relief are also mentioned in: O.Did. 341 (dumped c. 77–92); O.Krok. 96 (Trajan/Hadrian). For continuity in secondment policy see also Speidel 1992, 269.

⁴⁷ O.Did. 372 (dumped c. 88–96); cf. O.Krok. 97 (early in the reign of Hadrian): The writer asks the addressee to come with the donkeys if he learns that their relief would be coming.

⁴⁸ O.Did. 422 (c. 140–150).

⁴⁹ O.Did. 417 (c. 120–125, dumped c. 125–140).

⁵⁰ O.Did. 329 (c. 77–92).

⁵¹ O.Did. 344 (dumped c. 77–92), ll. 13–16: εἰ θέλεις κομμεᾶτον, / γράφον μοι καὶ αἰτή/σω σοι.

⁵² O.Did. 447 (dumped c. 140–150); *commeatus* is also requested from the *curator* in O.Did. 439 (c. 110–115).

⁵³ Perhaps the distinction between *commeatus* and transfers/secondments to some other *praesidium* should not be too finely drawn (in the Eastern desert context). A transfer to a «better *praesidium*» brings a change of scene and may have recreational elements of a *commeatus*.

⁵⁴ Cf. O.Florida, p. 31; O.Krok. 99 (Trajan/Hadrian): The prefect unexpectedly conducted a roll-call inspection at Koptos or at a *praesidium*; he found that not all was as it should have been (perhaps a soldier was absent without a good reason) and went into a fit over the infringement of the *disciplina militaris*.

⁵⁵ All passes found at Didymoi were issued by *centuriones* except for one issued by a *decurio*, who wrote in Latin

Most of these documents were found at Mons Claudianus and date from the reign of Trajan⁵⁶, while Didymoi has furnished only five dating from the late first and early second centuries. Although roughly contemporary, the Didymoi passes differ quite considerably from those of Mons Claudianus: The latter are, all but two, written in Greek in the form of letters that follow the same laconic formula and are addressed to the *stationarii* along the roads.⁵⁷ The passes from Didymoi, however, neither follow the same formula and terminology nor do they mention any addressees. Two of them, O.Did. 48 and 49, are actually written, by the permission seeker, in Greek in the form of requests submitted to a centurion who wrote his permission underneath as a *subscriptio* in Greek (48) and Latin (49), respectively.⁵⁸ The latter permit (49) presupposes bilingual reading competence on the addressees' side, as the Latin and the Greek texts are not identical but complementary, the Latin *subscriptio* only telling the reader to let pass the person identified in the Greek text. The fact that, in O.Did. 49, the centurion used Latin as the official language of the army and Rome for giving instructions to military addressees at road stations reflects the authority of Rome in the province.⁵⁹

The lack of desert-wide uniformity in these passes suggests that there was obviously no standard form to be used by both applicants and issuers. What mattered was the content of the permits, and in this respect the passes are quite interesting, as identification of the travellers is not established via their names. Cuvigny rightly remarks that in a society without identity cards or passports it would not make much sense to indicate the name of the person requesting permission. Quite pragmatically, identification was achieved by verifying whether the composition of the party of travellers plus the sex and number of possible animals they may have had with them was as indicated in the pass, and that presupposes a certain amount of literacy on the part of the soldiers doing service at road checkpoints.

Literacy and Letter-writing

There was a great deal of letter-writing in the Eastern desert; both soldiers and civilians exchanged messages with greetings and personal news, informing one another of the dispatch of e.g. foodstuffs⁶⁰ or requesting, in return, letters or whatever was needed. One Iulius writes to a Valerius that he is sending him three letters in addition to the four previously dispatched through the *galearius* of Didymoi and wants him to hand them over to a horseman; he adds that he also wrote a letter on Valerius' behalf.⁶¹ In another letter, which he may have written the following day, Iulius takes up the subject of the seven letters again, asking Valerius how many he had received, apparently because he was not sure that Valerius had received them all.⁶² Gaius Antonius was not sure either whether Longinus Crispus had sent him a message and therefore asked Crispus «if you have sent me a letter which I did not find as it came

(O.Did. 47 [dumped 88–96]). At Myos Hormos in the first half of the 2nd century a *duplicarius* issued a pass for two women wishing to visit the sanctuary of Philotera (cf. Van Rengen 2001).

⁵⁶ O.Claud. I 48–82.

