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Publius Petronius, Augustan prefect of Egypt*

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We do not know the prefects of Egypt under Augustus very well. Ann Hanson has recently shown, on the basis of a newly-published Michigan papyrus, that the Ostorius Scapula who served as governor in the first decade of our era was not the Q. Ostorius Scapula who was praetorian prefect a few years before, but Publius.¹ Our fasti of prefects of Egypt have more holes than doughnut from 21 B.C. to A.D. 10,² and the density of documentation for those who are known is mistlike.³ A papyrus in the Library of Congress, published below, allows us now to see that the praenomen of Petronius, the third prefect, was also Publius, rather than (as is usually thought) Gaius.⁴ Reflection suggests that we ought to have known this even without the papyrus.

I. The papyrus

The Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection of the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.) contains a fragmentary Greek papyrus, given to Mr Rosenwald by Harold J. Maker, its first known owner. The papyrus is broken at the right and bottom. At the left, the original margin is preserved except for the upper left corner and a rectangle to the left of lines 5-6. At the top, the surviving text suggests that there has been lost space for a few lines preceding line 1.

* I am deeply indebted to Alan Cameron and Klaas Worp for advice and references.

1. 'P. Ostorius Scapula: Augustan Prefect of Egypt', *ZPE* 47 (1982) 243-53, using her 'Two Copies of a Petition to the Prefect', *ibid.* 233-43.

2. See G. Bastianini, *ZPE* 17 (1975) 268-69.

3. Augustus' 43 years are 13.4% of the 321 years covered in the standard lists; but they occupy only 5% of the space in Reinmuth's list.

4. I am grateful to Svato Schutzner (Library of Congress, Special Materials Cataloging Division) for first bringing this piece to my attention, and to Kathleen T. Hunt (Librarian for the Rosenwald Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division) for permission to publish it here.

Publius Petronius, Augustan prefect of Egypt

7. 'Undisturbed' may likely refer to some privilege, property, or status; it is used in *BGU* IV 1140.24 to refer to being thus undisturbed by previous prefects.

8-9. See section II, immediately below.

II. The date

The tone of even the remains of this edict can leave little doubt that the issuer was the prefect. But which one? There are several Petronii among the prefects, but of almost all we know the praenomen, and they are not in any case Publii. One Petronius Quadratus was prefect later, in the second century,⁵ but one would hardly be comfortable with such a late date for the hand of this papyrus. It seems much earlier, in fact. The only other candidate is Augustus' prefect, and the hand can quite comfortably be assigned to the later first century B.C. It is less cursive than *P. Ryl.* II 73 (pl. 3; also in O. Montevicchi, *La papirologia*, Tav. 29), but more connected than *P. Oxy.* XII 1453 (pl. 2), of 33-30 and 30-29 B.C., respectively.

The third prefect of Egypt under Augustus, to whom palaeography and elimination of other possibilities point, is almost always listed as C. Petronius.⁶ The praenomen rests on Dio (*LIV* 5.4), who has nearly universally been preferred to the testimony of the elder Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* VI 181), who refers to this Petronius as Publius. Given Pliny's testimony, I have no hesitation in assigning the papyrus to the Augustan prefect. There are interesting consequences for the man and his family connections; these are explored in section III below.

With an Augustan date in mind – Petronius' known dates are 25 or 24 to 21 B.C. – let us turn to lines 8-9. Line 8 might most conservatively be read as πτης και ει[[δ]]αδος [. A line has been drawn through the *delta*. Now neither ειδαδος nor ειαδος makes any sense. But if we see the vertical cancelling line as an attempt to convert the *delta* into a *kappa*, we get the text given above, εικάδος. We thus have a reference to a twenty-fifth day of a month. Can we tell which?

5. Bastianini, *op. cit.* (n. 2) 284.

6. A noteworthy exception: R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford 1938) 338 n. 4, refers to him as P. Petronius without discussion and citing Dio.

Roger S. Bagnall

Line 9 refers to γενεθλίου ἡμέρα[ς, a birthday. Whose birthday can be meant in such an edict? Surely the emperor's. Augustus was born on 23 September, which in normal years fell on Thoth 26; in a leap year, however, it would fall on Thoth 25. Since the date of the covering letter falls in Phaophi, the next month after Thoth, the attractiveness of taking the 25th as Thoth 25 is increased. The covering letter may be only a few days or a week after the date referred to. As it happens, Petronius' prefecture did include a leap year, namely 22/21. I surmise, therefore, that the date referred to is 23 September 22 B.C.

