

# Temples in Decline? The Egyptian Priesthood under Roman Rule

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## Abstract

I argue here against the narrative that the Egyptian priesthood «suffered» under Roman rule and, in consequence, «declined markedly» in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. In contrast, I point out that Romans were keen to protect priestly privileges, and that the economic condition of temples is difficult to reconstruct. A closer look at the body of evidence further shows that a general «decline» of the Egyptian priesthood under Roman rule cannot be stated, as our material is primarily limited to just few temples at the edges of the Fayyum.

## Keywords

Egyptian priesthood, Roman Fayyum, temple economy

A number of studies on Roman Egypt presuppose that the native Egyptian priesthood suffered from «strict rules» and a «lack of investment» by the Roman rulers. This policy, it is said, caused tremendous damage to Egyptian temples, in effect initiating a «decline» of institutionalized Egyptian cults that became manifest in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, I argue here that the narrative of a «decline» of Egyptian temples is based on a misinterpretation of both Roman policy and the historical record: Indeed, most evidence of institutionalized Egyptian cults fades away in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century. The problem is: Once you accept the narrative of a negative impact of Roman rule on Egyptian temples, you can hardly avoid the conclusion that the gap in the historical record is a result of Roman rule. In turn, the

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<sup>1</sup> Due to limited space, I quote only Roger Bagnall, a prominent advocate of the idea of a «decline» of the Egyptian cults in the Roman period: «It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the temples of Egypt, along with their traditional scripts, personnel, influence, festivals, and wealth declined markedly in the third century; but equally, many aspects of their life were already in decline in the first century. What is distinctive about the third century is that as it nears its middle the results of the long decline become manifest.» (Bagnall 1993, 267.)

To be fair, recent scholarship seeks to paint a more nuanced picture: Headlined by the title «Stronger Control under the Romans», Katelijn Vandorpe and Willy Clarysse point out that social networks and economic activities of Egyptian temples remains quite stable well into the fourth century. Nevertheless, they state that «some cults suffered more than others from the strict rules and the lack of Roman investment in temple-building, such as the crocodile cults in the Fayyum» (Vandorpe / Clarysse 2019, 415). Yet, the reference given to back up their assertion claims only that we lack information on temple-building activities in the Fayyum in the later Roman era; they provide no evidence for any «suffering» of Fayyumic temples. Moreover, their statement implies that they generally assume that Egyptian temples «suffered» under Roman rule.

observation of quickly fading evidence in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century supports the idea that there was a kind of «decline» in the centuries before. Combined in a vicious circle, the disappearance of evidence and the assumption of oppressive Roman policy are interlinked with each other, making the idea of a «decline» of Egyptian temples, caused by Roman policy, a persuasive narrative.

My argument is twofold: First, I propose an alternative reading of Roman administrative policy as rather protective towards Egyptian temples. Moreover, I question the importance of Roman investment in Egyptian temples. In a second step, I point out that a closer look at the find history and distribution of the historical record on Egyptian temples in the first centuries of Roman rule shows that the «noise» several Fayyumic temples produced was an exception rather than the norm. Instead of proposing another grand narrative that may replace the story of a priesthood in decline, I shall make a case for a narrative that concedes our lack of knowledge and highlights our inability to draw a larger picture of Egypt, as a whole, under Roman rule.

### **Roman rule over the Egyptian priesthood: «strict rules» and a «lack of investment»?**

The idea that Roman rulers sought to reduce and contain the power of the Egyptian priesthood is a child of the grand historical narratives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This narrative resembles the colonial practices the modern nation-states applied to indigenous nations in Africa and Asia during this period.<sup>2</sup> In fact, however, the administrative strategies the Romans applied in ruling over Egypt seem not to differ crucially from their strategies in other provinces. The Romans incorporated local agents into their administrative system, in order to provide social order and economical organization of their provinces with minimal administrative resources. In this regard, they had no reason to sabotage the organization of temples and cause turmoil at a local level. On the contrary, it seems that local agents such as temple-colleges knew how to convert the Roman administrative apparatus into a tool for their own purpose.