⁵⁷ ὁ δεῖνα τῶ (τοῖς) δεῖνα χαίρειν. πάρες (πάρετε) τὸν (τὴν, τοὺς) δεῖνα. Only two passes do not follow this formula; cf. O.Claud. I, p. 58–59. On *stationarii* see now Fuhrmann 2012, esp. 207–220.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, authorisation is given in the same way as in the permit, granted by the prefect of Egypt to a certain Aurelia Maeciana of Side, to leave Egypt via Pharos (P.Oxy. X 1271 = ChLA IV 266 [26th April–16th May (?) 246]): The governor gave his permission in the form of a *subscriptio* in Latin under the request written in Greek. This clearly attests to the common use of established documentary principles in both the civilian and military spheres. The permit also illustrates «the vigilance exercised by the Government on the frontiers of Egypt and the strictness with which ingress and egress were controlled» (P.Oxy. X, p. 204). The same vigilance and strictness obviously applied to traffic on desert highways; cf. Fuhrmann 2012, 208.

⁵⁹ Cf. Adams 2003, 395–396.

⁶⁰ Bread, cheese, dates, eggs, lentils vegetables, cabbage; money, see e.g. O.Did 438 (110–115), 444 (c. 125–140); 447 (dumped c. 140–150); 455–456 (first half of 3rd cent.).

⁶¹ O.Did. 318 (dumped c. 77–92).

⁶² O.Did. 319 (dumped c. 77–92).

through». ⁶³ The questions highlight the uncertainties involved in the forwarding and delivering of (private) letters. Presumably, a horseman arrived with a «bag of ostraca, which everyone looks through to see if there is anything for him. Gaius Antonius allows for the possibility that he has missed seeing that there was one for him and the letter-carrier has departed with the letter towards the next *praesidium*.» ⁶⁴ Not all of those who were in correspondence with friends and relatives knew how to read and write, but recruited the assistance of someone literate. Second-hand literacy is therefore pretty much in evidence in the ostraca from Didymoi ⁶⁵: The aforementioned Iulius, for example, although probably illiterate, was nevertheless a proficient author and had his letters written by at least two different persons. ⁶⁶ Albucius, presumably a soldier at Phoinikôn, wrote letters in his own name and on behalf of Iulius and Kephalas. ⁶⁷ The funny thing about the letter he wrote for Iulius is that Iulius sends greetings to Annius from Albucius, who did the actual writing. Three ostraca ⁶⁸ give us an inkling of the communicative situation between people who were familiar with each another, but did not all share the same language: Demetrous, perhaps a prostitute, did not read or write Latin and may have been completely illiterate. She had one Numosis ⁶⁹ write a letter in Latin to a certain Claudius, who may have been a Dacian like his comrade Diurponais and neither read nor wrote any Greek. ⁷⁰ Numosis was Greek-speaking and had a fairly good knowledge of Latin letters, but had picked up only a smattering of Latin spelling, grammar and word usage. Numosis calls Claudius his *frater et magister*, while Claudius calls Numosis his *filius*, which suggests that the two were soldiers and comrades, Claudius probably being the older of the two. Demetrous needed Numosis with his shaky Latin literacy to write Claudius a letter, a task for which Bülow-Jacobsen believes he used a phrase-book or glossary for mechanically translating from Greek to Latin. ⁷¹ However, military service in the Eastern provinces included routine duties that required some reading knowledge of Greek, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Claudius could not have read passes in Greek on his own, but would have needed a comrade like Numosis. The two together may have had enough linguistic competence to read and write short messages in both Latin and Greek. This raises some questions difficult to answer: Was Claudius an exception, or were there (always) numerous soldiers in the Eastern provinces who neither read nor wrote any Greek? How did the Roman military administration proceed when it came to *equally* distributing amongst the soldiers routine tasks requiring the reading and/or writing of short texts? After all, Vegetius says that records were meticulously kept to ensure that no-one be treated unjustly or exempted from duty by favour. ⁷² Those responsible for personnel allocation likely had to take soldiers' (il)literacy into consideration when doing their planning. Many soldiers were undoubtedly aware of the advantages literacy would bring in the form of better prospects of promotion, more comfortable service conditions ⁷³, higher pay etc. Perhaps this also motivated Numosis to learn how to write Latin letters. However, the fact that his text is

⁶³ O.Did. 339 (dumped c. 77–92), ll. 6–8: ««εἰ ἀπέσταλκός / μοι ἐπιστολὴν ἦν οὐχ εὔρον διελθεῖν».

⁶⁴ O.Did., p. 262. Occasionally, donkey drivers also delivered ostraca (O.Did. 444 [c. 125–140]).

