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Military Officers as Landowners in Fourth Century Egypt

In a brilliant article fifteen years ago, JEAN-MICHEL CARRIÉ dissected Libanius' speech *περὶ τῶν προστάσιων* to show that its ostensible attack on military 'patronage' was in reality provoked by the rise of large-scale ownership of land by military officers, evidently at the expense of the curial class.¹ Since there is effectively no documentary evidence allowing an assessment of the dimensions of this ownership around Antioch in the period around 390 when Libanius wrote, CARRIÉ supported his thesis by comparison with the situation in Egypt, some decades earlier.² In this respect he was building on the work of ROGER RÉMONDON, who in 1965 published an extended review-article about the Abinnaeus archive in the course of which he pointed to Abinnaeus and to Fl. Vitalianus as examples of the «development of the landed wealth of military men and the progress of their patronage.»³

Attractive though this picture may be, and well though it accords with scholars' readiness to attack late antiquity for «militarization» and join Libanius in blaming the military for the ills of society,⁴ it does not rest on much. For one thing, two cases do not make a trend, and in Part 3 of this paper I shall argue that there is good

¹ Patronage et propriété militaires au IV^e s. Objet rhétorique et objet réel du discours Sur les patronages de Libanius, BCH 100, 1976, 159–76, cited below as CARRIÉ 1976. Papyri are cited in this article according to J. F. OATES et al., Checklist of Editions of Greek Papyri and Ostraca, BASP Suppl. 4, Atlanta 1985. BL = Berichtigungsliste der Griechischen Papyrusurkunden aus Ägypten, Berlin–Leipzig etc. 1922–.

² There is some awkwardness in the supposed schedule of events, for CARRIÉ supposes that the peak of the growth of the power of the military came in 350–380, after which the curial class recouped, at least for a time; see CARRIÉ, *L'esercito: trasformazioni funzionali ed economie locali*, in: *Società romana e impero tardoantico. Istituzioni, Ceti, Economie*, ed. A. GIARDINA, 1, n. p. 1986, 482 (cited below as CARRIÉ 1986). Libanius would thus be beating a dead horse, were it not that his real object is military wealth (CARRIÉ 1976, 175). But to the extent that the two are related, placing the peak in 350–380 is awkward for the interpretation of Libanius. It is equally so for Abinnaeus, unattested after 351.

³ ROGER RÉMONDON, *Militaires et civils dans une campagne égyptienne au temps de Constance II*, JS 1965, 132–43, cited below as RÉMONDON 1965.

⁴ An attitude quite antithetical to CARRIÉ's, in fact, as his 1986 article shows. The picture that emerges from the present article is, I think, more in keeping with CARRIÉ's overall conclusions than that in his article of 1976.

reason to think that military wealth was not proportionately very great. But we shall begin by investigating the cases of Vitalianus and Abinnaeus to see just how secure the conclusions drawn about them are.

1. *Flavius Vitalianus*

Vitalianus has been known since the dawn of papyrology. He appeared first in BGU I (1895) 316,⁵ the well-known slave sale from Ascalon dated 359. The purchaser in that text is identified as Fl. Vitalianus, *biarchos* of the *vexillatio* of cavalry *cataphractarii* now based in Arsinoiton polis under the tribune Dorotheos. He buys a fourteen-year-old boy for 18 solidi from a member of another unit stationed in Ascalon. A year later (1896), B. P. GRENFELL published a lease of forty arouras located near Hiera Nesos in the Arsinoite, dated 378.⁶ The lessor was Fl. Vitalianus, described as γεουχοῦντι ἐν τῷ Ἀρ(σινοίτῃ), the lessee probably also of military or official background, Fl. Aegyptus son of Kometianos. In 1917 H. I. BELL edited as P. Lond. V 1656 an undated loan of money for repayment with a thousand (or more) empty dipla, in which the lender is Fl. Vitalianus, once again γεουχοῦντι and with a lacuna following. BELL commented, «A person of this name occurs in P. Grenf. i. 54, 3 as γεουχοῦντι ἐν τῷ Ἀρ(σινοίτῃ). The date of that document is A.D. 378, and the hand of the present fragment suits the suggested period very well. Moreover, the name Vitalianus was sufficiently uncommon in Egypt to give the coincidence some value.» The last observation is an understatement, as these three documents are the only attestations of the name in the papyri.⁷