I present here three brief examples that contest the narrative of Egyptian temples «suffering» under «strict rules» and a «lack of investment» by Roman authorities. In sum, these examples indicate that Roman procurators were not keen to subjugate the priesthood systematically; instead, they were supportive towards priests and temples, protecting them against the arbitrariness of local officials or certain other conflicts at a local level. It also seems that Roman funding was not essential to Egyptian temples.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Connor discusses how an interpretive consensus regarding the alleged «confiscation» of temple-land after the Roman conquest of Egypt developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He points out that especially British historians conceived of and described the Roman conquest of Egypt in a way similar to British colonial politics in Egypt and in other overseas territories at that time, cf. Connor 2015, 87-93.

1. The Gnomon of the Idios Logos lists several paragraphs that concern misdemeanors in the sphere of Egyptian cult practice. For example, paragraph 76 says that a priest who wore woolen cloth and long hair was fined 1000 Drachmas.<sup>3</sup> One may see rules such as these as an instrument of Roman officials to «subjugate the priestly class».<sup>4</sup> Yet, a closer look at how these rules were applied, reveals a quite different picture:

In 159-160 A.D., a certain Pasis issued a petition to the *idios logos*, denouncing a priest in Soknopaiou Nesos for wearing woolen cloth and long hair during his time of sacred service. The *idios logos* forwarded the petition to the nome officials in Arsinoë for further investigation. These officials, in turn, ordered the temple-elders from Soknopaiou Nesos to comment on the accusations. The elders issued a statement, which breaks off soon after the first words, leaving the name of the accused priest and the statement itself lost.<sup>5</sup>

However, this case shows that Roman officials did not punish the denounced priest immediately. Instead, they forwarded accusations to local officials, who in turn ordered the local temple-elders to investigate the case. In fact, this interrogation enabled temple-elders to shield or to denounce their colleague at will. Hence, it is quite doubtful that this procedure should be seen as a tool of Roman «subjugation» of Egyptian priests. Instead, it is clear that officials acknowledged the authority of temple-elders over their own staff. In some way, the *idios logos* even became an aide of the temple-elders, because he applied punishment for violations of cult-specific rules upon their judgement.<sup>6</sup>

2. Liturgies and taxes were a field of constant conflict between state officials and citizens. As a separate status group within the rural population, priests benefited from certain privileges and exemptions which were regularly contested by local officials. In such cases, procurators were keen to protect the priesthood.

For instance, let's have a look at the temple of Soknebtynis: The prefect P. Petronius (24-22 B.C.) had converted a share of the temple's land into state land. Instead of accepting the payment of a regular subvention as compensation for their loss (the usual procedure), the local priestly families agreed with the prefect that they had the prerogative to lease these plots, and were allowed to pass this right on to their heirs. Yet, in 71-72 A.D., the village scribe of Tebtynis charged an additional fee from them for leasing these plots; upon this issue, they raised a complaint to the prefect. In reaction, the prefect argued that an additional fee would be unjust, as long as the priests continued to carry out the services for the gods.<sup>7</sup>

Henceforth, the privilege of the priests of Tebtynis was bound to their cultic service: As long as the leasers held a priestly office and fulfilled their religious duties, they were allowed to pass the right

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<sup>3</sup> BGU V 1210, col. 8, l. 188 (Theadelphia, after 149 A.D.).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dieleman 2005, 210 f.

<sup>5</sup> BGU I 16 (Soknopaiou Nesos, 159-160 A.D.).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sippel 2020, 210-216.

<sup>7</sup> P.Tebt. II 302, l. 9-15 (Tebtynis, 71-72 A.D.), cf. Sippel 2020, 217-222.

to lease the former temple land to their children. The prefect's argument shows that agreements made by procurators were binding to their successors. This makes clear that Romans sought to tackle any deliberate decisions by local officials, in order to maintain a consistent administrative policy.