⁶⁵ See introductions to O.Did. 353–354, p. 274; 355–360, p. 276.

⁶⁶ See O.Did., p. 234–235 for an overview of his letters.

⁶⁷ Iulius: O.Did. 329 (c. 77–92); Kephalas: D534 (s. O.Did. 330 [dumped c. 88–96]).

⁶⁸ O.Did. 417 (c. 120–125, dumped c. 125–140), 418 (dumped c. 120–125) and 419 (dumped c. 115–120).

⁶⁹ Perhaps a deformation of Numisius, O.Did., p. 352.

⁷⁰ Although illiterate in Greek, Claudius may have picked up enough spoken Greek to orally interact with his Greek-speaking environment. Men with Dacian names also occur in O.Did. 64, 435, 439, 440 (c. 110–115); cf. O.Claud. II 402–404.

⁷¹ *Frater et magister*: O.Did. 417 (c. 120–125, dumped c. 125–140); *filius*: O.Did. 419 (dumped c. 115–120); O.Did., p. 352.

⁷² Veg. mil. 2,19,3: *ut ne quis contra iustitiam praegravetur aut alicui praestetur immunitas, nomina eorum, qui vices suas fecerunt, brevibus inseruntur.*

⁷³ Cf. P.Mich. VIII 465 (19th/20th Feb. 107), 466 (26th Mar. 107); Haynes 2013, 327.

«full of errors and deformations of words»⁷⁴ clearly shows that writing exercises are not the same thing as training in spelling and/or grammar. While the former could be done auto-didactically or with limited outside help, perhaps in the form of a glossary or a phrase-book, the latter required a teacher. Numosis may have taught himself the Latin alphabet, but he probably had not received (formal) training in orthography or grammar.⁷⁵ The soldier Cutus, perhaps a Thracian, was certainly not a native Latin speaker⁷⁶ and seems to have been in a similar situation: He drew up, in Latin, a list of horsemen and their *turmae*, probably as a writing exercise, as the last line contains only five *B*'s.⁷⁷ Bülow-Jacobsen describes Cutus' handwriting as «fairly firm, letters are mostly formed individually, the same way every time they occur and in a form which suggests that he has received qualified instruction in writing. His orthography is deplorable.»⁷⁸ One Harpokras struggled likewise, as he was familiar with epistolary formulas but was out of his grammatical depth as soon as he had to compose freely.⁷⁹ Another soldier with a Dacian name (Zourdanos = Diourdanos), writing to a presumably Dacian comrade, had acquired a working knowledge of Greek, but his spelling was also shaky.⁸⁰

If it is true that the Dacians mentioned in the ostraca were recruited into the Roman army after Trajan's conquest of Dacia in 106, as Bülow-Jacobsen believes, and if the date at which these ostraca were discarded (110–115) is also correct, these Dacians must have been transferred to Egypt fairly soon after their military service had begun. Since Latin was probably not their mother tongue, they first had to learn Latin as the official command language of the Roman army, and through Latin they had to come to grips with Greek after their transfer to Egypt. Glossaries and/or phrase-books may have been provided by the army for soldiers with mother tongues other than Latin and/or Greek to cope with the linguistic challenge.⁸¹ Linguistic incompetence was obviously no reason why soldiers should not be transferred to a Greek-speaking province.⁸² The communicative situation between Demetrous, Claudius and

⁷⁴ O.Did., p. 352.

⁷⁵ Formal training in spelling and grammar was given at least to centurions and to those entrusted with the drawing up of all sorts of documents in military units (cf. Adams 1995; id. 1999; Stauner 2004, 90, 132–138). P.Hibeh. 276 = CPL 260 (late 2nd/early 3rd cent.) mentions an *orthographus leg(ionis?) n(ostrae?)*, whom the writer calls *amicum nostrum karissi[mum]...* With regard to Krokodilô and Maximianon, J.-L. Fournet (in Cuvigny 2003, 465–466) says: «[...] certains de nos ostraca paralittéraires témoignent d'un apprentissage du latin par des hellénophones, l'inverse a dû être tout aussi vrai. [...] Les exercices d'écriture des noms propres, des sigles monétaires et surtout de rédaction de lettres montrent combien la visée de cet enseignement était avant tout pragmatique et inféodée aux exigences de la pratique de l'écriture de tous les jours: savoir écrire une lettre était plus immédiatement nécessaire que savoir lire Homère, Euripide ou Méandre.»

⁷⁶ O.Did., p. 252. If Thracian, he could have been more familiar with Greek than Latin.

