

# Record of an Enslaved Woman's Activities

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THE NUMEROUS ACCOUNTS of work found in the papyrological record form an important corpus for the social and economic history of the ancient world and have recently been analyzed in Christel Freu's monograph on salaried labor in Roman and Byzantine Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The present papyrus from the British Library is of particular interest, as it relates to activities not normally documented, namely those of a female slave, in this case a woman named Ptolema in the middle of the second century CE.<sup>2</sup>

Entitled an "account of inactive (days)," from Ptolema's perspective it is anything but: her idle time is spent working, traveling, and tending to serious family matters. These days are only ἀργαί from the perspective of the anonymous account-keeper, who evidently had an interest in her activities, probably as a lessee of her labor or under a similar arrangement. The account would have been used to ensure that Ptolema's "free" days did not exceed those allowed in the contract (if any) and to calculate compensation, as is anticipated in work-lease and apprenticeship contracts. *P.Wisc.* I 5 (Oxyrhynchos, 185), for instance, allows

<sup>1</sup> C. Freu, *Les salariés de l'Égypte romano-byzantine. Essai d'histoire économique* (Paris 2022).

<sup>2</sup> For a new discussion and collection of translated texts on slavery in Egypt see J. L. Rowlandson, R. S. Bagnall, and D. J. Thompson, *Slavery and Dependence in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge 2024); the work of slaves in Roman Egypt is discussed in my ch. 6 at 275–277 and 305–311. For more detailed studies see I. Biezuńska-Małowist, *La schiavitù nell'Egitto greco-romano* (Rome 1984) 157–221, and J. Straus, "L'esclavage dans l'Égypte romaine," *ANRW* II.10.1 (1988) 841–911, at 867–876.

the enslaved weaver Tapontos a total of eight days off (ἀργήσει) for the attendance of festivals (lines 20–25), while any further days missed, “whether for festivals, illness, or some other pressing need of the master,” trigger a reduction in the wages paid to the owner (26–30). In the apprenticeship contract *SPP* XXII 40 (Soknopaïou Nesos, 150), the slave girl Taorsenouphis is to make up for non-work days by “remain(ing) for an equal number of days in compensation after the set time.”<sup>3</sup>

The account-keeper recognizes the family bonds of the enslaved woman, mentioning her daughter Euphrosyne (5), unnamed children and possibly a son Moschos (7), and a man named Pabous, who ought to be another family member or a close associate (6). Pabous’ death kept Ptolema away from credited work for two days, presumably to attend to funeral rites, while the illness of her daughter Euphrosyne cost her one day.

Other “inactive” days were spent at work for the goddess Isis: two days brewing beer, two washing. Ptolema’s activities also involved travel: she spent three days in Gynaikon Nesos with her children and made visits to Soknopaïou Nesos and the metropolis. Her base of operations in this year was thus probably in the Herakleides division of the Arsinoïte nome, to which these two villages belonged. The work “for Isis” and the travel may have related to the active festival calendar of Soknopaïou Nesos and its filiate chapels in the nome.<sup>4</sup>

The papyrus was likely found in Soknopaïou Nesos, as so many of the early London acquisitions were, an idea supported also by the name Pabous and the reference to Gynaikon Nesos, which had strong links to the priests and temple of this village

<sup>3</sup> Transl. J. Rowlandson, *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt. A Sourcebook* (Cambridge 1998) 268. Lines 19–22: ὦν δὲ / ἡμερῶν [ἐ]ὼν ἀργήσῃ δι’ ἐτίαν (l. αἰτίαν) τῆς δεσποίνης ἢ ἀσθελνήσῃ [ἢ ἀτακτῇ] ἐπὶ τῷ τὰς Ἰσας μετὰ τὸν χρόνον / [ἀ]γν[ι]παρ[α]μένειν.

<sup>4</sup> A. Jördens, *P.Louvre* I 4, introduction, and L. Capron, “Déclarations fiscales du temple de Soknopaïou Nêsos: éléments nouveaux,” *ΖΠΕ* 165 (2008) 133–160. See generally F. Perpillou-Thomas, *Fêtes d’Égypte ptolémaïque et romaine d’après la documentation papyrologique grecque* (Leuven 1993).

(see 632–632 below). If so, the owner and/or lessee of the slave Ptolema probably belonged to one of the priestly families of the village, as is the case in the apprenticeship contract *SPP XXII* 40 cited above, adding to the plentiful evidence of slaveholding in Soknopaiou Nesos.<sup>5</sup>

*P.Lond.* II 302b *descr.* h. 13.8 x w. 10.5 cm Soknopaiou Nesos(?)

