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The Councillor and the Clerk: Class and Culture on a Roman Frontier*

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WE KNOW THE NAMES OF A LOT OF ORDINARY INDIVIDUALS WHO LIVED IN THE ANCIENT Mediterranean world, probably well over a million of them.¹ Most are literally ghosts: people whose gravestones have survived and of whom we usually know only the name, where they lived, some idea (however approximate) of when they died, and perhaps a few details like age at death and the names of a relative or two. From Egypt we have, according to the Leuven website Trismegistos, the names of over 370,000 individuals: taxpayers in registers and receipts, involuntary workers cleaning canals, lessees of land, relatives mentioned in private letters, and the like. Most of these people are known from only one tax or rent payment or some similar occasion; they may just figure on a list. We are somewhat better off with what papyrologists conven-

* As will be evident, much of what follows is the result of fieldwork in Egypt over the past two decades, and I have incurred many debts in the course of this work. To name only those most directly relevant to this article, I thank Rodney Ast, Bruno Bazzani, Raffaella Cribiore, Paola Davoli, Colin Hope, Tony Mills, David Ratzan, Susanna McFadden, and Klaas Worp. A more general list of obligations can be found in *O.Trim.* I, pp. 7–8, and a full list of members of the excavation team from 2004 to 2015 can be found at www.amheida.org/index.php?content=directory-2004. Earlier versions were given as lectures at the Ägyptisches Museum in Berlin and Wolfson College, Oxford; for those invitations I thank Verena Lepper and Hermione Lee, respectively.

¹ For Egypt alone, and with gaps in the coverage of that country, Trismegistos has so far over 450,000 citations (http://www.trismegistos.org/ref/about_coverage.php, consulted 11 January 2017). Not all of those are discrete individuals, but it is evident that if we take the vast epigraphic harvest of the rest of the ancient Mediterranean world into account the total number of known individuals must be a multiple. And if we were to add all the persons known from the cuneiform tablets, the number would expand greatly.

tionally call “archives”—masses of texts related to a single person, family, or office.² It is largely from such archives that we can get beyond the curtain of obscurity that separates us from the personalities of the individuals known from the papyri.

But even with such archives we face daunting obstacles to understanding a human personality embedded in the ink on papyrus, tablet, or potsherd. Our difficulties go to the essence of why most personal and family archives existed, which was the protection of rights to personal status and property.³ People collected documents to prove that they owned property, that they were free rather than slave, that they had paid their taxes or discharged a public duty, that a judge had ruled in their favor in a dispute. These documents too are external and transactional. For the most part they tell us nothing about how individuals felt, how they tried to represent themselves to those around them, how others perceived them. Some letters and petitions are more subjective, but the letters are mostly conventional requests for goods or wishes for health, and the petitions are loaded with rhetoric out of handbooks.⁴

Sometimes, with patience and persistence, we can get around all these limitations to a modest extent. I shall explore two cases in which we can, I think, get some glimpses of the personalities and specific characteristics of individuals despite all obstacles. One of them is a man named Serenos, whom we can understand to some degree by combining archaeology and the documents. The other is someone whose name we do not know, whom we can try to tease out only from his writing. Taken together, these two men can help us understand the possibilities and limits of the exploration of those ancient personalities who did not, unlike a literary figure of the stature of Cicero, leave behind hundreds of informative and distinctive letters.

Serenos has gradually emerged over the past dozen years during the excavation and study of a house located at an archaeological site called Amheida, in the Dakhla Oasis of Egypt.⁵ The town was called Trimithis in the Roman period, and it was the center of the western part of the oasis; in the fourth century

² See Vandorpe 2009 for the distinction between archives and dossiers and a bibliography of earlier discussions.

³ Bagnall 1995: 17–29 and more generally Bagnall 2011.

⁴ See Bagnall and Cribiore 2006 for private letters by women, but with some more general observations; a broader treatment of the subject remains a desideratum. Much has been written about petitions recently; see, for example, Feissel and Gascou, eds. 2004 and Kelly 2011.

⁵ For localization see <https://pleiades.stoa.org/places/776235>. For a synthesis of the excavation results up to 2014, see Bagnall et al. 2015.



Figure 1. House of Serenos, view from north. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

there was a Roman garrison stationed a few kilometers away.⁶ The house that we have come to call the house of Serenos (Fig. 1) was first discovered during the survey of the area by the Dakhleh Oasis Project in 1979.⁷ Pulling back the sand, they found a corner of a room painted with scenes from Homer, and it was with that room that we began our systematic, stratigraphic excavation in 2004. Along the east wall, above a high dado painted to resemble polychrome stonework, we find a representation of the Homeric scene (from *Odyssey* 8) in which Ares and Aphrodite are caught in adultery and witnessed by the gods (Fig. 2). At the left of that scene is a personification of the City, Polis (Fig. 3), looking on. Trimithis had been a village as late as the second century, but by the fourth century it had become a city.⁸ Other scenes to the right are only fragmentarily preserved and have not been securely identified; the same is true with a higher register on the wall. The northeast corner shows Odysseus

⁶ Kucera 2012; Ast and Bagnall 2015.