⁷⁷ O.Did. 63 (dumped c. 88–96).

⁷⁸ O.Did., p. 252.

⁷⁹ O.Did. 447 (dumped c. 140–150).

⁸⁰ O.Did. 435 (dumped c. 100–115); another shaky, illiterate hand appears in O.Did. 464 (dumped late 2nd–early 3rd cent.). In O.Did. 136 (14th May 215) one Chryses writes on behalf of an illiterate person, but is himself a poor writer.

⁸¹ Cf. the bilingual glossaries collected by Kramer 1983: P.Lond. II 481 = Kramer, no. 13 (4th cent.): a bilingual glossary in which both Latin and Greek terms are written in Greek; for a military parallel see O.Amst. 8 = SB XX 14180 (2nd cent.); cf. Adams 2003, 42, 436–437; P.Ant. 1, fr. 1, verso = ChLA IV 259 (4th/5th cent.): two Latin alphabets for Greek speakers; they were probably intended for specialised professional scribes, but not for learners of Latin (cf. Kramer 1999, 38); P.Reinach inv. no. 2140 = Kramer 1983, no. 3 (2nd half of 3rd cent.): a Latin-Greek word list including *miles*, *miles gregarius*.

⁸² Transfers were also made from Greek-speaking to Latin-speaking provinces: According to Palme (2006, 282), some 20 per cent of the men serving in the *classis Misenensis* in the 2nd century were Egyptians. How many of them knew Latin well enough to understand and speak (and even write) it before the start of their military service? Not all of them will have been in a position like the Apion who thanks his father for giving him a good education which he hopes will ensure his promotion (BGU II 423 [2nd cent.]); many Egyptian recruits will certainly have needed language train-

Numosis shows us a very pragmatic way of getting the message across. For some official communication purposes in the Eastern desert, e.g. at road stations, the army is likely to have followed a similar pragmatic path.

Sex was on their Minds

The relief was not the only thing that kept soldiers preoccupied. The ostraca from Didymoi also give us unprecedented insight into one aspect of daily life at military camps, namely prostitution, of which we knew all along that it was there, but have never seen it in such detail: Long months out in the Eastern desert set many soldiers afire with lust. Their carnal desires did not have to go unanswered, as the prostitution business was pandering to their urges.⁸³ Several ostraca mention prostitutes touring the *praesidia*. Usually, a woman accompanied the girls to their «workplaces», where they were eagerly awaited. The way these young women went about their business was called *κυκλεύειν*, i.e. moving round in circles, serving one man after the other.⁸⁴ The soldiers apparently had their predilections: At the *praesidium* of Aphroditis Orous the *curator* wrote a letter on behalf of the whole garrison, who wished to rent a certain prostitute. Desirous of her services, the men had collected enough money to pay both for the girl (sixty *drachmae*⁸⁵) and for the *conductor* who would bring her.⁸⁶ That the men asked for a particular girl and also knew her price suggests lively discussions amongst soldiers about the merits of the prostitutes available. From another letter emerges that a certain Cornelius, the *epitropos* or owner of a girl called Julia, begged the whole *praesidium* to let her come to the addressee, Antonius, who seems to have been burning from sexual desire.⁸⁷ He was not the only one desirous of exclusive access to a girl. An apparently influential person wanted to lease a little girl on a long-term basis, and Philokles, who had command over her, was bending over backwards to please his client.⁸⁸ One writer even let his wife as a prostitute, inculcating in the addressee, Rusticus, that she was not permitted to lie with anybody without Rusticus' consent, which probably meant that he had to guarantee her against rape. Should she have problems with anybody, Rusticus was to take them on until the centurion or decurion arrived.⁸⁹ One letter brings to the surface the plight of a girl, presumably a prostitute: Kroniaina, probably rented out to a client for a somewhat longer period, complained in a letter to her father about being maltreated by that man: «*I went hungry so that he could fill his belly and even so, when he saw my bread hanging in the basket, he became so violent and abusive – I am unable to put it in writing for you.*»⁹⁰

The ostraca cast indirect light on the misery of young girls and women whose job it was to satisfy the sexual desires of whole garrisons. The fact that the *curator* of Aphroditis Orous undertook to make arrangements, on behalf of the garrison, for a girl to be sent to the *praesidium* or that centurions and decurions should solve problems concerning prostitutes suggests that the military administration at least connived at this sort of activity within military installations, as it presumably was instrumental in keeping up of the morale of troops in the desert.

ing of some sort.