3. To what extent were temples dependent on state funding? With regard to temple architecture, Roger Bagnall remarks that signs of building activities became rare in the Roman era. As an explanation, he suggests a lack of financial support from Roman rulers.<sup>8</sup> However, the importance of state funding for Egyptian temples remains a matter of debate: Jan Quaegebeur argued that in both Ptolemaic and Roman times the ruling dynasty and state officials were certainly prominent, but not the main donors to temple construction projects; not at important religious sites and even less in the countryside. Instead, it seems that construction works were primarily managed from the temple's own budget (which benefited, of course, from privileges granted by state officials). In addition, local benefactors, such as members of the *gymnasia* and *metropoleis* or priestly families themselves, contributed to the temple budget by funding building activities or sponsoring goods and sacrificial animals.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking of the Fayyum, temples received various endowments: For instance, an association of shepherds from Nilopolis financed the monumental enclosure wall of the temple district in Soknopaiou Nesos.<sup>10</sup> A man named Europos donated a pavement and statues in the temple district of Narmouthis, while a certain Satabous funded construction works there.<sup>11</sup> Several people donated calves for ritual sacrifices, such as C. Papirios Maximos.<sup>12</sup> And temple accounts register amounts of grain «given out of piety» (*didonai kat' eusebeian*).<sup>13</sup> Yet, we are unable to determine the economic situation of even a single temple in more detail. The edition of new Demotic texts, such as the ones being prepared by the Franco-German project DimeData, may offer more insight in the temple economy in Roman times.<sup>14</sup> At present, however, a lack of state funding seems not to have been a relevant factor for the prosperity and architectural condition of Egyptian temples.

In conclusion, these three examples indicate that Egyptian priests rather faced problems with officials and individuals from within the local population. The «real» Roman officials, i.e. procurators such as the prefect or the *idios logos* were keen to support and protect the priesthood in the course of such conflicts, accepting the religious authority of the priests and seeking to tackle deliberate

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bagnall 1993, 267 f.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Quaegebeur 1979, 713-715; see also Sippel 2020, 149-152.

<sup>10</sup> I.Fayoum I 73 (Soknopaiou Nesos, 24 B.C.).

<sup>11</sup> Europos: I.Fayoum III 170 (Narmouthis, Roman); Satabous: I.Fayoum III 167 (Narmouthis, 85-88).

<sup>12</sup> SB XXVIII 17058 (Soknopaiou Nesos, 162-169 A.D.).

<sup>13</sup> P.Oxy. XLIX 3473, l. 34 f. (Oxyrhynchus, 161-169 A.D.); P.Tebt. II 298, l. 45 (Tebtynis, 108 A.D.); SPP XXII 183, col. 1, l. 1 f. (Soknopaiou Nesos, mid-2<sup>nd</sup> cent A.D.). See also the letter P.Mert. II 63 (Arsinoites, 58 A.D.), cf. Sippel 2020, 100-109.

<sup>14</sup> The project is available at [<https://dimedata.huma-num.fr>]. For preliminary reports on Demotic sources concerning the temple economy cf. Lippert / Schentuleit 2005; Lippert 2007.

decisions by single local officials. Moreover, the importance of state-based temple funding remains dubious. Therefore, the narrative of «strict rules» and a «lack of investment» of Egyptian temples by the Roman rulers does not seem convincing.

### **What is more remarkable? The silence – or the noise before?**

As the Roman administrative policy towards the Egyptian priesthood can hardly be interpreted as «suppressive», the abrupt silence of the evidence from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards requires a different explanation. A closer look at the distribution and find-history of the papyrological and epigraphical evidence on Egyptian priests from the Roman period unveils a new perspective on the disappearance of sources. Observing the historical record as a whole, it seems that the dense preservation of sources relating to priests and temples in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century was the actual exception, and not their gradual disappearance thereafter.

