

CLCV 204: Alexander and the Hellenistic World
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The Ptolemies, the priesthood, and *P. Grad.* 4: The Impossibility of *P. Grad.* 4
 in the Thebaid and Implications for Ptolemaic Rule

by Jennifer Barrows

I. Introduction

The papyrus *P. Grad.* 4 contains an oath by the banker Semtheus in 230 BCE, in which he swears to perform all of his banking and tax collection duties justly and accurately.¹ Although a banking oath papyrus should be rather prevalent among the papyri found in Egyptian cartonnage,² *P. Grad.* 4 is an anomaly: it is the sole papyrus cited by the scholars Karolien Geens,³ Roger Bagnall,⁴ Naphthali Lewis⁵ and Michael Austin as an example of an oath by a Ptolemaic banker.⁶ The Herakleopolite that this papyrus comes from was a highly Hellenized area with intensive economic activity during the third century BCE⁷; therefore, this nome would be more likely to produce an administrative oath. However, other regions of Egypt have produced many pieces of evidence for financial administration as well.⁸ The Thebaid's temples,

¹ Michael Austin, *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest: A Selection of Ancient Sources in Translation*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 555.

² Administrative papyri were later recycled into coverings for mummies in the later Ptolemaic period; much of the evidence for Ptolemaic Egypt comes from cartonnage. See Joseph Manning, *Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Structure of Land Tenure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 18.

³ Karolien Geens, "Financial Archives of Graeco-Roman Egypt," *Pistoi dia tèn technèn: Bankers, Loans, and Archives in the Ancient World: Studies in Honour of Raymond Bogaert*, ed. Koenraad Verboven, Katelijn Vandorpe, and Véronique Chankowski (Leuven: Peeters, 2008): 139.

⁴ Roger Bagnall and Peter Derow, *The Hellenistic Period: Historical Sources in Translation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004): 145.

⁵ Naphthali Lewis, *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt: Case Studies in the Social History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986): 49.

⁶ Except for Austin, the other scholars cite the papyri *P. Fuad. Cat* 3-4. However, the persons mentioned in *P. Grad.* 4 are the same (though with different spellings) in the translations of *P. Fuad Cat.* 3-4.

⁷ A nome was a basic political division of Egypt.

⁸ Here, the question of why other regions with strong royal involvement have not produced oath papyri can be raised. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to address this issue.

for example, were financial centers for the Thebaid and collected various taxes from their land (Manning 70). Archives from the praktor Milon and from the temple of Edfu in the Thebaid demonstrate the temples' financial administration, but these archives do not include similar oath papyri.⁹ This paper will argue that the existence of an oath like *P. Grad. 4* stems from the differences in administrative control between a state-controlled region like the Fayum and the Thebaid's temple-based system: no oath papyrus can be traced back to the Thebaid because the Ptolemies, foreign to Egypt and keen to appease their subjects, had to accommodate the power of the temple administrations by limiting the state's presence.¹⁰

This paper will address this hypothesis in three sections. The first section will discuss the general significance of the papyrus and provide a general picture of the Ptolemaic financial administration. Then, a history of the Thebaid's temple financial system will show that temple priests in charge of the Thebaid's finances would not have sworn a fiduciary oath to the state. Finally, the last section will discuss how the Ptolemies accommodated the temples in their centralization efforts and why these accommodations mean that the Thebaid could not have produced an oath papyrus or, at the least, enough papyri for one to exist today.

II. *P. Grad. 4*: its Issues and Implications

The oath implies a high level of bureaucratization and state control in the Fayum's financial administration, tight control that reflects the Ptolemies' desire to maximize revenues from their land. While both their banking and tax farming institutions were derived from Greek precedents, the Ptolemaic system was unique in monopolizing the system, as Ulrich Wilcken

⁹ Sitta Von Reden, *Money in Ptolemaic Egypt: From the Macedonian Conquest to the Third Century BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 9; for examples of papyri from Edfu and other places of the Thebaid, see Katelijn Vandorpe and Willy Clarysse, *Edfu, An Egyptian Provincial Capital in the Ptolemaic Period* (Wetteren: Universa Press, 2003).