⁷ See Leahy 1980 for the first publication of the paintings uncovered in the survey. A description of the paintings of the House of Serenos is given by S. McFadden in Bagnall et al. 2015: 193–212; see also McFadden 2014.

⁸ For a preliminary discussion, Bagnall and Ruffini 2004; a more detailed treatment is to appear in a forthcoming article by Bagnall and G. Tallet.



Figure 2. House of Serenos, Room 1, scene with Ares and Aphrodite. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)



Figure 3. House of Serenos, Room 1, Polis. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

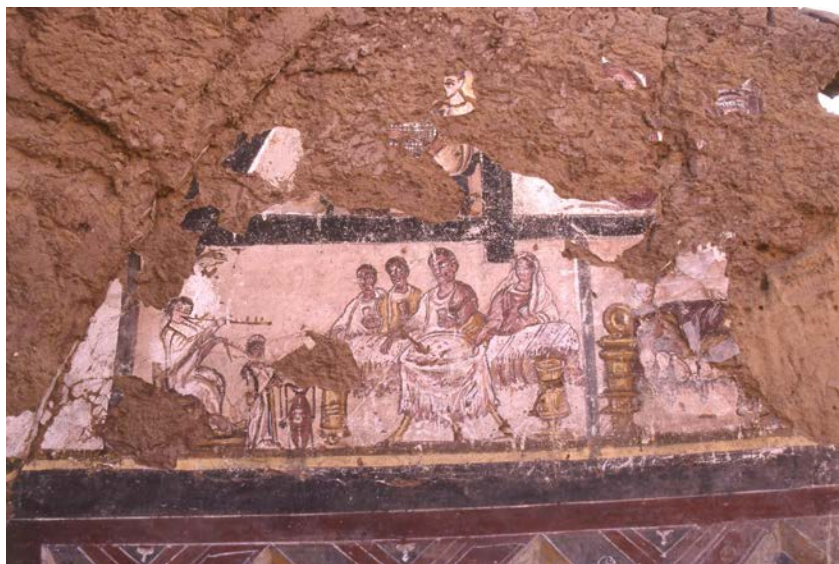


Figure 4. House of Serenos, Room 1, banqueting scene. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

returning to Ithaca, depicted at the moment where Eurykleia recognizes him. On the other side of the north doorway are Perseus and Andromeda.

Even before we knew Serenos's name, therefore, we had a sense of a house owner with a taste for classical culture and the means to hire artists to decorate his reception room. As the excavation of the painted room continued, we found on the west wall what may well be a representation of the man and his family, banqueting (Fig. 4). And connecting to this room were two adjacent painted rooms, with repeating floral patterns, one in green (Fig. 5) and a similar one in red. Although there is much that is unique about the paintings in this house, that is probably just the result of the failure of painted plaster to survive at most other sites. The decoration of the house reflects, even if in a provincial manner, the metropolitan culture of the later Roman empire, the stories that members of the upper classes would have learned in school.

As excavations progressed on to the room just north of the painted reception room, we found another set of clues in a cluster of ostraka that had apparently fallen from a shelf in a wall niche and, when discovered, lay on the floor. Three of them were notes from the same man, written to different individuals. One of these (*O. Trim.* I 297; Fig. 6) was decisive: "Serenos to his brother Philippos, greetings. Send me immediately the decree that I

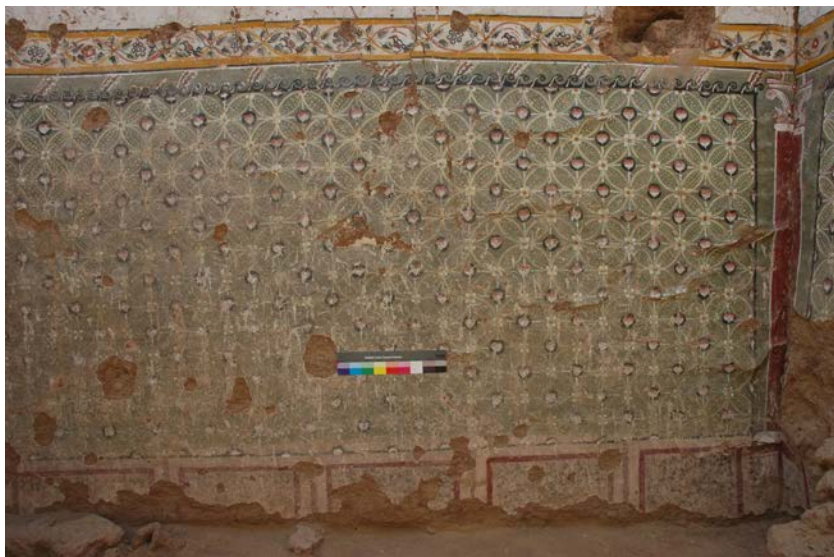


Figure 5. House of Serenos, Room 11, geometric design. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