⁸³ On prostitution in the Eastern desert, see Cuvigny 2003, 374–375; 388–395; id. 2010b.

⁸⁴ Cuvigny 2010b, 162; O.Did., p. 25.

⁸⁵ This appears to have been «the standard monthly amount at which the prostitutes were leased out.» (Nappo – Zerbini 2011, 73).

⁸⁶ O.Did. 430 (dumped c. 100–110); cf. Cuvigny 2010b, 164.

⁸⁷ O.Did. 333 (dumped c. 88–92). At Didymoi one Dioscoros proudly announced in a graffiti: «*I have fucked here twice. Hurrab!*» (I.Did. 10 [76–beginning of 2nd cent.]); cf. CIL IV 4029 (Pompeii): *hic ego bis futui*.

⁸⁸ O.Did. 382 (c. 110–115): At the end of the letter mention is made of a period of three years.

⁸⁹ O.Did. 406 (dumped c. 115–140).

⁹⁰ O.Did. 451 (dumped c. 176–210); translation by A. Bülow-Jacobsen; cf. M1189 (Cuvigny 2003, 394): a letter addressed to a woman called Kroniana who did not take the *κυκλευτικόν* (cf. Cuvigny 2010b, 160–161) which appears to be the contract price for *κυκλεύειν*; see fn. 84.

* * *

The discussion of the various documents has yielded interesting new insights summarised below:

Documenting the postal service: Although O.Krok. 1, O.Did. 22 and Abû Qurayya inv. 39 are all concerned with the arrival and dispatch of official post, there are subtle differences between the «postal daybook» O.Krok. 1 on the one hand and O.Did. 22 and Abû Qurayya inv. 39 on the other: While the former documents the postal service in great detail, which e.g. allows ascertaining how often individual horsemen were sent on courier missions, the latter appear to have been drawn up with a different purpose in mind: O.Did. 22 seems to confirm, in a *renuntium*-type fashion, that the postal service at the *praesidium* runs by the book and that, consequently, the road station maintains the *disciplina militaris*; Abû Qurayya inv. 39 reports at least one incident that constitutes a departure from the standard procedure (of forwarding incoming mail within the hour), which amounts to an infringement of the *disciplina militaris*. The absence of any heading – a phenomenon known from many other military documents – makes it difficult for the modern student of the Roman army to categorise documents and suggests that they were drawn up to answer implicit questions known to both writers and recipients. Headings were therefore superfluous. Taken together, the three documents imply long-term continuity in the operation and documentation of the military postal service in the Eastern desert.

Transfers, the relief and commeatus: The numerous mentions, in the soldiers' letters, of transfers and the hotly awaited relief shed fresh light on the practice of the Roman army's personnel allocation in the Eastern desert (and perhaps not only there) over long decades: The way soldiers write about (desired) transfers to other *praesidia* give the impression that such relocations were not uncommon and relatively easy to obtain, perhaps with some added pecuniary incentive, on the part of the requester, for the decision-maker to accede to the request. The same applies to *commeatus*. It appears that soldiers did not find it too difficult to get some time off, or at least there are no allusions to insurmountable difficulties in the letters. The relative ease of obtaining leave of absence may also have to do with the fact that service in the *praesidia* in the Eastern desert was by nature more or less ambulatory. It also means that we should reconsider the validity of Vegetius' apodictic comment on the rarity of *commeatus*: Even if fundamentally true, it apparently did not apply everywhere at all times and under all circumstances. The letters from Didymoi suggest that there was a certain amount of flexibility and pragmatism in the procedures in the Eastern desert. A more or less liberal attitude on the part of the military authorities may also explain why prostitutes were allowed to work within the *praesidia*. *Commeatus*, inter-*praesidium* transfers and prostitution undoubtedly helped keep up morale at desert camps where routine service afforded very little, if any, diversion for troops.