¹⁰ For the purposes of this paper, the Fayum, the Herakleopolite nome's neighbor, will be used as a point of comparison to the Thebaid due to the more readily available research on the Fayum. Assumptions about the Fayum cannot be perfectly applied to other nomes, despite their proximity, but for the purposes of this argument, the Fayum will serve well.

noted,¹¹ with three levels of bureaucracy to ensure that the king's estate- that is, virtually all of Egypt – reaped the highest revenue possible (Geens 139; Bevan 133).¹² These three levels are clearly delineated in *P. Grad.* 4: Semtheus swears to carry out his duties under Kleitarchos who in turn is subordinate to the banker Asclepiades at the nome level. *P. Grad.* 4 also implies that there was a set of regulations over the banking system since Semtheus outlines what he should and should not do as a banker. Indeed, the Ptolemies emphasized regulations in their bureaucracy in order to maximize their tax revenues: Ptolemy II Philadelphus' Revenue Laws (c. 259 BCE) aimed to provide a degree of stability and security for their tax revenues through checks on their bureaucracy.¹³ The oath papyrus, dated not too long after the imposition of the Revenue Laws, corroborates with the tight instructions of the Revenue Laws in showcasing the level of concern the Ptolemies had over their tax revenues. To guarantee that no taxes escaped from the system, the Ptolemies then needed to closely control every step of the process.

While there were regulations and various checks on each level of the bureaucracy, the Ptolemies must have required an oath of loyalty as an extra preventive measure against fraud. *P. Grad.* 4 includes not only an oath of loyalty, but also recognition of punishment in the event of mismanagement (“should I owe anything more/for my management...recovery of my debts shall be at my expense from all my [possessions]”). Royal agents thus had a personal, in addition to legal, responsibility to carry out their duties well. E.R. Bevan characterized Ptolemaic agents as being the Ptolemies' “personal servants,”¹⁴ an idea which seemingly fits with the personal obligation in *P. Grad.* 4. However, Bevan's characterization of officials as servants implies that the royal agents had rarely, if ever, dared to thwart their master. According to Manning, though,

¹¹ Ulrich Wilcken, *Alexander the Great*, trans. G.C Richards (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932): 292.

¹² Also see Jean Bingen, *Hellenistic Egypt: Monarchy, Society, Economy, Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 166.

¹³ Bagnall 181

¹⁴ E.R. Bevan, *The House of Ptolemy: a History of Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty*, 1st American ed. (Chicago: Argonaut, 1968): 153.

there are instances where local elite took money from state coffers at their master's expense (Manning 138). This corruption is a "fundamental observation" of the Ptolemaic bureaucracy, a result of a "hierarchy of economic interests" that often led to conflicts (Manning 138; Bingen 193). This hierarchy can be simplified into the royal agent's balancing act, weighing his responsibilities as a royal official against his position as an intermediary between the ruler and his subjects.¹⁵ Although the Ptolemies wanted their officials to be just, "it was almost impossible for our good official not to be bad" (Crawford 201). An oath and threat like those in *P. Grad.* 4 were hedges against almost inevitable corruption among royal officials; these methods were further measures to ensure the fullest tax revenue possible.

Although the existence of such a papyrus demonstrates the scrupulously detailed Ptolemaic administration, the lack of similar evidence introduces problems of interpretation. Indeed, an inherent problem in using papyri is extracting information without overgeneralization – the lack of evidence imposes limits on how widely inferences can be applied.¹⁶ A fortunate element and "one of the most striking novelties," of the Ptolemaic royal banking system was its extensive record-keeping, evidenced by archives like Zenon's and Menches' (Geens 137, 140).¹⁷ Archives such as these have allowed researchers to create pictures of what the Ptolemaic economy may have looked like. It is difficult to say what kind of picture this papyrus paints of the Ptolemaic economy because of its exceptionality. Since the Fayum featured a strong royal banking presence, an oath papyrus is inherently more likely to appear from it – royal record-keeping was so proliferate. There is some evidence for oath papyri in the Thebaid, but

¹⁵ Dorothy J. Crawford, "The Good Official of Ptolemaic Egypt," *Das ptolemäische Ägypten : Akten d. internat. Symposions, 27.-29. September 1976 in Berlin*, ed. Herwig Maehler and Volker Michael Strocka (Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 1978): 194.

¹⁶ Bingen 157.