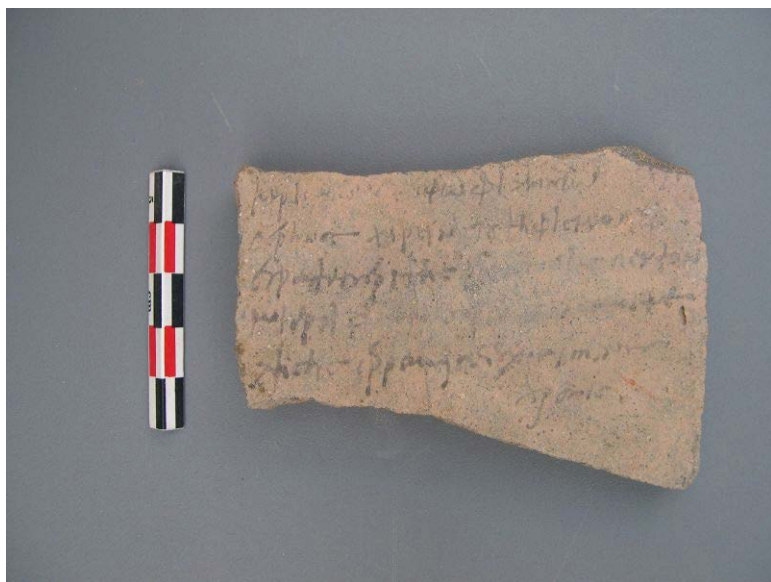


Figure 6. Letter of Serenos to Philippos (*O.Trim.* I 297). (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

wrote concerning the liturgy and do not neglect it.” The term “liturgy” in the documents of Roman Egypt refers to a government office held by a person of financial means, under compulsion, for a limited period, often one year; most tax collection offices, for example, were rotating liturgies.⁹ So Serenos had written a decree, a *psephisma*, about a liturgy. The only people who wrote decrees in Roman Egypt were members of the city council, the *boule*.¹⁰ Serenos was therefore a councillor, a *bouleutes*. Philippos was his colleague, “brother” in ancient idiom, perhaps also a councillor.¹¹

The other two letters (*O.Trim.* I 298 and 299) were less exciting, being simply orders to other men to send him chaff, left over from the threshing of wheat, and olive oil. They presumably come from the daily operations of a household with agricultural interests. But they contributed to our first impression of Serenos as a wealthy man—like all city councillors—who could afford, as it seems, to indulge the taste for classical culture that we see on the walls. Or, we might say, he could at least gratify his wish to display to others a taste for culture, for the paintings may tell us more about how Serenos wished to be perceived than about his inner love for Homer or his detailed knowledge of the *Odyssey*.

Of course, there were some leaps of imagination in this vision of the personality of Serenos that formed in our minds in 2004. We did not really know that the house was his, nor was its internal chronology yet entirely clear.¹² But we did have a hypothesis that led us to be looking for more clues as the excavations proceeded. And we have found more. The most striking discovery was that the structure just north of the house, which in its final phase seems to have housed animals, their feed, and other goods, had before that been a school of Greek letters.¹³ Much of the school was destroyed in the transformation into stables, but a considerable part of an inscribed wall in one room (Room 15) showed that in it students had been taught to compose rhetorical verse. The teacher had written sample poems on the wall, complete with various diacritical marks that helped the students figure out how to observe

⁹ The standard treatment of liturgies is Lewis 1997.

¹⁰ Bowman 1971 treats institutional aspects of the councils, Tacoma 2006 social and demographic facets.

¹¹ See Dickey 2004 for this form of address.

¹² But see *O.Trim.* I, pp. 20–31, the basic conclusions of which remain sound after subsequent analysis based on further stratigraphic study, in *O.Trim.* II, pp. 4–8.

¹³ First publication: Cribiore, Davoli, and Ratzan 2008. See also Cribiore and Davoli 2013, and Cribiore in Bagnall et al. 2015: 179–92.



Figure 7. House of Serenos, Room 15 (schoolroom), Greek rhetorical verse. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

the complex rules of Greek poetry (Fig. 7). Cliché follows cliché, one might complain—emulate Herakles in his labors, drink deep from the fountain of the Muses—but the rules are followed. This poetry reflects a relatively high level of education, higher than one might expect in such a remote town, and training students to write it themselves was an advanced exercise.

What is the relationship of this school to Serenos? That is not immediately obvious. The school seems to have been built around 340, at the same time as the house, and its transformation into storage space for food and drink and stables for animals may have come only a decade later, when the house underwent a major renovation. It is this last phase of the house's existence, after 350, that we associate with Serenos. It is from this phase as well that a batch of ostraka signed by Serenos came, all found on the stable floor.¹⁴ So did he destroy the classroom with its poetry still on the whiteboard, and shut down the school? Quite possibly. But before we conclude that he was an uncultivated vandal rather than the cultivated member of the elite we first

¹⁴ *O. Trim.* II 505–523.



Figure 8. House of Serenos, Room 13, graffito from Euripides, *Hypsipyle*. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

thought, we should reflect that he preserved the writing on the wall throughout the transformation of the room where it stood. The poems remained visible and legible even when the room was filled with wine and oil.

And culture hardly departed in 350, for the mythological paintings almost certainly belong to the phase of repainting that dates to this renovation. Also from the last phase of occupation of the house is a curious graffito (Fig. 8) in another room, in which we find a verse from a lost play of Euripides, the *Hypsipyle*.¹⁵ Here we seem to glimpse a household in which even the more obscure works of classical literature were known. Oddly, the graffito itself is rather crudely written in chalk, and (as we shall see) is not in the fluent handwriting of Serenos himself.