When we talk about vanishing sources, we should first clarify the limits of our knowledge: Which temples and priestly families can we observe at all? Some studies talk generally about «Egyptian temples» or «temples in Roman Fayyum». In doing so, they evoke the impression that we have sources on many temples. Yet, from the perspective of the papyrological and epigraphical record, our scope is generally limited to temples of not more than a dozen sites and regions. When we talk about substantial evidence, i.e. a large corpus of texts that refer to a single temple or family, the scope is even smaller. Searching papyri.info for Greek key-words relating to Egyptian temples, priests and festivals from 50 B.C. to 500 A.D., it turns out that more than half of all relevant papyri and *ostraka* stem from settlements in the Fayyum area. A closer look narrows our scope even more: more than one third of the overall text corpus (and more than half of the Fayyumic evidence) stems from just five villages at the corners of the Fayyum: Bakchias, Narmouthis, Soknopaiou Nesos, Tebtynis and Theadelphia: According to papyri.info, these settlements are provenance to about 350 Greek papyri and *ostraka* that mention Egyptian priests and temples under Roman rule. If we add epigraphical sources and Demotic documentary texts, these villages get an even larger share of the whole corpus: One may say that almost two thirds of all relevant Greek and Egyptian texts stem from these five settlements!<sup>15</sup> The second largest corpus are about 100 Greek texts from Oxyrhynchus. Yet, about

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<sup>15</sup> I am reluctant to give a precise number of papyri, inscriptions and other material, not to mention a chart or any other illustration that pretends to offer precision. First and foremost, it is difficult to distinguish where texts were found and where they were written: The above mentioned number of about 350 papyri and *ostraka* is indicated by papyri.info. A finer differentiation between the place where a text was written and where it was found may change this number. However, the general ratio, that the overwhelming majority of all relevant texts on the Egyptian priesthood in Roman times stem from just a few villages, is confirmed not only by browsing papyrological databases, but also by scrolling through relevant text-collections. Moreover, the body of evidence from Narmouthis, Soknopaiou Nesos and Tebtynis is still growing, thanks to the archaeological excavations and the publications of several remarkable research-projects.

100 texts from a city like Oxyrhynchus throughout the Roman period is not much at all, and, moreover, Oxyrhynchus lacks a similarly extensive body of epigraphic and Demotic evidence. That means, our knowledge on the Egyptian priesthood in Roman times is primarily based on the remains of five medium-sized settlements in a peripheral area.

Why are so many preserved sources located at the corners of the Fayyum and almost no traces of priests and temples left in other parts of Egypt? The distribution is primarily determined by three factors: 1. A number of villages at the edges of the Fayyum were abandoned from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards. Thus, the conditions for survival of evidence were much better here than elsewhere. 2. Government supervision over temples was centralized in Alexandria, as well as in the nome-capitals. In consequence, most Greek documents that mention temples were stored in these cities. As but few texts survived from these sites, the majority of sources relating to the governmental temple-administration are lost. 3. We are still at the beginning of editing Demotic texts. Yet, Demotic was the script that was primarily used by priests and thus offers us a much better picture of the temples in the Ptolemaic and Roman period. So, our record of sources concerning the Egyptian priesthood is a result of coincidence of preservation, historical administration patterns, and scholarly work today.

Now let us have a closer look at the five settlements mentioned above. First of all, it is noteworthy that the historical evidence on priests and temples is not distributed in equal shares among these settlements. Instead, the corpus is dominated by Greek and Demotic documents from the temple-archives of Narmouthis, Soknopaiou Nesos and Tebtynis, which tell us about religious tradition, cult practice, economic administration and various other fields of temple life. This body of evidence is enriched by several archives and dossiers of priestly families, as well as by interesting inscriptions and objects brought to light in recent archaeological excavations. Bakchias and Theadelphia provide less evidence on priests and temples in the Roman period, but both settlements still offer more sources than many other places of Egypt: A number of staff-lists and petitions shed light on the temple of Bakchias in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century; the archive of the priest Harthotes and the archaeological remains of the main temple, on the other hand, contribute to our knowledge of Theadelphia.<sup>16</sup> In comparison, barely more than a dozen papyri mention the priesthood of Karanis, although about 100 priests and *pastophoroi* served in Karanis in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> In conclusion, our scope on the Egyptian priesthood under Roman rule is highly limited to just three or five distinguished settlements. These settlements are not even continuously documented, but so far provide only certain spotlights on the history of the local institutions and families.