¹⁷ Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*, special ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), *ACLS Humanities E-Book*, Yale University Library, New Haven, 4-5 April 2009 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;idno=heb01484>>: 1282.

this is once again rooted in the differences in administrative structure between the two regions. The papyrus, *P.Berlin* 13535+23677 appears from Elephantine in the Thebaid, located at the border of Egypt.¹⁸ However, the Elephantine was traditionally a garrison town and therefore would have had a high level of state presence naturally (Manning 33). Thus, a general conclusion about state involvement in the Thebaid based on the existence of *P.Berlin* 13535+2367 cannot be created. While there are general differences between the Thebaid and the Fayum that justify the hypothesis of this paper, there will always remain local exceptions that confound the conclusions to varying degrees.

This section has addressed some of the major issues that *P. Grad.* 4 raises. Its existence implies a high level of detail and bureaucratization within royally-administered banks. The oath of loyalty Semtheus swore and the personal accountability he had for tax collections underscores the basic Ptolemaic desire for revenue that pervaded its financial actions. Although many scholars suggest that the Ptolemies had a planned economy (Manning 134),¹⁹ economic development was often dictated by past traditions. The Thebaid in particular demonstrates how these two factors influenced the Ptolemies' financial centralization.

III. The Temple finances and Administration in the Thebaid

By the time the Ptolemies came to power, the temples already had a complex financial administration dating back from the pharaonic times, a structure that would have made the Ptolemies unlikely to impose "a whole new system...on [this] precivilized landscape".²⁰ In Upper Egypt, temples had long histories of landownership and tax collection (Shipley 196), with

¹⁸ In this papyrus dated 236 BCE, three tax collectors swear to collect a set amount of taxes. Andre Dollinger, "A taxcollector's oath," 10 April 2009 <<http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/texts/taxcollector.htm>>.

¹⁹ Meyer Reinhold, *Studies in Classical History and Society* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press), Ebrary, Yale University Library, New Haven, 13 April 2009 <<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/yale/docDetail.action?docID=10084809>>: 88.

²⁰ Graham Shipley, *The Greek World after Alexander: 323 – 30 BC* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000): 196.

some institutional aspects dating back over 700 years before the Ptolemies appeared.²¹ The overall manager of the temples' economic activities was the *lesonis* (also translated as *archiereus*) - a high priest of the temple - a position established at least since the Third Intermediate Period (1069-664 BCE) of Egyptian history (Muhs 102-103). Brian Muhs describes an "overseer of the necropolis" as a member of the temple bureaucracy as well by whom the scribes wrote. These bureaucratic parallels to the Ptolemaic financial royal administration show that the Thebaid temples already had a similarly stratified and effective financial bureaucracy of its own hundreds of years before the Ptolemies' rules. The Ptolemies would have subverted the priests' positions within this financial structure and undermined their dynastic goals if they forced priests to swear a fiduciary oath promising loyalty to state superiors.

Although temples often served as administrative and financial centers of Egypt during pharaonic times (Manning 70), the Egyptian priests saw their ruler as the "chief officiant in every cult," (Manning 71) and therefore, priests were tied to the state religiously, rather than legally. For the ancient Egyptians, the pharaoh was a living god with absolute power who ensured the divine order of Egypt²²; the Ptolemies, as foreign rulers, aligned themselves with this idea of the pharaoh in order to safeguard their own dynasty.²³ The pharaohs' priests were considered "Servants of God," whose essential responsibility was to preserve a "millennia-old tradition" of religious beliefs and practices.²⁴ However, because these priests also held secular positions for long periods of the year, there were doubts surrounding the priests' loyalty and religious knowledge (Shafer 10). Therefore, just as the royal banker had to take an oath before becoming

²¹ Brian Muhs, *Tax Receipts, Taxpayers, and Taxes in Early Ptolemaic Thebes* (Chicago: Oriental Institute Publications, 2005): 101-103.

²² Bob Brier and A. Hoyt Hobbs, *Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008): 39.

²³ See Austin 274 for a discussion of a decree praising Ptolemy IV in pharaonic terms.