(p. xxix)

Acquired in 1893<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1

141/2 CE

The sheet is written against the fibers, and its other side is presumed blank, the papyrus having been pasted to a backing. The straight edge at the foot suggests that the original dimensions are preserved, with no lines missing below. The upper and left margins are 1 cm, with the presumed bottom margin measuring 0.5 cm. There are traces of uncertain significance above λόγος in line 1.

λόγος ἀργῶν Πτολλέμα δούλης  
 ε (ἔτους) Ἀντονίνου Καίσαρος τοῦ κυρίου  
 Ἱ[σι]δος πυοῦσα ζῦτον ἡμέρας β  
 4 ὁμοίως πλύνουσα β  
 καὶ ὅτε τεθεράπευ(ται) ἡ θυγάτηρ(η) Εὐφροσύ(νη) ᾠ  
 καὶ ὅτε τετελεύτ(η)κε Παβοῦς β  
 [καὶ] μ[ε]τὰ τῶν τέκ(νων) ἀντῆς εἰς τ(ὴν) νῆσον  
 8 [τ]ῶν Γυνεκ(ῶν) μετ' υἱοῦ Μόσχου γ  
 [κ]αὶ εἰς τ(ὴν) νῆσον τοῦ Σοκο  
 Ἱ[σι]δος ἡμέρας ζ καὶ ὅτε ἀπο-  
 [ ] εἰς τ [ ]

<sup>5</sup> For a list of slave-owning residents see D. H. Samuel, "Greeks and Romans at Soknopaiou Nesos," *Pap. Congr.* XVI (Chico 1981) 389–403, at 394 n.14. Additions are made regularly to the corpus of slavery-related documents from Soknopaiou Nesos: see e.g. the recently-published sale of an enslaved female "percussionist" (τυμπανίστρια) to a local resident, *P.Hoogendijk* 26 (138 CE).

<sup>6</sup> British Museum, *Catalogue of Additions to the Manuscripts in the British Museum, in the Years MDCCCXLVIII–MDCCCLIII* (London 1894) 412–450, at 427.

12 [            ] . . Σωτηριχ[            ]  
      [            ] . . [            ]  
      [καὶ εἰς] τ(ήν) πόλειν ἡμέ[ρας ]

1 l. Πτολέμας 2 l. Ἀντωνίνου 3 l. ποιούσα 8 l. Γυναικῶν, μεθ' 14 l. πόλιν

“Account of inactive (days) of the slave Ptolema.

5<sup>th</sup> Year of Antoninus Caesar the lord.

For Isis, making beer, 2 days

likewise, washing, 2 (days)

and when her daughter Euphrosyne was cared for, 1 (day)

and when Pabous died, 2 (days)

and with her children to Gynaikon Nesos, with (her?) son

Moschos, 3 (days)

and to Soknopaiou Nesos ... (day(s)?)

For Isis, 6 days and when ...

... to ...

... Soterichos ...

and to the city, – days”

- 1 λόγος ἀργῶν: sc. ἡμερῶν. One might consider a mistake for ἔργων,<sup>7</sup> but stressed vowels are less susceptible to error, and the account tracks not just work but time spent caring for and traveling with family. The sense of ἀργός here, in Reekmans’ classification, is time spent away from “regular work,” although some of Ptolema’s time may have been spent attending festivals (see below), another sense of the term.<sup>8</sup> Both senses are used in the contracts cited in the introduction. Other accounts of “off days” include *SB* VI 9127 (II), *P.Lond.* III 1170 verso 45–51 (259), and *SB* XIV 11472 (296/7). The last provides a good parallel for the heading, where λόγ(ος) ἀργ(ίας) in 1 could also perhaps be expanded λόγ(ος) ἀργ(ῶν). On the tracking of such non-working days see Freu, *Les salariés* 85–89.

<sup>7</sup> F. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Period* I (Milan 1976) 283, notes that ἐργαλεῖον was commonly written ἀργ-.

<sup>8</sup> T. Reekmans, “Ἀργός and its Derivatives in the Papyri,” *ChrÉg* 60 (1985) 275–291, at 285–287 and 281.