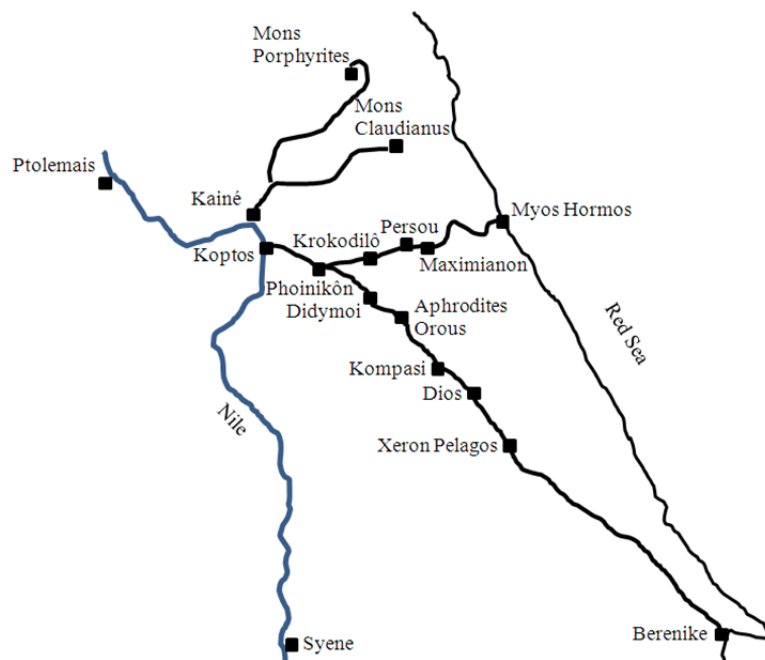
Administrative personnel: The proper functioning of the army's communications network in the Eastern desert relied heavily, if not exclusively, on written communication, on the reading and writing or copying of messages, reports and letters as well as on the forwarding thereof to the addressees via relay stations. At each point in this communication chain literate personnel were required if there was to be action on orders and messages transmitted in writing. The ostraca from Didymoi (and other sites in the Eastern desert) add further mosaic stones to this ever more detailed picture of the Roman military administration that is taking shape before our eyes, highlighting in particular the fundamentally ambulatory nature, across the centuries, of the army's administration when it came to meeting superordinate information requirements.

Travelling passes: Pragmatism also obtained in the issuing of permits that allowed travellers to pass through checkpoints along desert highways. There was no desert-wide uniform formula for these documents, either for the requests for permits or for the permits themselves. What mattered was clarity of content, and this may, quite pragmatically, also have been a factor in the choice of Latin or Greek to balance varying degrees of literacy on the recipients' side.

Literacy and letter-writing: The Didymoi ostraca yield plenty of evidence for second-hand or vicarious literacy, showing that illiteracy was absolutely no hindrance to participation in the world of written

communication. A case in point is O.Did. 417, in which Demetrous had her letters to Claudius written by Numosis, who had acquired knowledge of the Latin alphabet either by himself or with limited outside help, perhaps in the form of a glossary or a phrase-book which the army may have provided to help soldiers tackle the challenge of writing in Latin (or Greek). Such aid was all the more needed if the presence of soldiers of Dacian extraction in Egypt shortly after the conquest of Dacia was no exception. It seems that, linguistically, the army threw soldiers in at the deep end by not refraining from sending e.g. non-Greek-speaking soldiers to Greek-speaking provinces. Lack of linguistic competence was no excuse for not going where one was needed or not doing what was necessary. If need be, pragmatic solutions were found to overcome individual semi-literacy or outright illiteracy⁹¹, e.g. through the provision of training or phrase-books etc. or, very probably, through pairing together (semi-)literate and illiterate soldiers to enable them to perform tasks involving the reading and/or writing of short texts in Latin and/or Greek.

Appendix 1: Praesidia in the Eastern desert of Egypt



Two major desert highways running from Koptos to Myos Hormos and Berenike, respectively. Along these roads were located Roman military stations, *praesidia*, some of which, namely those mentioned in the discussion, are shown here.

Appendix 2: Units mentioned by name in the Didymoi ostraca from the first and second periods

First period (76/7–c. 150): *legio XXII (Deiotariana)*, the only legion mentioned in the ostraca, is represented by a centurion who issued a pass for several donkey drivers.⁹² *Ala Commagenorum* is

⁹¹ For example, Roman army administration required each and every soldier to confirm in writing receipt of food and equipment, irrespective of whether he was able to write himself or needed to recruit the assistance of a literate comrade, cf. e.g. P.Hamb. I 39 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 76 (179).