At this date (or at any time under Petronius, for that matter), this fragment becomes the earliest preserved edict of a prefect of Egypt by some five and a half decades, the next being that of C. Avillius Flaccus in *W. Chr.* 13 (A.D. 34/5). Bureth's list does not even give an allusion to an edict of a prefect before C. Turranius, some 15 years after Petronius. Nor have any come to light since Bureth wrote, so far as I know (see the list of Augustan papyri in C. Balconi, *Aegyptus* 56 (1976) 218; a check of more recent editions did not turn up anything pertinent).

III. Petronius and his family

First, the praenomen. The passages of Dio and of Pliny mentioned above are the only evidence hitherto; all other sources simply call the man 'Petronius'. The major reference works⁷ have accepted Dio's testimony explicitly in preference to that of Pliny, though without arguing the point. In their wake, most other modern scholars have taken the point as settled, giving no indication that a controversy could exist.⁸ Why Pliny – a first-century equestrian himself – should have known less in such a matter than Dio, in the third century, is unclear.

An interesting parallel is provided by the case of T. Petronius, a Neronian courtier mentioned by Pliny in *Nat. Hist.* xxxvii 20. What is surely the same person is mentioned by Tacitus in one

7. Stein, *R-E* 19 (1937) 1197–99, Petronius 21: 'bei Plin. n.h. vi 181 steht *P. Petronio*, was auf falschen Überlieferung beruhen dürfte'. Similarly *PIR* III P 196.

8. E.g. S. Jameson, 'Chronology of the Campaigns of Aelius Gallus and C. Petronius', *JRS* 58 (1968) 71–84.

Publius Petronius, Augustan prefect of Egypt

place (*Ann.* xvi 18) as C. Petronius. The analysis by K. F. C. Rose⁹ has shown that Pliny is almost certainly correct and the Tacitean mss. incorrect. Interestingly, Rose cites a contrary argument by G. Bagnani, who argued against Pliny's trustworthiness here on the grounds that he had made a similar error in the case of the Augustan prefect! The discovery that Pliny was correct in the case of the prefect must surely strengthen the case in favor of his correctness in the case of the other Petronius.¹⁰ (This latter is identified by Rose with the author of the *Satyricon*.)

About Petronius' own career, we know nothing else.¹¹ Jameson has argued¹² that he was active in Egypt already in the fall of 25, and that his last attested date is probably in 21. On the other hand, his successor (P. Rubrius Barbarus) is not attested in office until 13/12, leaving open the possibility that one, two, or even more prefects held office in the interim. And Petronius' own term may have extended longer than we know.

About his family, more has been thought to be known or surmised. *PIR* III P 236 provides a stemma for the supposed C. Petronius, in which he is the ancestor of a line of C. and M. Petronii Umbrini. This connection now evaporates, and we must look for what other family members, if any, can be found. As it happens, *PIR* also provides a stemma of Publii Petronii (under P 198), which is given in Figure 1.

A bit more flesh may be put on this skeleton. The *triumvir monetalis* has been assigned by K. Pink to 19 B.C.¹³ As this position was a classic point of entry into the senatorial career by a young

9. *The Date and Author of the Satyricon* (*Mnemosyne* Suppl. 16, Leiden 1971) 47-48. There is also a scholiast to Juvenal who refers to a Pontia, daughter of P. Petronius; it looks as if the scholiast (fourth century) has confused P. Petronius *suff.* 19 (who will be discussed below) with C. Petronius Pontius Nigrinus *cos. ord.* 37.

10. Jameson, *op. cit.* (n. 8), though tacitly rejecting Pliny's praenomen for Petronius, concedes in the matter of Petronius' status while campaigning that Pliny 'should have known his equestrian order'.

11. In P. A. Brunt, 'The Administrators of Roman Egypt', *JRS* 65 (1975) 124-47, he is (p. 142) among those (in the majority) about the remainder of whose career nothing is known.

12. *Op. cit.* (n. 8) 76.