RÉMONDON summarized his activity succinctly: «en 378, retiré de l'armée, «propriétaire» dans l'Arsinoïte, résidant à la ville, il donne en location un lot de quarante aroures de terre à blé . . . et achète en une seule fois mille corbeilles pour ses vendanges.»⁸ CARRIÉ describes him as follows: «ce préfet de numerus transplanté d'Ascalon à Arsinoé d'Égypte . . . en 359 apparaît quelques années plus tard comme un important propriétaire dans le Fayoum. . . . Vitalianus, Abinnaeus ont trouvé sans peine des terres à proximité de leur nouvelle affectation. Leurs offres d'achat font prime, et l'on imagine la perturbation que pouvait créer sur le marché foncier local la présence d'une garnison.»⁹ Now Hiera Nesos is not particularly near Arsinoe, whether it is the village of that name near Karanis or the one near Tebtunis.¹⁰ And

⁵ Republished as M. Chr. 271 and FIRA III 135; cf. BL 3.10, 5.11.

⁶ P. Grenf. I 54; cf. BL 1.183 for extensive corrections.

⁷ F. PREISIGKE, *Namenbuch*, Heidelberg 1922, s.v. cites also SPP III 208, but the termination of the name is not preserved there, and Vitalius or Vitalinus would also be possible.

⁸ RÉMONDON 1965, 140.

⁹ CARRIÉ 1976, 169.

¹⁰ See W. PÉREMANS and E. VAN'T DACK, *Prosopographica = Studia Hellenistica* 9, 1953, 63–64. S. DARIS, in: A. CALDERINI – S. DARIS, *Dizionario dei nomi geografici e topografici*

when one reads the lease closely, it turns out that Vitalianus does not own the land at all. Rather, he himself is a lessee: ὡς καὶ σοὶ (= σὺ) ἔχῃς ἐμ μισθώσει ἀπὸ ὀνόματος Νόννου πολ(ιτευομένου) (lines 6–7). The rent Vitalianus is getting is not particularly elevated, either, 3 art. of wheat and a half-art. of barley, the equivalent of about 3.25 art. if it were all in wheat. Not only is Vitalianus not buying up land, he is not even leasing the best land. One may well imagine that he is paying Nonnos barely enough for the latter to cover the taxes (a little over 2 art. per aroura, probably, including taxes in money). His activity is thus that of an entrepreneurial middleman, of a sort well known from the third century B. C. to the sixth century of our era. He therefore in no way fits the picture offered of the officer coming in and buying up the best land, displacing the curiales. On the contrary, he is fulfilling a role which allows the curial to keep his land, probably marginal land which otherwise would have gone out of cultivation¹¹ and left the curial with a significant tax burden.

Fl. Vitalianus, though described as landowner, thus is attested only in two roles, acting as a middleman for marginal land and lending money for repayment in wine-jars. If these suggest a dynamic segment of the economy, well and good. But they contribute nothing to the picture of military officers buying land. It may be added that neither of the documents showing Vitalianus' private economic activities comes from a period when he was on active duty. As CARRIÉ says, «la propriété militaire n'est pas, en elle-même, un fait nouveau. Elle est fréquemment documentée sous le Haut-Empire, mais le plus souvent, il est vrai, à propos des vétérans» (p. 168). Exactly so here: Vitalianus is retired.¹²

2. Fl. Abinnaeus

Abinnaeus had a still longer career and became the commander of a unit and a *ducentarius*, a rank higher than that of Vitalianus.¹³ He also left a much larger pile of papers to posterity. CARRIÉ (1976) provided a brief appendix (p. 176) in which he enumerated the papyri which he considered to pertain to the private affairs of

dell'Egitto Greco-Romano 3, Milano n. d., 17, includes this reference in the list of indeterminate citations.