Given that most of our sources are concentrated on just a few sites, one may turn the narrative of a «decline» upside down: It is, in fact, the norm that we do not have much evidence about Egyptian

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of relevant sources of each settlement cf. Sippel 2020, 16-26.

<sup>17</sup> BGU XIII 2215, col. 2, l. 9-11 (Fayyum, 113-114 A.D.).

temples – only because of a coincidence, do we happen to have a remarkably large number of sources for some Fayyumic settlements. Hence, the «noise» in these settlements in the first three centuries of Roman rule was the actual exception, not the silence thereafter.

Upon closer inspection, it turns out that this silence was caused in each case by slightly different reasons. This is especially noteworthy for the priesthoods of Soknopaiou Nesos and Theadelphia: Priests on duty in Soknopaiou Nesos are still attested in 220 A.D.<sup>18</sup> However, soon after, in 230 A.D., the village turns completely silent. Andrea Jördens argues that the village was kept alive by its temple, which drew worshippers and tourists to the remote site and thus afforded the priestly families at the site a comfortable life. Following her argument, the village suffered heavily under the Antonine Plague in the late 170s A.D., and later on also due to competition from new, Hellenized formats of religious entertainment, which evolved in the nome-capitals. As a result, the villagers left Soknopaiou Nesos in 230.<sup>19</sup> Regarding Theadelphia, there is evidence that the temple was in use up until the village itself was abandoned in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Most probably, water-scarcity was the reason for its abandonment.<sup>20</sup> In sum, in both cases the villages as a whole suffered a crisis, not only their temples. In Soknopaiou Nesos, the crisis was perhaps induced by an exceptional decimation of the local population and fading popular interest in the local cults; in Theadelphia, almost one century later, it was probably triggered by water scarcity. The very different causes led to the same result: the abandonment of the villages and the temples.

In the three remaining cases, traces of priestly life faded away, although the settlements continued to be inhabited: The latest attestation of priests of Bakchias is a petition that dates to 218 A.D.<sup>21</sup> Shortly afterwards, the papyrological record of the whole village breaks off, although archaeological evidence shows that it was at least inhabited until the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> It is almost the same with Narmouthis: The latest evidence of priestly life in Narmouthis are bilingual *ostraka* dating to the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> Again, we do not know at which point the temples of Narmouthis closed, since the textual evidence of the whole village vanishes almost completely in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, while the settlement was inhabited until the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> The final example in this category is Tebtynis: The latest papyrus mentioning the temple of Soknebtynis dates to 210-211 A.D.<sup>25</sup> Just a few years later, the papyrological record of the village breaks off as a whole, though archaeological remains indicate that it was inhabited up until the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> So, the evidence of three temples faded away

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<sup>18</sup> SB XVI 12785 (Soknopaiou Nesos, 220 A.D.).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jördens 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Römer 2019, 111.

<sup>21</sup> P.CtYBR inv. 905 QUA (Bakchias, 217/218 A.D.), published in Benaissa 2016.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of evidence for the later settlement history cf. Buzi 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Vandorpe / Verreth 2012.

<sup>24</sup> On the settlement history cf. Bresciani / Giammarusti 2012.

<sup>25</sup> P.Tebt. II 313 (Tebtynis, 210-211 A.D.).

<sup>26</sup> On the settlement history in the Byzantine period cf. Gallazzi 2010.

in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Simultaneously, the documentation of all three villages was in decline as well – although they were still inhabited for several centuries. Unfortunately, the reasons for this abrupt silence are unknown. However, this assessment of all five settlements and temples makes clear that it is difficult to deduce from the simple decline of historic evidence a general and large-scale decline of Egyptian temples.