13. *The Triumviri Monetales and the Structure of the Coinage of the Roman Republic* (*Num. Stud.* 7, New York 1952) 47.

Roger S. Bagnall

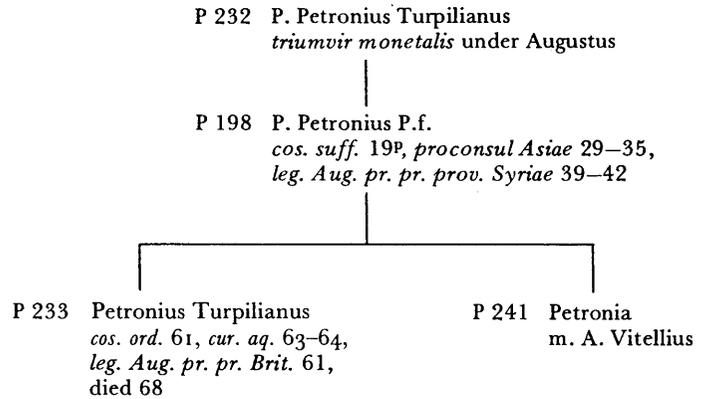


Fig. 1. A stemma of Publii Petronii

man of equestrian family,¹⁴ we may suppose that P. Petronius Turpilianus was born in the late 40s B.C. We have no further evidence on his career, which presumably did not reach the consulate. His presumed son, whose cognomen is not known, was suffect consul in 19, thus born presumably in the late 20s B.C. He had a distinguished career and was saved from an order of Caligula to commit suicide only by the death of the latter.¹⁵ He was close to Claudius, but at the latter's accession he must have been in his early sixties: there is some reason (see below) to think that he had died by 46/7.¹⁶

Another Petronius, a C., was suffect in 25. It has been suggested that he was the younger brother of Publius, the suffect of 19.¹⁷ This cannot be demonstrated, but the evidence to be discussed later about property in Egypt provides some basis for accepting the suggestion.

The presumed son and daughter of the suffect of 19 were intimately involved in court politics at the highest level. The suffect had married a Plautia, daughter of A. Plautius and a

14. Cf. e.g. A. Stein, *Der römische Ritterstand* (Münch. Beitr. 10, Munich 1927) 298-99, with the case of C. Rubellius Blandus, son of an equestrian, himself a mint magistrate, and father of a suffect consul.

15. Cf. P. Franke, 'Publius Petronius und C. Aelius Seianus', *ArchAnz* 83 (1968) 474-82.

16. On the relationship with Claudius, see R. Syme, *Tacitus* 1 (Oxford 1958) 331 with n. 8.

17. R. Hanslik, *R-E* 19 (1937) 1199 Petronius 22.

Publius Petronius, Augustan prefect of Egypt

Vitellia, and his daughter was married to the future emperor Aulus Vitellius. We find no further trace of this family of Petronii after the events of A.D. 68.¹⁸

The sequence of Petronii described above makes sense, therefore, both in terms of chronology and in terms of career pattern. P. Petronius Turpilianus, born in the late 40s B.C., reached the first stage of a senatorial career. His son, born in the late 20s B.C., became suffect and held two governorships. The younger brother, if such he was, also became suffect. In the next generation, born perhaps around A.D. 20, came an ordinary consul and connections to the highest circles. The prefect of Egypt is a logical ancestor for this line, the family's last equestrian and one who held an office at the pinnacle of that order, born perhaps in the 70s B.C. and at maturity in the late 20s when he was prefect. The Ostorii Scapulae provide a parallel,¹⁹ and they are only one instance among many.

With this picture in mind, we turn to the problem of the Petronian estate in Egypt. Two published papyri of the reign of Claudius (*BGU* II 650 = *W. Chr.* 365, of 46/7; *SB* VI 9224 ii 24, of 50/51) refer to a Πετρωνιανή οὔσια. In *BGU* II 650 it is specified that this property belongs to the emperor.²⁰ There is evidence of its continued existence under Nero, but not later.²¹ The published papyri refer to Herakleia and Philadelphia in the Arsinoite nome, indicating (as is normal) that the *ousia* consisted of parcels at a number of locations.²² It has generally been believed that the Petronius after whom the estate is named is the prefect, but the evidence is essentially the absence of other good candidates, and Parássoglou has recently expressed some lack of conviction.²³