¹¹ Both villages named Hiera Nesos were on or near the edge of the cultivated land. Perusal of the citations in CALDERINI – DARIS, Dizionario (above, n. 10) 17, shows that the Polemon village is unattested between the third century and the sixth, while the Herakleides one is unknown after 353 (P.Col. VII 155). Either way, Hiera Nesos in 378 was near the bottom of the barrel.

¹² We cannot tell when he retired, of course. He was already an officer, a *biarchos*, in 359. Fl. Taurinos, in the next century, reached that rank by 432, after at least four years of service (BGU XII 2138); he was still active, now a *centenarius*, in 446 (BGU XII 2141), reaching the rank of *primicerius* at some time thereafter; cf. BGU XII, p. xxiv. Vitalianus may have had another 15 years or so of service after moving to Egypt.

¹³ See T. D. BARNES, The Career of Abinnaeus, Phoenix 39, 1985, 368–74.

Abinnaeus. The core of the case is a letter (P. Abinn. 5) and several accounts (P. Abinn. 66–69, 80 verso, 81, 82) which CARRIÉ takes to refer to «exploitations» of Abinnaeus at villages located near his military post, particularly Hermoupolis, Andromachis, and Narmouthis. CARRIÉ identifies some payments of wheat as loans for sowing, others as various revenues and expenses of Abinnaeus' estates.¹⁴ Other letters are taken to concern the management of these estates (P. Abinn. 4, 31, 43) and his tenants' tax arrears (P. Abinn. 14). P. Abinn. 21 and 41, a memorandum and letter on the two sides of one papyrus, are taken to concern the management of the estate and relations with other proprietors. A contract (P. Abinn. 60) records the purchase by Abinnaeus of two cows from a soldier in his unit.

At first sight, this is an impressive list. And, despite the doubts I shall express, it is certain that Abinnaeus did own some kind of property and have private business affairs. Not all of these, however, can be part of them. We may begin with the word βρέουιον, which is mentioned in the letter P. Abinn. 5 and heads the accounts in P. Abinn. 66–69. DANIELLE BONNEAU has, since the appearance of CARRIÉ's article, shown that this word always refers to a «liste fiscale», a schedule of some goods or services either to be furnished to the government or already so furnished.¹⁵ In light of this demonstration, Aetios in P. Abinn. 5 must indeed be concerned with a collection of tax produce. On the other hand, he may well be a private employee entrusted with such a responsibility, and his reference to τοῖς ἡμῶν ἀνθρώποις seems almost certain to have a private reference. It is remarkably difficult to separate public and private business in many fourth-century papyri; the archive of Papnouthis and Dorotheos in P. Oxy. XLVIII provides significant examples. Aetios' exact relationship to Abinnaeus must remain obscure; he writes as an equal, not as a dependant. He is in some village other than Hermoupolis or Theoxenis.

The consequences for the accounts are much more serious. The recto accounts must be rejected in their entirety as a source for Abinnaeus' private wealth. With them disappear literally dozens of supposed tenants. Also to be rejected is P. Abinn. 69 verso, an account of φοραὶ of barley. This term is normally used for convoys of donkeys carrying tax produce from a village to a collection point.¹⁶

¹⁴ P. Abinn. 5 (letter of Aetios to Abinnaeus): «... il vend ou prête des produits de ses exploitations: ... du grain surtout.» «5 fait clairement allusion à de telles notes (βρέουιον) [i. e., «des récapitulations de redevances en nature versées ou dues au praepositus par ses tenants»].» The accounts: «[O]n précise une fois au moins qu'il [i. e., du blé] a été prêté pour la semence ... ce qui dans toutes les sociétés rurales est typiquement un prêt de gros propriétaire. Ce dernier document [68] est écrit au verso de comptes d'un fabricant de sacs qui sont peut-être une commande passée par Abinnaeus pour ses propres exploitations.» «[I] semble qu'on doive en localiser ... une [exploitation] à Hermoupolis.»