⁹² O.Did. 49 (dumped 88–96). At Mons Claudianus another centurion of this legion, Valvennius Priscus, issued a pass addressed to the *curator* of Raïma (O.Claud. I 49 [113–117]; cf. I.Pan 41; O.Claud. I, p. 48). On *legio XXII Deiotariana* see Ritterling 1924/5, 1791–1797; Daris 2000–2003. According to Cuvigny, legionary centurions appear to be specialised in the issuing of passes (O.Did., p. 12). Rather than speaking of a specialisation, I would prefer to say it was a task which fell within the remit of centurions as the most senior officers present at Mons Claudianus; cf. fn. 55.

ferred to in only one ostrakon⁹³; it is unclear where the unit was encamped; M. P. Speidel assumes it «was stationed in Upper Egypt» and «could have sent detachments to the Eastern Desert as well as into Nubia»; Spaul suggests that it «was perhaps stationed at Koptos, where Ala Vocontiorum replaced it.»⁹⁴ Probably referred to in O.Did. 141, *cohors I Thebaeorum equitata* may have been in Egypt since the early first century; in 105 it was transferred to Iudaea.⁹⁵ While in Egypt, the cohort was involved in the reconstruction of the camp and the dedication of water-tanks at Koptos and presumably also in road and/or other camp building activities in the Eastern desert.⁹⁶ *Cohors I Pannoniorum* may be behind *Jnniorum*; it is first attested in Egypt in 83.⁹⁷

Second period (176/7 – c. 250): *Ala Thracum Herculianna* was transferred from Palmyra to Koptos between 183 and 185, changing places with *ala Vocontiorum*.⁹⁸ Several commanders of this unit doubled as prefects of the desert.⁹⁹ A number of ostraca mention *Palmyreni*¹⁰⁰ who may be members of the *Hadriani Palmyreni Antoniniani sagittarii*, a unit «of irregular Palmyrenian bowmen» who «may have been called to Koptos because of their experience in patrolling the desert, conditions in Egypt's Eastern Desert having much in common with those around Palmyra.»¹⁰¹ At the time of Caracalla they are attested at both Koptos and Berenike.¹⁰² One ostrakon¹⁰³ contains a list of soldiers enrolled in at least five different auxiliary cohorts: The first soldier is given with his ethnicon, *Thrax*, and likely belonged to a cohort of Thracians, presumably *cohors II Thracum*¹⁰⁴, which arrived in Egypt in 105 together with *cohors I Lusitanorum* and was stationed at Syene in 131 and at Luxor in 143.¹⁰⁵ The next unit is mentioned only indirectly with the name of its garrison place, Pselkis, and could be *cohors II Ituraeorum*, attested there in 138; this is all the more likely since the soldier in line 7 is indicated as belonging to δ Εττ (*cohors II Ituraeorum*).¹⁰⁶ The soldier in line 8 was enrolled in *cohors I Augusta praetoria Lusitanorum equitata*; transferred to Egypt before 105, the unit was first stationed at

⁹³ O.Did. 326 (dumped c. 78–85).

⁹⁴ Speidel 1992, 258; Spaul 1994, 94–95.

⁹⁵ Speidel 1992, 260–261; Spaul 2000, 456–457.

⁹⁶ CIL III 6627; Lesquier 1918, 94–95; Ritterling 1924/5, 1793; Saxer 1967, 97–99 no. 294; Maxfield 2000, 425–426.

⁹⁷ O.Did. 206 (dumped c. 77–92); cf. O.Did., p. 13. Lesquier 1918, 93; Spaul (2000, 335) remarks that the cohort «did not stay in Aegyptus long enough to leave any epigraphic evidence. This would suggest that it was based somewhere in the western desert where archaeologists have rarely ventured.» Hitherto scarce epigraphic evidence does not connote a brief stay in the province, all the less so if, as Spaul himself surmises, the unit was stationed somewhere in the hardly explored western desert. As the wealth of the present material shows, the desert is full of surprises and may alter or expand our current knowledge quite dramatically.

⁹⁸ AE 1933, 208, 209, 214; P.Ryl. II 85 (185); P.Amh. II 107 (185); II 108 (185/6); cf. Lesquier 1918, 78–79; Speidel 1992, 82; Spaul 1994, 142–143; Maxfield 2000, 419.

⁹⁹ I.Did. 9 (c. 190); O.Did. 38 (dumped after 235).

¹⁰⁰ I.Did. 5 (post 176/7, ante 219?); O.Did. 71 (dumped at end of 2nd/beginning of 3rd cent.); O.Did. 39 (3rd cent.).

¹⁰¹ Speidel 1992, 82; cf. Lesquier 1918, 96–97. I.Portes 85 (216^p) mentions a M. Aurelius Belakabos, *vexillarius* of this unit (the rank of *vexillarius* indicates that the unit was at least part-mounted); SEG XLVIII 1977 (after 183): dedication by one M. Aurelius Mokimus who identifies himself as Παλμυ(ρη)νός Ἀ(ν)τω(ν)ιανός τοξότης; cf. O.Did., p. 14–15.

¹⁰² Maxfield 2000, 426.