- 2 The usual short-form titlature of Antoninus Pius: see P. Bureth, *Les titulatures impériales dans les papyrus, les ostraca et les inscriptions d'Égypte* (Brussels 1964) 66–72.
- 3 Ἰσιδος: For the restoration cf. Ἰσιδος in 10. ὁμοίως in the next line likewise refers to work for the goddess. It is unclear if the reference in 10 is to be connected with the previous line: if so, the service to Isis took place in Soknopaiou Nesos; if not, the cult site is unlocated in the account. In the cultic network of the priests of Soknopaiou Nesos, there were several chapels dedicated to Isis (Nepheres and Nephremmis), namely at Neilopolis, Pelousion, Gynaikon Nesos, and Dionysias, besides Soknopaiou Nesos itself: see S. L. Lippert and M. Schentuleit, “Agreements and Accounts. On-going Research on Economic Activities of the Temple of Soknopaiou Nesos according to the Demotic Texts,” in A. Jördens et al. (eds.), *Accounts and Book-keeping in the Ancient World* (Wiesbaden 2020) 141–157, and *C. Clergé* II 69.4 n.
- πνοῦσα ζῆτον: Though much earlier, a remarkable parallel for such “off days” devoted to brewing, likely for festivals, comes from an ostrakon of the Deir el-Medina workmen (O.BM EA 05634, TM 136354: 1250 BCE): see J. J. Janssen, “Absence from Work by the Necropolis Workmen of Thebes,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 8 (1980) 127–152, at 146–147. More than a millennium later, beer was still a staple of Egyptian culture, and the priests of Soknopaiou Nesos had their own brewery: cf. *P.Dime* III 2 (8 BCE) and an unpublished agreement dating to 158/9 (P.Vindob. D 6032 and other fragments), outlined in S. L. Lippert, “Chapels, Chambers and Gateways. The Religious Architecture of Soknopaiou Nesos according to the Demotic Documentary Papyri,” in M. Capasso et al. (eds.), *Soknopaios. The Temple and Worship* (Lecce 2015) 157–165, at 163–164. On the development of the beer industry in the Roman period see the overview of L. Bigi and N. Dogaer, “The End of the Egyptian Beer Industry? Archaeological and Papyrological Perspectives on Beer Production in

the Roman Fayum,” *Aegyptus* 99 (2019) 107–132.

- 4 πλύνουσα. Ptolema spent two days “washing” for Isis, without further details. The verb generally refers to washing raw materials or clothing. Laundries and fullers appear in the Demotic sources from Soknopaiou Nesos: see *P.DimeData* 1.vi.1 and 13 recto.xxiii.2 for entries related to *ῥῆty* (“fullers”), while P.Vindob. D 10011b recto (forthcoming in *P.Dime* IV) contains agreements concerning laundries. For πλύνω in a different temple context cf. the petition *P.Stras.* II 91 (Tebtynis, 86 BCE), which narrates an assault and theft while an ibis and hawk burier was cleaning (πλύνοντος) the wrappings of the sacred mummified animals. Outside the temple setting, cf. the account entry ἐργάταις πλύνουσι ἔρια in *P.Mil.Vogl.* II 52.33 (Tebtynis, 138).
- 5 Εὐφροσύ(ν)η: A common slave name (TM Nam 9382), borne by the mother of a slave in *SB XXVIII* 16853 (132 BCE; cf. *SB XXVIII* 16852); a daughter of Valeria alias Thermouthis, who was taken captive and enslaved for 38 years, according to her epitaph (*I.Varsovie* 75, I–II); a slave freed in *P.Oxy.* I 48 and *XXXVIII* 2843 (86); and as the second name of another freedwoman in *P.Oxy.* XLIII 3117 (235 or after). The letter *P.Tebt.* II 413 (late II) appears to have been written by a slave to her mistress, so the Euphrosyne of the lady’s staff was likely also a slave: see the new edition by I. Andorlini, “Women’s Letters concerning Textile Manufacture (P. Tebt. II 413–414),” in N. Quenouille (ed.), *Von der Pharaonenzeit bis zur Spätantike. Kulturelle Vielfalt im Fayum* (Wiesbaden 2015) 1–16.
- 6 τετελεύτ(η)κε Παβοῦς. The last tau, written after redipping the pen, is slightly raised and separated from what precedes, as if marking an abbreviation. Yet, the writer appears to have then decided to write the ending in full, forgetting the eta in the meantime.  
In the Fayum, the Name Παβοῦς (TM Nam 13136) is strongly associated with Soknopaiou Nesos, although it comes to prominence only in the second century (I thank Marcel Moser for pointing out the chronology).