A different side of Serenos emerges from the stables, where a sizable group of little receipts was found, mostly signed by him. Individually, they are not very exciting: “24th of the month of Epeiph, for the donkeys, 15 bundles of hay. I, Serenos, have signed” (*O.Trim.* II 512; Fig. 9). For the most part they

¹⁵ Published in Cribiore and Davoli 2013; see also Cribiore in Bagnall et al. 2015: 191–92.

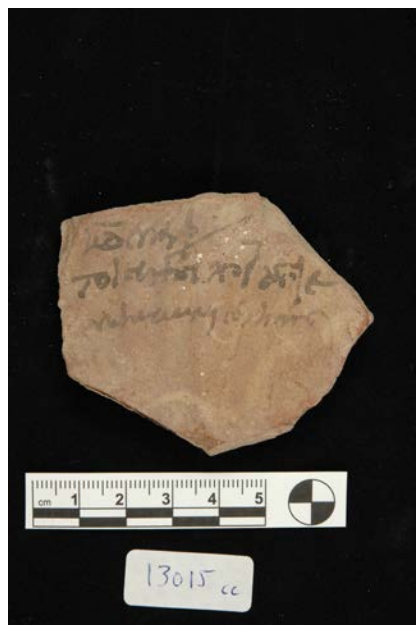


Figure 9. Receipt for hay (*O.Trim.* II 512). (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

concern hay and barley, the two key staples of the donkey diet. And in the stables are what look very much like feeding troughs for animals (Fig. 10). So next to the elegant house where guests could admire the high culture of their host were smelly stables for donkeys. These were in antiquity the chief means of local transportation in the oasis, camels serving for the long-distance trade; they are still today abundant, usually pulling small carts. One may well imagine that an important person like Serenos had many of them to move wheat, barley, hay, wine, oil, and dates from the farms located around the many wells surrounding Trimithis to his city house.

What might be more surprising is to realize that Serenos was writing these receipts himself. Detailed comparison of the letters in Serenos's name, the signed receipts for barley and chaff, and other texts, carried out by my colleague Rodney Ast, has shown that we can identify at least 24 ostraka in Serenos's hand.¹⁶ This is a remarkable number; by way of comparison, just 28 texts showing the handwriting of the protagonist of the very largest papyrus archive, Zenon of Kaunos, have been identified, out of nearly two thousand

¹⁶ *O.Trim.* II, pp. 98–102.



Figure 10. Troughs in stables north of House of Serenos. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

papyri in his archive.¹⁷ Serenos's handwriting is among the best known in all of antiquity. And a comparison of signatures with the texts of the receipts has shown that Serenos wrote them himself; he did not simply sign what someone else had written. His handwriting is compact and controlled, rapid and businesslike. A good example can be found in *O.Trim.* II 476 (Fig. 11), an account of hay.

It is this last point that is crucial. Serenos was not a remote magnate, leaving it to employees to do his administration. He wrote his own correspondence and receipts and even drew up accounts. As Ast has remarked, "It is thus difficult to determine how common it was for managers and others acting in administrative capacities, whether on a personal or public level, to keep their own records and conduct their own correspondence."¹⁸ In the Great Oasis, at any rate, it was not uncommon. Serenos was near the top of the local economic and social hierarchy, but he did much of his own administrative work.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive reference work, see Pestman, ed. 1981; the abundant bibliography since then can be traced in the *Bibliographie Papyrologique* (http://www.aere-egke.be/BP_enligne.htm).

¹⁸ *O.Trim.* II, p. 101.

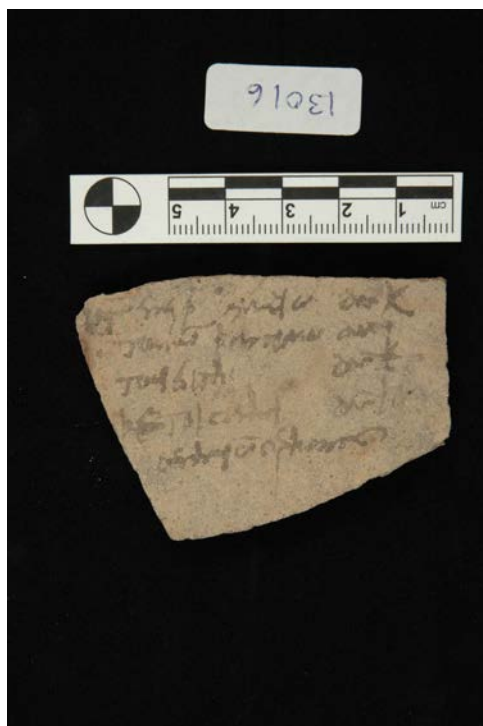


Figure 11. Account of hay in Serenos's hand (*O. Trim.* II 476). (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