Of course, it is pointless to turn every temple into a unique case that is incomparable to other temples. The temples at the edges of the Fayyum indeed shared a common fate at some point, as they shared the same irrigation-system, the same crocodile-cults and the same administration. For instance, it seems that the Antonine Plague took a heavy toll on the Fayyumic temples: In Bakchias, Narmouthis, Soknopaiou Nesos and Tebtynis alike, the number of priests decreased almost simultaneously in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, perhaps as a result of the plague.<sup>27</sup> As priests were required to recruit only persons stemming from priestly families on both the paternal and maternal side, restructuring the number of members within the temples may have proved especially difficult. Again, regional events and developments cannot be automatically presupposed for other regions of Egypt in the same way or with the same intensity: The temples we see here, in the Fayyum area, are quite small and hardly comparable with large religious centers in Alexandria, Memphis, or Upper Egypt.

## Summary

One can hardly say that Egyptian priests «declined» and «suffered» collectively under Roman rule. As far as we can see, Roman procurators mostly acted in a protective fashion towards the Egyptian priesthood, as they aimed to maintain priestly privileges and made concessions to leading temple-officials. At the same time, Roman investment in temples seems to have been rather irrelevant, compared with donations from locals. Yet, there are not enough sources to assess the Egyptian temple economy in detail. In sum, two of the main explanations of an alleged «decline» and «suffering» of Egyptian temples in the Roman period are to be rejected.

A close look at the distribution and find-history of sources reveals that the breadth of our knowledge about Egyptian priests and temples is highly limited: In fact, only three to five temples, all situated in medium-sized settlements at the edges of the Fayyum, provide substantial evidence that permits a more extensive assessment of their situation. All other sources are highly scattered and too fragmentary to allow for general conclusions. It hardly needs to be pointed out that three to five temples are neither representative for the Fayyum area, nor for the whole country of Egypt.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Sippel 2020, 66-68.



The discussion of the evidence from these settlements made clear that the «noise» of the first three centuries is the exception, not the silence of the temples thereafter. Moreover, temples went silent for very different reasons: at times a temple was abandoned along with its surrounding settlement due to water scarcity; at other times temples and settlements went silent mysteriously, although the villages continued to be inhabited for several centuries. Hence, what has so far been called a «decline» of Egyptian temples is a subjective impression, based primarily on the fact that a couple of villages that once provided abundant evidence, fall silent in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century for a number of different reasons.

Just to be clear: I do not mean to say that Egyptian cults were flourishing in Roman times: Especially the shrinkage of temple-personnel in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century indicates that events on a regional scale caused serious problems for local temples. But at the same time, our knowledge is not sufficient to make large-scale statements about Egyptian priests in the first three centuries of Roman rule, since the historical record shines light on local problems, not on provincial developments. While we can certainly see processes of change and transformation, we also see no signs of simultaneous, large-scale «suffering» of the institutionalized Egyptian cults.

Ongoing archaeological excavations, text editions and digitalization projects will soon paint a more nuanced picture of the Egyptian priesthood under Roman rule. My contribution to this endeavor is a monograph which studies the quotidian social and economic life of priestly families in the Fayyum. Further promising subjects may be the family archive of Kronion and Isidora from Tebtynis, or the archive of Aurelios Ammon from Panopolis. Both archives contain hundreds of papyri, illuminating the life of high-ranking priests at the crossroads between Egyptian tradition and Hellenistic culture. Yet, their texts remain largely unpublished.<sup>28</sup> It may be worth having a look at them.

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<sup>28</sup> For an introduction to the archive of Kronion and Isidora cf. Feucht 2012; I’m grateful to Todd Hickey for making me aware of the extent of this archive, which is kept mainly in The Center for the Tebtunis Papyri in Berkeley. On the archive of Aurelios Ammon cf. Geens 2004.

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