²⁴ Byron E. Shafer and Dieter Arnold, "Temples in Ancient Egypt: An Overview," *Temples of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997): 10; Michael Cheaveau, *Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000): 108.

an official, these priests likely also took vows during their initiation to “help guard against corruption” (Shafer 10). These could include vows of purity and integrity, but, most relevant of all, vows to obey cultic regulations and ethical principles (Shafer 10). Thus, priests’ duties to the Egyptian religion and to the king as a god were the essential elements of their vow; tax collection for the king was not an essential element of their duties.

The priests had to maintain the temples’ cultic functions with income from the temple estates – this would have precluded them from taking an oath to provide a set amount of revenue to the king. The temples, at least before the reforms under Ptolemy II and his successors, controlled large tracts of land of their own from which they derived most of their income, similar to how the Ptolemies gained their income from exploiting the land (Manning 68).²⁵ These tracts were cultivated by private individuals who would owe annual harvest taxes to the temple (Stead 1045). Because these taxes were paid to it directly, the temple could maximize its revenues and apply this income to the cultic requirements of the institution; as Miriam Stead put it, “the chief objective was self-sufficiency in all needs relating to temple personnel and cult requirements” (Stead 1045). The temples’ direct collection of taxes further underscores the point that the temples had a complex financial bureaucracy before the Ptolemies arrived. The collected taxes went toward the temple cults’ ultimate goal “to provide a religious service for the whole community” (Stead 1052). Consequently, the priests would have wanted to maximize their revenue for their temple cults and pay as little as possible to the state.²⁶ If so, it can be argued that the Ptolemies would have forced the priests to swear that they would pay a given amount in taxes each year. However, the Ptolemies desired to project an image of reconciliation and

²⁵ Miriam Stead, “A Model to Facilitate the Study of Temple Administration in Graeco-Roman Egypt,” *Atti del XVII Congresso del Internazionale di Papirologia*, vol. 3, (Naples: Centro Internazionale per lo Studio dei Papiri Ercolanesi, 1984): 1045.

²⁶ This is akin to how the Ptolemies wanted to maximize their revenues for their own cults in that the Ptolemies created grandiose images, parades, etc. which required a steady stream of high income. See Austin 449, 453 for examples of Ptolemaic wealth and its connection to their images as Hellenistic kings.

patronage to pharaonic traditions and therefore would not have required priests to swear a statement undermining their primary responsibilities.

Before the Ptolemies arrived, the temples already had a rich financial history and complex financial structure created to sustain the temples' religious and cultic duties. The Ptolemies would not have forced priests to swear any form of loyalty to the state since this would contradict the priests' position within Egyptian society and their financial goals as related to the temples. Efforts to centralize in the third century BCE would need to accommodate the Thebaid's temples (Manning 67).

IV. The Thebaid and Ptolemaic Accommodation: Not like the Fayum

The Fayum was much likelier to have produced an oath papyrus because of the intensity of royal economic involvement there. During the early Ptolemaic period, there was such a large amount of unsettled Fayum land available that the Ptolemies undertook a grand reclamation,²⁷ attracting large numbers of Greeks and of Egyptians from other areas of the kingdom with grants of new land (Manning 125). In order to collect taxes from this new land, however, the Ptolemies needed a great number of state banks and officials to carry out the work. In fact, the state-administered structure of the Fayum directly influenced the great number of banks in that region (Von Reden 263). However, while there was a tendency toward royal control, the Ptolemies still put local officials in charge of smaller areas and made them personally responsible for the revenue of that area (Manning 125). Since the government was mainly interested in the revenues from the new agricultural land (Manning 125), local officials must have sworn an oath like that in *P. Grad.* 4.²⁸ The Fayum did have an atypical amount of royal financial involvement, though (Manning 102); the existence of *P. Grad.* 4 may just be a result of

²⁷ See Manning 104-105 for a discussion on the logistics of the operation.

²⁸ See the first section of this paper for a review of the need for an oath.

this exceptionality, rather than a result of state control only. However, the rarity of *P. Grad. 4* within the context of the Fayum and its characteristics still supports the idea that the Thebaid could not have produced *P. Grad. 4* – a region with strong temple influences, rather than strong royal involvement, did not feature the same institutions that necessitated an oath.