That may reflect the fact that even though he was a city councillor, there were people richer than he was on the oasis scene. The little account signed by Serenos and illustrated in Fig. 11 includes a delivery of bundles of hay to “father” Faustianus (“father” is again a term of respect, not family relationship, just as “brother” does not usually mean biological brother), and a second delivery “to the Hibite,” i.e., to the Kharga Oasis. We just happen to know a landlord domiciled in the Hibite named Faustianus. His property in the Dakhla Oasis (the Mothite nome) is the focus of the document that will be the basis of the discussion of the second, anonymous person. Faustianus was clearly a grandee, someone who owned property in both oases and operated his estates through agents. Serenos may well have been one of those agents, managing the land of someone richer than he was. He would not be the first person of such rank to do this; a third-century equestrian (and possibly former councillor) in Arsinoe, the capital of the Fayyum, was the general manager of the estates

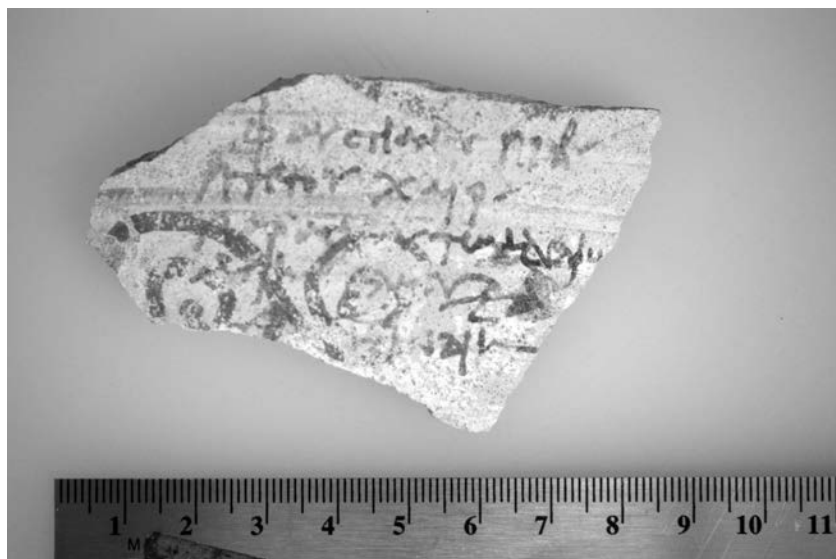


Figure 12. Ostrakon from Hibis written by Faustianus. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art)

in that region that belonged to an absentee owner, a very rich Alexandrian former councillor of equestrian status named Aurelius Appianus.¹⁹

And yet we should not assume that even Faustianus was a gentleman of leisure who left it to his agents to do all the work. By chance we have an ostrakon (Fig. 12) excavated more than a century ago by the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the site of Hibis (Ain el-Turba), just north of the modern town of Kharga, in which we read “Faustianus to the priest of Ptetou greeting. Supply to our brother [i.e., again, colleague] Hatres one sextarius of olive oil. I have signed; for the 8th indiction.”²⁰ Of course, we do not know for sure that it is the same person, but the name is rare, and the coincidence of name, place, and approximate date suggest that this is indeed Faustianus son of Aquila, the landlord of the Kellis Agricultural Account Book (on whom see below). Here he writes an order for a half-liter of olive oil—a half-liter.

Two more clues about Serenos from archaeology. First, despite all the classical veneer of the house, it was a very thin veneer, in a literal sense. One

¹⁹ For the Appianus estate see Rathbone 1991, esp. 59–60 on the general manager Alypius. He might be the former magistrate and councillor of that name in *CPR* VIII 21.

²⁰ Bagnall and Tallet 2015.



Figure 13. Plaster edge in Room 1, House of Serenos. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

can see in this image (Fig. 13) just how thin was the lime plaster applied to the mud-brick and mud-plastered walls before the painter went to work. The contrast to other painted rooms, for example those at Kellis in the second century, but even to some as yet unexcavated rooms at Trimithis,²¹ is striking. This is cheap work, in fact. One could not have put any less plaster on and had a surface at all. Serenos was, one might infer, cheap—or not as rich as we might have imagined, anyway. He wanted the appearance of elite status, but could not or would not pay for it.

One might interpret in a similar fashion the changes made to the street outside the west wall of the house, where the once-public space was gated

²¹ Bagnall, Bolman, and McFadden 2016.



Figure 14. *Stibadium* in Street 2. (Photo: Excavations at Amheida)

at both ends, provided with a roof of palm logs supported on twin pillars, palm ribs, and mud, and equipped with a semi-circular dining platform, called *stibadium* in Latin, of a type popular in the Roman world in the third century and later (Fig. 14). These alterations created what one might call a low-budget equivalent of the pillared banqueting halls that Paola Davoli, field director of the Amheida excavations, has identified in a number of Trimithis's most substantial houses; these have been documented by surface survey and mapping of the entire visible habitation area at the site. Serenos got a dining room on the cheap.

One final point: We know the names of quite a few of the people connected with Serenos, thanks to his ostraka. It is striking that a high proportion of these have Roman names, like Serenos himself: Faustianus, Paulus, Claudius, Iulianus, and Domnion; or Greek names, such as Gelasios, Gerontios, Zoilos,

Herakleios, Theodoros, Nikokles, and Philippos. Only one has a purely Egyptian name. This Greco-Roman dominance stands in contrast to the general situation of the ostraka from Amheida, and from other oasis sites as well, where Egyptian names are overwhelmingly dominant.²² Although Greco-Roman names are not individually and by themselves evidence of the social status of a particular person, a cluster like this surely is, especially when it includes a name like Nikokles, certainly given by a parent who had been educated in a Greek grammarian's classroom, reading the orations of Isocrates celebrating the Cypriot king of that name or addressed to him. We will return to Isocrates.