¹⁵ Βρέουιον (breve), «liste fiscale», dans les papyrus, Studi in onore di Cesare Sanfilippo 5, Milan 1984, 111–23.

¹⁶ H. C. YOUTIE, ZPE 21, 1976, 29–30 = Scriptiunculae Posteriores 1, Bonn 1981, 299–300.

As for the rest, not all are illuminating. In P. Abinn. 14, Ploutammon complains that Abinnaeus left the city without arranging with him about the *agroikoi* «concerning the balance.» There is no way of telling whether Abinnaeus' tenants are involved, as CARRIÉ suggested, or if the rustics are in quite a different role. But a comparison of the following document, no. 15, of which Ploutammon is also the author, suggests official business connected with tax collection, rather than private agricultural management. The transactions in P. Abinn. 21 are certainly private but modest (two solidi, two artabas). The front of that, P. Abinn. 41, mentions a recruit, a runaway, and bowstrings, concerns that are as likely to refer to Abinnaeus the military man as Abinnaeus the landowner. And the concluding sentence quoted by CARRIÉ occurs just before the papyrus breaks off; its import is unclear. In P. Abinn. 43, the grand total of the amounts owed is given as 259 myriads, or the equivalent of about 58 art. of barley (thus perhaps about 35 of wheat), a significant but hardly enormous amount. The two cows of P. Abinn. 60 cost the equivalent of perhaps 40 art. of wheat. From P. Abinn. 80 verso, actually, one gets the impression that Abinnaeus did a fair amount of dealing in livestock, perhaps both buying and selling.

In sum, there is reasonable evidence to say that Abinnaeus owned land, but no indication of how much, that he dealt in animals, and that he lent money and produce. Once the big accounts are removed from consideration, however, there is no indication of the scale of his dealings, and certainly no indication that he had embarked on an extensive buying spree of the best land in the most prosperous villages near Dionysias.

Before leaving Abinnaeus, some mention should be made of RÉMONDON's claim (1965, 140) that «Si l'on excepte le curiale d'Arsinoé déjà cité (P. Abinn. 28), eux [«vétérans ou anciens officiers, soldats et officiers en activité . . . leurs femmes et . . . leurs enfants»] seuls ont droit, dans les archives d' Abinnaeus, au nom de «propriétaire», de géouchos, terme à la signification économique et fiscale duquel s'ajoute maintenant une signification sociale: géouchos est devenu un titre.» That statement is true, but it does not follow that the reason is that only these people were in fact *geouchoi*. Rather, it is that only these people appear in the Abinnaeus archive with this title. Since virtually all of them appear in petitions to Abinnaeus, it is logical to suppose that they petitioned him (rather than civil authorities) precisely because of their military status. It was official policy, reiterated in an edict of the prefect, that the jurisdiction of military commanders applied only to cases involving military parties,¹⁷ and even if the policy was not always honored, there is no reason to think it was not observed in most instances.¹⁸ The absence of mention of non-military *geouchoi* thus has nothing to do with any monopolization of land by the military.

¹⁷ P. Oxy. VIII 1101 (cf. BL 1.331) (367–370), the edict of Fl. Eutolmius Tatianus.

¹⁸ CARRIÉ 1986, 482, also rejects the notion of a military usurpation of justice.