Although the Ptolemies wanted to increase tax revenues from the Thebaid, the Ptolemies' need to appease the priesthood required gradual methods of increasing revenue collection that did not interfere with temple finances or with the priests' roles in the temples directly. To “live the proper life of a king” (Shipley 228), the Ptolemies sought to increase the amount of royal and cleruchic agricultural land in Egypt, since this land directly increased tax revenues (Shipley 226).²⁹ However, perhaps as a result of the lack of manpower and available land in the Thebaid, the Ptolemies allowed the temples to retain nominal control of their land (Manning 50). Instead, the Ptolemies streamlined the tax collection in the region and gave concessions to the temples as they streamlined. There are some cases where Greeks, probably royal rather than temple officials, began overseeing the tax collection, but private individuals who cultivated land for the temples still paid harvest taxes directly to the temples (Muhs 9). There is also evidence that the Ptolemies may have instituted a single sales tax collected by the state in the place of a temple sales tax paired with a state sales tax (Muhs 10). To compensate for the increasing government control, the Ptolemies created the *syntaxis* to provide priest with a regular income (Stead 1047). The streamlined revenue collection and compensatory income to the temples ensured that the Thebaid temples were not cheating the state. These methods also allowed the priests to continue their traditional roles within the temple administration. It is possible that the royal officials who oversaw these new processes swore oaths to the state. However, the relative scarcity of banks in

²⁹ Cleruchs were new settlers to Egypt who were given plots of land as rewards for moving there. See Shipley 217.

the region precludes the idea that the Thebaid could have produced enough oath papyri to result in one existing today.

While the Ptolemies did centralize financial operations, they recognized the importance of the temples as social and economic centers (Manning 162) and as a result, merely imposed a layer of bureaucracy atop the temples' established structure – priests would not need to swear to the state. Indeed, the Ptolemies did not seek absolute control of the Thebaid's finances. In their centralization processes, the Ptolemaic rulers sought relationships between themselves and the local elite – in the Thebaid, the local elite would have been the priesthood (Manning 69). As noted in section II, the Ptolemies could not require the priests to swear loyalty to the state. Instead, the Ptolemies incorporated and managed the temple's financial administration through state agents (Manning 67,162). It is possible that the Ptolemies would require the state officials overseeing the temple banks to swear an oath. However, just as the state administrative structure in the Fayum dictated that the Fayum needed many banks, the temple administration of the Thebaid's finances resulted in a "relative scarcity of banks in the Thebaid" (Von Reden 263). The influence of the temples in the Thebaid resulted in a relatively thin layer of bureaucracy in the Thebaid compared to that in the Fayum. As a result, an oath papyrus in the Thebaid is unlikely to exist. There were too few officials in the Thebaid that the probability of finding one in the Thebaid is rather low.

Though the Ptolemies made efforts to place the Thebaid under state control, they could not forcibly impose new administrative mechanisms on the Thebaid unless they wanted to alienate themselves from their subjects. The Fayum, on the other hand, underwent state reclamation and thus, royal control had no historical precedents to accommodate. Since Egyptian priests were important for the legitimization of the empire (Manning 50), the Ptolemies

accommodated them with bureaucratic methods that make it virtually impossible to believe that the Thebaid would have produced or will produce an oath papyrus.

V. Conclusion

This paper's hypothesis claims that the Thebaid region is highly unlikely to produce a papyrus like *P. Grad. 4*. The Ptolemies understood what it meant to be foreign rulers in Egypt, and as a result, centralized financial control in the Thebaid carefully and lightly. An oath papyrus is thus unlikely to be traced to the Thebaid because of the region's scarcity of royal control and the Ptolemies' respect for the priesthood. As more documentation is found in areas of Egypt besides the Fayum (Manning 15), the hypothesis of this paper may or may not be disproved. There has been little archaeological excavation of areas besides the Fayum. This limits the ability to assess Ptolemaic economic history over time, and thus, conclusively eliminate the Thebaid as an area with oath papyri (Manning 15). Once more excavation is completed, one papyrus could materialize.

Through the regional analysis of *P. Grad. 4*, this paper has explained the key characteristics of the Thebaid's temple administration and their effects on the Ptolemies' economic plans. The Ptolemaic rulers' light touch in the Thebaid region demonstrates that they were not interested in absolute control over every aspect of their large kingdom, but rather, they were interested in creating a dynastic legacy. In the end, the Ptolemies gauged their kingdom's character well: their dynasty lasted for over three hundred years, far longer than any of their Hellenistic rivals' kingdoms.

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