Up to this point, I have for the most part described pieces of evidence that give us small contributions to our picture of Serenos, with only modest amounts of my interpretation. Let us now exercise our imaginations and see how these pieces can be fitted together into a picture of what this city councillor of the middle of the fourth century, living in a city remote from the Nile valley, might have been like. Certainly he seems to have been a practical person, a hands-on manager of his own business affairs and probably those of other landowners. His circle of contacts looks to be made up of similar people, although the fact that what survives is business correspondence may limit our understanding of these connections. We do not know what the now-disappeared papyri in the house might have contained. At all events, Serenos was not detached from the details of daily economic life.

He was at the same time an educated person, with a fair claim to belong to the most cultured local circles. His handwriting is that of someone who wrote a lot; it has no pretensions but no lack of fluency. He surrounded himself with images of the classical heritage he had encountered at school along with some of his colleagues, and he may well have owned the multi-roomed school that operated for a decade or more just north of his house and was joined to it by a shared wall. Someone in his house knew a rarely-read play of Euripides, and the inscriptions on school walls come from a high level of education. He had himself and his family depicted as gentlefolk of leisure, banqueting in the most approved Roman upper-class fashion. He saw to it that he had a banqueting facility, even if it did not remain in use for long and was not as elegant as those of some of his neighbors.

But that banqueting facility was tacked on to his house by appropriating a street, and the platform was demolished a few years later. The house, although a respectable 225 square meters, was hardly one of the largest houses in Trim-

²² See *O. Trim.* II, pp. 95–97 for a more detailed treatment of the circle of Serenos.

ithis. And, as we have seen, the work done to make it into the presentable home of a member of the local elite was superficial.

I do not mean to offer a snobbish or negative judgment on Serenos. Our evidence, suggestive though it is, does not allow us to get too deeply inside his thinking or circumstances. My sense overall is that he was on the edge between the elite and managerial classes, with characteristics of both. Was he an estate manager trained to be a business agent, who was on the rise and had barely made it into the local council? Or was he from a more established family, but struggling to keep his head above water in declining circumstances? We cannot be sure. In the early fourth century, two generations earlier, the district governor of Trimithis, the *praepositus pagi*, was named Serenos. The one document in which he appears, a papyrus found at Kellis (*P.Kell.* I 27), has no exact date, and we cannot tie the men together except through the name and place.²³ Our Serenos might be his grandson, struggling to remain a member of the elite in tougher times. Trimithis seems to have been in steep decline in the 360s. But the name Serenos is not as rare as Faustianus, and we cannot be sure. Either way, however, I suggest that Serenos may help to remind us that we should not oversimplify the divide between elite and non-elite in Roman society, nor can we suppose that life was comfortable for all of those who appear to be wealthy. If even Serenos did not lead a life of leisure and have the resources to buy enough lime plaster to prepare his walls properly for painting, what was life like for others?

The other person on whom I shall focus has much in common with Serenos, in that he was an estate manager, or *pronoetes*, as he was called in Greek. We know him only from a codex of eight wooden tablets (Fig. 15), found in a room of a fourth-century house at Kellis, located a good day's journey southeast of Trimithis.²⁴ On these tablets he recorded the amounts of rent due from tenants of the estate he managed, their actual payments, his disbursements for expenses, and various other estate accounts. These cover a period of three years, with occasional reference to earlier and later years. They are dated only by the years of the 15-year indiction, or taxation, cycle in common use at the time. The years probably refer to the period 361–364.

This account has all of the characteristics that make papyrological documents difficult to quarry for personalities. The writer tells us nothing directly about himself at all, not even his name. He does refer to four other individuals

²³ On this text see *O.Trim.* I, pp. 44–46.

²⁴ *P.Kell.* IV 96 = Bagnall 1997.

