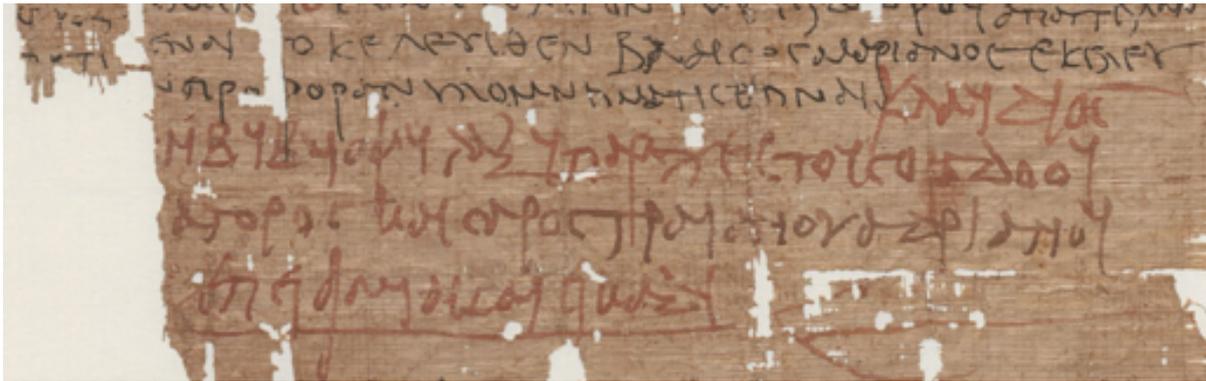


ABSTRACT: "Public Archives in Roman Egypt"



SPP XX 4 = CPR I 18 = M.Chr. 84 = (Arsinoe, 124 CE)

Authenticated copy of proceedings from archival records, corrected and signed by an archival official (detail)
Papyrus Collection of the Austrian National Library, Vienna

Among tens of thousands of papyri that have survived in the sands of the Nile Valley, hundreds provide detailed evidence for a centralized system of public archives in the Roman province of Egypt. While existing research has examined individual archives and genres of records, the material awaits a detailed synthetic study. This project proposes to conduct a focused investigation of these archival institutions, examining their structure, function, role in administration and impact on documentary culture.

How were the public archives of Roman Egypt structured and how were archival records organized, retrieved and used? How did the centralized archive system serve as an instrument of Roman provincial administration? In what respect was Roman archiving distinct from Ptolemaic practice and to what extent does papyrological evidence correspond to evidence for archives in Italy and other Roman provinces?

This project involves a comprehensive survey of the relevant documentary evidence and works with papyri in the original, examining their layout and other physical features, such as handwriting and administrative processing marks. The project aims to elucidate the specific characteristics of Roman provincial archives, posing questions of continuity and change with regard to the Ptolemaic period. Furthermore, the project will place papyrological sources in dialogue with evidence from other provinces, to test whether papyri document archival institutions that were generally present throughout the empire.

By virtue of undertaking the first systematic study of a large corpus of documentary evidence for archival institutions in Roman Egypt, the project expects to make an original and substantial contribution to the fields of Roman history and papyrology. Through its comparative angle, bridging regions, genres of evidence and disciplinary boundaries, the project will combine particularistic analysis of ancient documents with synthetic historical and institutional arguments about the Roman Empire. The results are expected to be consequential: if indeed centralized archival systems of the sort attested in Roman Egypt had a broader presence in the Roman provinces, this would imply a much higher capacity for infrastructural power on the part of the Roman imperial state than has been previously suspected.

The output of the project will be published as a monograph on public archives in Roman Egypt within a broader imperial context, as well as individual articles and editions of papyri. The project also plans host an interdisciplinary conference that will produce a collected volume on archival cultures in antiquity and the early middle ages. The published results of the project are expected to yield a new and very different picture of the impact of Roman imperial administration that will challenge dominant views of premodern archival technologies and potentially recast the framework of future research in this field.