3. Numbers

If neither of these cases now seems quite so compelling, what of the larger picture? It is, of course, easy to find individual documents with veterans or active military men renting houses, leasing land, or lending money; but, as CARRIÉ observed, that is true in earlier centuries as well. Can any approach to the scale of the phenomenon in the fourth century be found? The only source which provides any possibility of quantification for the 350s (or for any other part of the century, in fact) is the Hermopolite land registers of ca 350 or a bit later, and they offer no support at all. These two property registers, similar but not identical in contents and probably composed at an interval of a few years, record the landholdings throughout the Hermopolite Nome, except around Hermopolis itself, of residents of one of the four quarters of Hermopolis and of all of Antinoopolis.¹⁹ In the Hermopolite list,²⁰ less than 1.8% of the land is owned by living or deceased men who could be military;²¹ it is in fact at least as likely that these are civil servants, many of whose titles in this period are 'military' ranks. Antinoopolis was probably the capital of the Thebaid in the middle of the fourth century, and it is thus not surprising that the Antinoite list²² shows much larger percentages of official holders, with 7.7% of the land in the hands of active and 9.4% in the hands of retired or deceased persons designated by titles which may be military or civil. But these are obviously enormously more likely to be officials in the provincial government than members of the military. Since the Antinoite holdings are much smaller than the Hermopolite, a weighted average²³ giving the military half of the total for officials plus military would in any event indicate that active officers owned 1.2% of land owned by city residents, and retired or deceased just .5%. Since the wealthy are disproportionately likely to live in the cities, adding into the calculation land owned by village residents

¹⁹ In earlier editions, they were the subject of considerable analysis. They were republished with substantial improvement in P. J. Sijpesteijn and K. A. Worp, *Zwei Landlisten aus dem Hermupolites (P. Landlisten)*, Stud. Amst. 7, Amsterdam 1978. For the date, cf. my *The Date of the Hermopolite Land Registers*, BASP 16, 1979, 159–68 and W. van Gucht, *Some Egyptian Bishops and the Date of P. Landlisten*, Atti del XVII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia, Naples 1984, 1135–40. A detailed analysis of the landholding figures in the new edition is provided by Alan K. Bowman, *Landholding in the Hermopolite Nome in the Fourth Century A.D.*, JRS 75, 1985, 137–63. My further statistical analysis of these registers will appear in JRS 82, 1992.

²⁰ All figures are derived from P. Herm. Landl. F, the more complete list, but G would not provide greatly different results.

²¹ The following titles are included in the figures used here: *quaestionarius*, *beneficiarius*, *primipilarius*, *speculator*, *librarius*, *ducenarius*, soldier, veteran.

²² Also in P. Herm. Landl. F.

²³ Multiplying the Hermopolite figures by four to account for the other three quarters of the city, and assuming that the military were half of the official ranks cited (probably too high a percentage).

would only reduce these percentages, as would, no doubt, a more realistic appraisal of the civil-military division of the officials with bivalent titles. All military holders together thus probably owned less than 1% of land in the Hermopolite Nome.

Some nomes may have had a bit more in military hands, of course. But Hermopolis probably had about its fair share of the garrison army of Egypt at the period of these registers, and there is thus no reason to see it as atypical. This unimpressive showing is not the result of impoverishment on the part of either retired or active officers, even if the wealth of the latter is often overestimated.²⁴ There is in fact considerable evidence that military men owned land, which since they were otherwise occupied they rented out to tenants.²⁵ Having as they did considerable liquid resources as well, they figure also as lenders in a fair number of surviving loans,²⁶ including those which constitute working capital for repayment in goods.²⁷ Their methods of investing their surplus thus parallel those of members of the curial class, and although they were not liable to liturgical offices, they did have other normal burdens on the land.²⁸ The similarity extends also to the occasional investment in productive facilities of other sorts, whether in villages or in cities.²⁹ And they certainly did not form any sort of separate 'caste'. In one case a veteran (and son of a deceased veteran) leases to yet another veteran a quarter of a house in a Herakleopolite village which he owns jointly with the heirs of a deceased councillor of Naukratis and those of a deceased soldier.³⁰ And in some cases officers came from well-off families and inherited land; not all of their wealth was acquired from military service.³¹

²⁴ CARRIÉ 1986, 484 argues that military service was, overall, profitable only if one lasted to retirement. This was probably true for enlisted men, but it is questionable for officers.