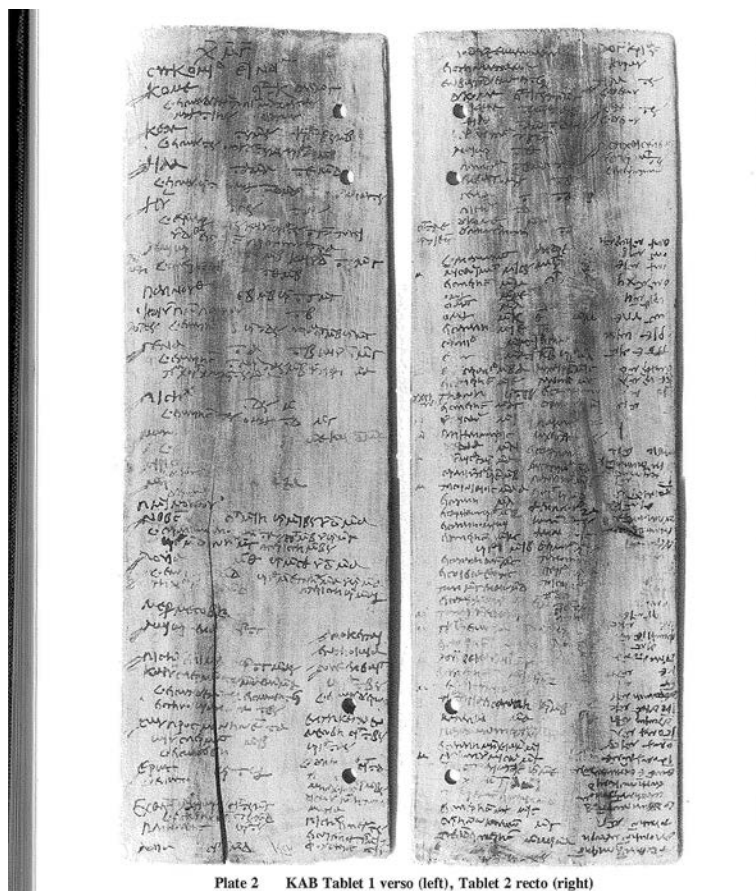


Plate 2 KAB Tablet 1 verso (left), Tablet 2 recto (right)

Figure 15. Kellis Agricultural Account Book: view of two leaves open. (Photo: Excavations at Kellis)

as “brother,” a term that, as I have mentioned, normally means “colleague” in such documents. Two of them are identified as *pronoetai*, stewards. A third individual not specifically called “brother” is also identified as a *pronoetes*. We may without much risk suppose that the “I” of the account was a steward of an element belonging to the estate of Faustianus son of Aquila; he refers to both Faustianus and the “mistress of the household,” who is explicitly said to be in Hibis. Our steward, whom I shall call Ego, following his own practice, seems to have been in charge of lands around three settlements: Kellis itself, Mesobe, and Pmoun Imouthou. We do not know where the latter two were located. It is not surprising that Ego had to feed a donkey, for he needed

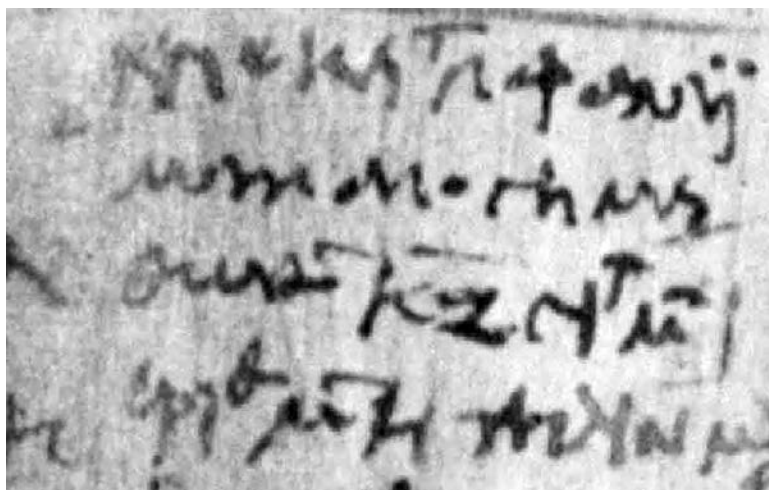


Figure 16. Kellis Agricultural Account Book: mark after end of month-name. (Photo: Excavations at Kellis)

transportation services among these points. He refers at one point to “my storehouse” in yet another place called Bait.

Ego refers to himself more than seventy times in the 1768 lines of the account. One might think this would tell us something about him, but one would be mistaken. Almost all of these mentions are of the form “through me” or (more rarely) “to me” with respect to a payment, indicating only that the tenant has delivered the payment through Ego, as opposed to through some other estate employee. Taken together, these indicate that it was a widespread practice for one *pronoetes* to receive payments to be credited to another, presumably as a matter of convenience and courtesy for both tenant and agent. Ego was not a lone operator; he was part of a collegial and cooperative structure.

But none of this gets us very far toward a personality. For that, I turn to handwriting: not in the sense of pretending to discern character in the handwriting itself, like a graphologist, but in examining a couple of interesting traits. One of these is a tendency to put an apostrophe after the names of Egyptian months that end in consonants, like Thoth, as well as after some personal and geographical names ending in consonants and not of Greek origin (Fig. 16). Such marks, which are occasionally found in other papyri of the period, appear to show that the writer wanted to signal the fact that a name was Egyptian and lacked the normal Greek case endings. They are not

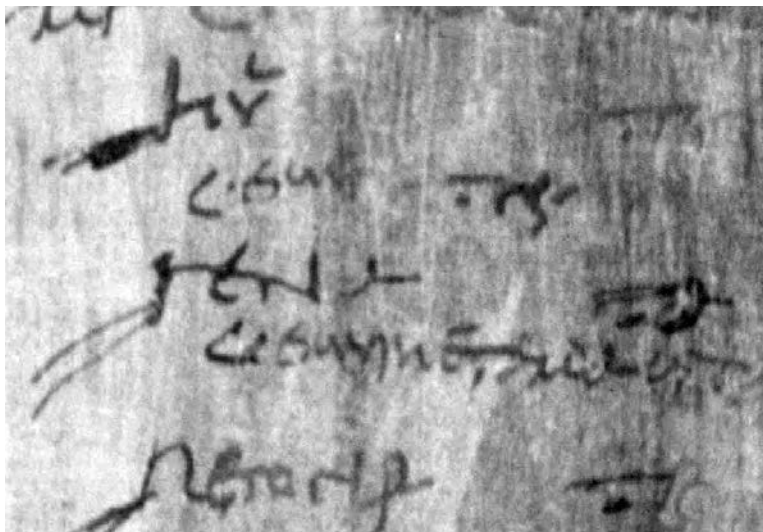


Figure 17. Kellis Agricultural Account Book: hook for rough breathing. (Photo: Excavations at Kellis)