7–8 εἰς τ(ῆν) νῆσον / [τ]ῶν Γυνεκ(ῶν): The article τῶν in this place name is otherwise unparalleled, but cf. the article τοῦ in 9. All references to the village of Gynaikon Nesos in Trismegistos (TM Geo 724) are found in texts that clearly or conceivably come from Soknopaiou Nesos, which strengthens the supposition that the present papyrus was likewise found there. On the close links of Gynaikon Nesos with the priesthood of Soknopaiou Nesos, see Lippert and Schentuleit, in *Accounts and Bookkeeping* 151 ff. Ptolema's visit with her children may have coincided with a festival: cf. e.g. the κομασίαι in this village mentioned at *SPP* XXII 183 = *C.Clergé* II 114.v.93 ff. (Soknopaiou Nesos, 138?).

8 μετ' υἱοῦ Μόσχου: Perhaps Ptolema's son, even if mentioned separately from "her children" in the previous line.

9 εἰς τ(ῆν) νῆσον τοῦ Σοκο . . . . : The article τοῦ is unusual in the place name, but cf. τῆς νήσου τοῦ Σοκνοπαίου in *CPR* XV 8=9.2 and 11.3–4 (Soknopaiou Nesos, 13–15 CE). Here, after Σοκ, it is difficult to see the expected nu. I have considered reading Σοκ(ν)οπ(αίου), with a curved pi marking abbreviation, but there are traces beyond. However written, Soknopaiou Nesos ought to be the place meant. There is also a trace at line end, below the gamma of the previous line, that may belong to the number of days; otherwise, the entry continues into line 10 (for the implications see above on line 3).

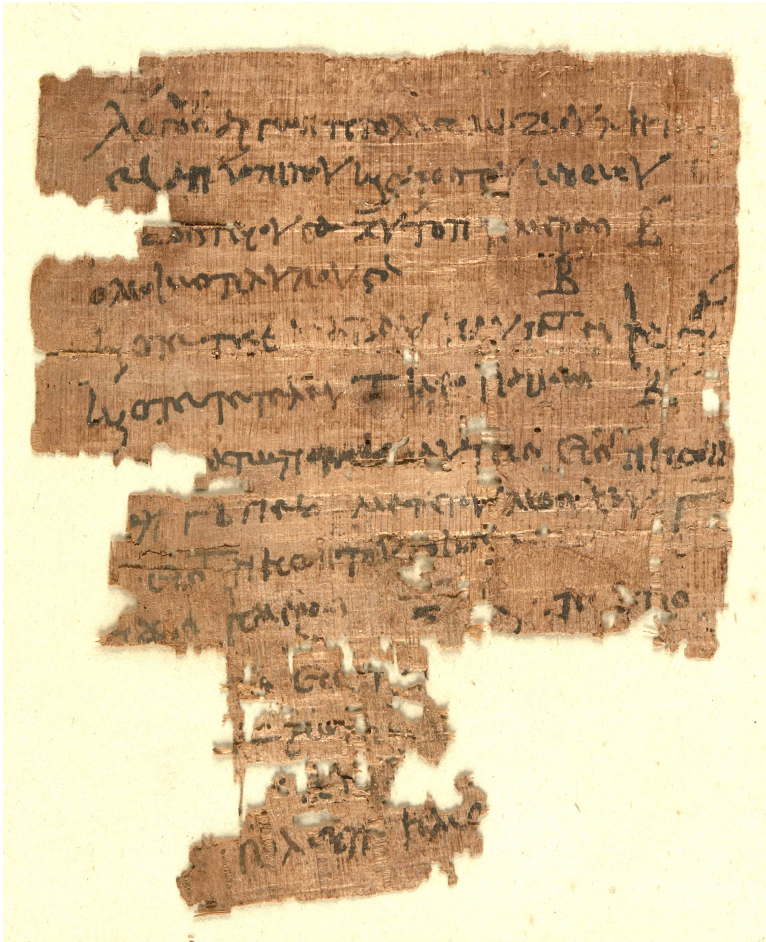
14 εἰς] τ(ῆν) πόλιν. That is, the metropolis of the Arsinoite nome, Ptolemais Euergetis.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This edition has been prepared from autopsy and a digital photo. I thank former Curator of Ancient and Medieval Manuscripts, British Library Peter Tóth, for permission to publish the papyrus and am grateful to Roger Bagnall, Nikolaos Gonis, Sandra Lippert, and Maren Schentuleit for comments and references. My research is co-funded by Poland's National Science Centre and the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 945339 (project No. 2021/43/P/HS3/00651).



*Figure 1: P.Lond. II 302b descr.*

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