²⁵ The papers of Fl. Taurinos in BGU XII, cited above, are the most extensive dossier. One other interesting instance: SB IV 7445 (cf. BL 7.194) (Oxyrhynchos, 382), a lease of a house by a former *praepositus*, now a landlord in the Oxyrhynchite: as with Vitalianus, a retired officer.

²⁶ E.g., P. Coll. Youtie II 82 = P.Oxy. XLV 3266 (337), a loan by a protector; perhaps P.Oxy. XIV 1711 (late 3 c), loan by a *ducenarius* of equestrian rank; P. Flor. I 30 (362), loan of six artabas of wheat from a soldier stationed at Dionysias.

²⁷ Even sheep, see P. Lund. VI 10 = SB VI 9359 (cf. BL 3.105) (Arsinoite, 400), in which an Arsinoite resident acknowledges to Fl. Sarapammon, soldier of the camp of Skenai Mandron in the Memphite Nome the price of 5 fleeced adult sheep, which he promises to deliver.

²⁸ Including paying taxes on land compulsorily leased to them, as in W. Chr. 380 (P. Gen. I 70) (Philadelphia, 381).

²⁹ E.g., P.Oxy. XIV 1705 = Sel. Pap. I 36 (298), sale of a loom; P.Oxy. XLII 3079 (4 c), ship owned by speculator; PSI IV 300 (cf. BL 1.395, 2.2.138; BASP 27, 1990, 86–89), in which a cavalryman purchases a pottery-works in an Oxyrhynchite village from a councillor of Antinopolis.

³⁰ P. Gen. I 10 (cf. BL 1.158, 461) (316).

³¹ A case in point is SB XII 10989 (ca 325), in which the deceased father of a *beneficiarius* and brother of an ex-protector had acquired and improved land, about which they are now in litigation. The father is not accorded any official title and seems simply to have been an industrious (and perhaps not wholly scrupulous) landowner.

Numbers were decisive. Probably no more than one soldier in a hundred at any given time had attained both the rank and the seniority to be able to compete economically with the councillors; even that estimate, which means five men in a 500-man auxiliary unit, is probably high. But it yields just 300 men in all of Egypt, even on a high estimate of the total garrison.³² If each acquired 200 *arouras*, their total holdings would come to less than 1 percent of the country's land. In reality, the average holding of the rank-holders in the Hermopolite and Antinoite registers is about 75 *arouras*.³³ Obviously there must have been some situations in which a particular high-ranking military officer was in a position to compete vigorously with curial landlords in a particular place, enough no doubt to irritate the occasional Egyptian equivalent of Libanius. But it is simply not arithmetically possible for this to have been more than a very exceptional case.

It is thus difficult to say whether active military officers owned more land in Egypt in the fourth century than they had in earlier periods or not. What quantitative data are available do not show that such holdings were any substantial part of the total landholdings in the country, even including veterans. And individual cases point at least as much to the well-known pattern of the previous centuries, in which it is retired, not active, officers who acquire property and become minor magnates. The vast properties of Abinnaeus, on the best land of prosperous villages, have vanished, leaving an officer still holding a position – though perhaps not a militarily demanding one – well past normal retirement age and occupied some of the time with a diverse portfolio of private activities, the scale of which cannot easily be gauged. This negative conclusion is perhaps not very exciting, but at least it does not demand of the evidence more than it can give.

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³² Cf. CARRIÉ, *Le rôle économique de l'armée dans l'Égypte romaine*, in: *Armées et fiscalité dans le monde antique*, Colloques nationaux du CNRS 936, Paris 1977, 385.

³³ If one allows for the fact that the registers do not include land in the 7th *pagus*, around Hermopolis, the actual average total might have been rather higher, perhaps as much as 100.