signs of abbreviation, as might otherwise be supposed. These marks suggest a certain degree of self-consciousness about writing. Since the account book was, as far as we can see, maintained solely for Ego's use, these marks do not represent an attempt to impress someone else or to convey information to another. Rather, they are for the writer's own eyes, a private pleasure in expressing knowledge. Even if, as Jean Andreau has argued,²⁵ the accounts might occasionally have been controlled by Faustianus or a steward higher than Ego, that would hardly change our assessment.

The same thing may be said about the use of a hook over certain initial vowels. This is the Greek rough breathing representing the sound of *h*, at the start of the word (Fig. 17). Thus the name in question here spelled *HY* was to be pronounced *Heu* rather than *Eu*. In fact, in Coptic the name is regularly spelled with an initial *hori*, the simple letter *H* in Coptic. So the writer knew what he was doing. But again, one wonders why. For whose eyes was this intended? His own, evidently. But he knew the man's name. No doubt he submitted reports to Faustianus from time to time, but these were surely on papyrus. The tablets were, I repeat, internal records for reference only, at most available for checking if needed.

²⁵ Andreau 2004.

Our writer Ego is not the only person in Roman Egypt to have engaged in this kind of private display of learning. At my first papyrological congress in 1968 I heard the great papyrologist Herbert Youtie describe how a tax collector of the village of Karanis in the Fayyum, whose name, we now know, was Socrates,²⁶ wrote in the margins of his tax rolls some rare Greek words that translated Egyptian nicknames; in one case, the Greek word that Socrates inserts is known only from the poet Callimachus. I quote the final lines of Youtie's article (1970: 551):

For us, however, these "names" resurrect an anonymous but well delineated personality. Among the clerks in the tax bureau was one whose role as *érudit manqué* comes through to us even after so long a time. The linguistic facility, the literary culture once so promising and now so pointless, the trivial display for no eyes but his own, the light and barely sarcastic touch—they are all there. And what could be more satisfying to a tax clerk with pretensions to learning than a borrowing from Callimachus furtively inserted into a gigantic money register, where no one would ever notice it?

With Ego, we are not quite at this level, perhaps, but I think something of the same traits can be seen.

There is, perhaps, more. The Kellis Account Book was found together with a nine-tablet codex containing three orations of Isocrates.²⁷ The handwriting of the first portion of this codex (*P.Kell.* III, Figs. 1, 3) is the closest parallel I was able to find to the writing of the account book. Even after a detailed examination of the original,²⁸ I cannot say for certain that it is the same; I have the impression that the writer of the Isocrates tablets is trying to be a bit more elegant than the account writer. But this could reflect nothing more than the different purposes of the tablets, because we know that trained writers could vary their script to suit the character of a text. Any educated person with good control of the reed pen knew perfectly well, for example, that the body of a letter and its signature should be in different styles of script, even if written by the same individual.²⁹

The Isocrates codex, in the view of its editors, was not a scholarly copy—which in any case should not have been on wooden tablets but in a papyrus roll, or perhaps by this time in a codex—but a schoolmaster's copy or something on that level. Who did the writing, given that there are at least two and perhaps

²⁶ Strassi 1991, 2001.

²⁷ *P.Kell.* III 95 = Worp and Rijksbaron 1997.

²⁸ Carried out with Klaas Worp in the Kharga Museum in 1996.

²⁹ Bagnall and Cribiore 2008: 46–48.

three hands in the codex, is hard to say. But one may indeed be tempted to think that the Ego of the account was also a village schoolteacher, and that the cultural pretensions suggested by the diacritical marks in the account book might also be reflected in the text of the 700-year-old orations of Isocrates. We cannot be sure, but Youtie's characterization of Socrates is hard to forget. "Pointless" may be too harsh; we defend liberal education in part on the basis of the lifelong interest in culture that it is supposed to impart, and why should we deny Socrates or Ego such a continuing cultural life?

By now it may be evident why I have connected these two personalities. Serenos and Ego are, if my interpretations are correct, both experienced writers, account keepers and managers of estates, with good educations and a continuing interest in literature and (at least in Serenos's case) classical culture more broadly. Perhaps Serenos owned a school, and possibly Ego taught in one; they were contemporaries and almost neighbors, but not equals. But they belong, one may argue, to points on the same continuum and at no great distance from one another. Despite great income and wealth inequality, Egypt's highly stratified society was not simply bifurcated between rich and poor. Both Serenos and Ego were well above average in wealth and education; but not even Serenos was so detached from the broader spectrum as to be free of compromises, and Ego had more in common than of difference with Serenos.

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