18. For the family connections see Syme, *Tacitus*, 386 with n. 5.

19. Cf. Hanson, *op. cit.* (n. 1) 240, with bibliography, above all referring to Stein, *op. cit.* (n. 14).

20. It is often claimed in reference works that *P. Giss.* 101.6 also refers to a Petronian estate. But G. M. Parássoglou, *Imperial Estates in Roman Egypt* (*Am. Stud. Pap.* 18, Amsterdam 1978) 16 n. 6, has pointed out that this mention is partially restored, does not fit the context in the papyrus, and is too late (third century) to be credible. (It should be noted that Parássoglou, by a slip, refers to the papyrus both here and on his p. 81 as '*P. Hamb.*' 101.)

21. The evidence under Nero comes from an unpublished papyrus described in a catalogue issued by H. P. Kraus, *Greek Papyri (& Greek Ostraca)* (New York n.d.) no. 9.

22. Cf. Parássoglou, *op. cit.* (n. 20) 69-83, Appendix II, for a survey of estates which shows this point clearly.

23. Parássoglou, *op. cit.* (n. 20) 16.

Roger S. Bagnall

The picture is complicated by the mention in *P. RyL. II* 127.4-5 (29^p) of an ἐποίκιον Ποπλίου καὶ Γαίου Πετρωνίων in the northwest part of the Themistes division of the Arsinoite. This has normally been taken as evidence for ownership of an estate by the two *suffecti*, but Parássoglou has again expressed some doubts: 'I am not convinced that the Gaius and Poplius Petronii, owners of a farmstead in Euhemeria in 29, are in any way connected with Gaius Petronius, a personal friend of Augustus and prefect in 24-21 B.C. I suspect that the Petronii brothers are veterans who had settled in the Arsinoite after their discharge, as so many of their comrades did throughout the Roman occupation.'²⁴

We may, to be sure, allow that the identity of the Petronii here is incapable of definitive proof with the present evidence. But it seems perverse to give the balance of probabilities as Parássoglou does. If, as does seem likely, the *suffecti* are brothers, the elder was presumably Publius. Their names in the Rylands papyrus would thus be in the correct order; the date coincides with the known time of activity of the brothers; and we know from the existence of the imperial Petronian estate that at some time there had been property in the Arsinoite belonging to Petronii or a Petronius (for the emperors did not have estates named after former retired legionaries). The most likely course of events, surely, is that the prefect acquired property in Egypt, passed it on to his son and he to his sons; on the death of Publius (not long after his last appearance in 42, perhaps), the property was bequeathed to his friend the emperor Claudius. Gaius, who does not appear after his *suffectship*, had perhaps died before holding another major office, in any case before his older brother.²⁵

24. *Ibid.* He adds in a note, 'For the prefect, see *PIR*¹ P 196 with stemma (many Gaii, no Poplii [*sic*]); cf. *PIR*¹ P 198 (many Poplii, no Gaii).' He shows no awareness of the hypothetical character of these stemmata, nor of the articles in *R-E*; and his remarks seem to suggest a belief that *all* males in a line would have the same praenomen, which he himself contradicts by calling the Petronii 'brothers'.

25. A. Lippold, *Kleine Pauly* IV, 672 no. 2, suggests that P. Petronius P.f. was the grandson of the prefect, following Hanslik's remarks in *R-E*; but both of them were supposing that the prefect was a Gaius. If that were so, it would be somewhat curious if the older brother were the Publius, given the tendency to give at least the first son the same praenomen as the father; cf. B. Doer, *Die römische Namengebung* (Stuttgart 1937/New York 1975) 99, 120ff. But this is a tendency, not a rule.

Publius Petronius, Augustan prefect of Egypt

Though there are gaps in our knowledge, a clearer picture of this branch of the Petronii emerges, with the transition from equestrian to senatorial status under Augustus and an increasingly close relationship to the imperial family and its inner circle. The death of their close connection Vitellius will have brought this rise to an end. What remains unclear is the connection of the Publii Petronii to the other Petronii of the time – the line of Umbrini, the C. Petronius Pontius Nigrinus (*cos.* 37) mentioned above, and T. Petronius Niger (*suff.* 62), the author of the *Satyricon*.