¹⁰³ O.Did. 70 (dumped end of 2nd/beginning of 3rd cent.).

¹⁰⁴ Cf. O.Did., p. 134–135. One member of this unit is also amongst the dedicatees in I.Did. 6 (176/7 or later).

¹⁰⁵ Syene: P.Wisc. 14; cf. Gilliam 1968; Luxor: P.Col. VIII 221 = SB X 10530 = ChLA XLVII 1448 (143); cf. Speidel 1992, 261; Maxfield 2000, 411; Spaul 2000, 369–370.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. P.Mich. VII 436 (138); Lesquier 1918, 90; Speidel 1992, 259–260, 269; Maxfield 2000, 416–417, 422; Spaul 2000, 444–445; Cuvigny 2010c, 41.

Syene and then, from 131 onwards, at Contrapollinopolis Magna, where it still was in 156.¹⁰⁷ *Cohors I Flavia Cilicum equitata* is also represented by one soldier. Raised by a Flavian emperor, the unit seems to have been stationed in Egypt from the start, first in the Eastern desert in 81–96 and 118, then at Syene in the second century and on Elephantine Island in the third century.¹⁰⁸ The last unit in this list is *cohors III Ituraeorum*, which is attested to have been in the province at least from 83 until 243/244 and may for some time have been encamped at Thebes.¹⁰⁹

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¹⁰⁷ Lesquier 1918, 92–93; Speidel 1992, 260, 266; Spaul 2000, 56–58.

¹⁰⁸ Lesquier 1918, 86; Speidel 1992, 258; Maxfield 2000, 411, 413; Spaul 2000, 399–400; the unit is also mentioned in O.Did. 135 (dumped c. 220–250). Another soldier of this cohort, enrolled in the century of Pasiôn, is mentioned at the head of a list of men without any further identification (O.Did. 69 [dumped c. 220–250]). The unit may also be referred to in a dipinto, cf. Cuvigny 2011, 38, 44, 53, 95. O.Did. 69 is reminiscent of O.Did. 71, which also identifies the first man in the list as a soldier (officer), indicating his name and rank, while giving only the names of the rest of the men. Similar lists with only the first man given with his name and rank can be found amongst the Douch ostraca, e.g. O.Douch I 22 (4th– early 5th cent.).

¹⁰⁹ CIL XVI 29 (83); P.Mich. III 164 = Rom.Mil.Rec. 20 (243/4); cf. Spaul 2000, 446–447; Maxfield 2000, 422; Mitthof (2001, 330) assumes that the unit was stationed in Middle Egypt. The ostraca from Didymoi provide new support for this assumption (it is also mentioned in O.Did. 143 [dumped c. 220–250] and I.Did. 6 [176/7 or later] and perhaps also in O.Did. 140 [dumped c. 125–140] and O.Did. 142 [dumped c. 220–250]).

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Özet

Mısır'ın Doğu Çölünden Roma Ordu İdaresi hakkında yeni Belgeler: Didymoi Karakolu'ndan Ostrakonlar

Sina Yarımadası'nda yolları gözetlemek ve bölgenin emniyetini sağlamak amacıyla Koptos'tan Berenike'ye uzanan güzergâh üzerinde kurulan Didymoi karakolunda İ.S. 2. ve 3. yy.a ait birçok ostrakon ele geçmiştir. Bu karakolun (*praesidium*) 174 yıllık idari tarihine ışık tutan toplam 465 adet yazılı ostrakon kısa bir süre önce Hélène Cuvigny tarafından yayımlanmıştır. Stauner makalesinde bu ostrakonların Roma ordusunun idari yapısına dair ne tür yeni bilgiler sunduğunu sorarak Cuvigny'nin korpusundan seçtiği bazı belgeleri ayrıntılarıyla incelemektedir. Seçilen *ostrakonlar* karakolun haber alma sistemi, erzak temini, sivillere sunulan geçiş belgeleri, karakolda görev yapan askerlerin okuma-yazma oranı ve mektup yazma alışkanlıkları ve de fuhuş ile ilgilidir. Belgelerden, bu çöl bölgesinde zor şartlarda görev yapan askerlerin ulaşım, erzak ve cinsel eğlence konularındaki taleplerine karşı ordu otoritelerinin belli oranda esneklik gösterdikleri anlaşılmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Post servisi; geçiş belgeleri; okuma-yazma; fuhuş; *praefectus montis Berenicidis*, *curator praesidii*, *praesidium*, *cornicularius*, *actarius*, *librarius*, *signifer*.