**The workers and the vineyard**

*(P.Lond. inv. 2238)*

Plate XIV

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**Abstract:** Publication of a Byzantine letter from the Oxyrhynchite nome that concerns work on an embankment for a new vineyard. The letter comes from a “large estate” milieu.

**Keywords:** agricultural estates, irrigation, Oxyrhynchite nome, rural labor, vineyards

The letter edited below was acquired by the British Museum in 1920 as part of a group of 137 “[m]iscellaneous papyri ranging in date from the late 1st cent. B.C. to the Arab period.”¹ Like many (but not all) of the papyri in this lot, its provenance is the Oxyrhynchite nome; the reference to the *epoikion* Graeidos in the second line assures this;² but more generally the content of the letter accords well with the “large estate” milieu that has been illuminated by the Byzantine papyri from the district. Indeed, Graeidos is known to have been part of the well-known Apion estate in the mid-sixth century, and this creates the temptation to assign the letter to that family’s dossier. Though neither its handwriting nor its content excludes this possibility, the date suggested by the script (see further below) would place it in the earlier (pre-550) phase of the Apion documentation—a period that has yielded relatively few estate texts³—and in any case caution is in order because the owners of *epoikia* could certainly change.⁴

The letter was generated by a certain Theodoros, whose office or position is not revealed by the text. The address indicates that he bore the title *lamprotatos,* and I

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would propose that he was a dioikêtês, an upper-echelon estate manager.5 Neither the address of the letter nor its tone should be considered impediments to such an interpretation.6 The recipient’s name is not preserved, but the fact that he is referred to as ἡ θαμασιότης may be telling: In the Byzantine period this was a title frequently employed for lower-level managers on estates,7 and we may imagine that our man was a pronoêtês (steward) or epikeimenos (overseer).8 The latter seems more probable. For one, the sender mentions a pronoêtês (l. 6) to the recipient, and a scenario in which two pronoêtaí (i.e., the one referenced in the letter and the recipient) are involved in the local affair that the letter documents is less appealing.9 More critically, the sort of work with which the recipient is involved accords better with that performed by epikeimenoi.10 In any case, the letter’s addressee clearly had some authority over labor at Graeidos, for Theodoros bids him to summon a certain Iakob, a geôrgos (“farmer”) from this place.

Though much recent scholarship has emphasized the deployment of wage labor on Egyptian estates,11 it seems preferable to interpret geôrgos as an umbrella term

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5 Cf. CPR XXV 34, 10n. (third paragraph) and the literature cited there. For dioikêtēs on the Apion estate, see Roberta Mazza, L’archivio degli Apioni: Terra, lavoro e proprietà senatoria nell’Egitto tardo-antico, Munera 17 (Bari 2001), 137–38. For the application of the title lampros to the office, cf., e.g., P.Oxy. XVI 1899.4–5 (476).

6 Both kyrion and adelphos (if read correctly; cf. l. 8 and n. below) are perfectly acceptable in reference to a fellow official of lower rank; for a comparable phenomenon, cf., e.g., P.Oxy. XVI 1851.5. The construction with καταξιώσῃ (in lieu of the imperative) is mere courtesy; see 2 n. below. For the issues of address and tone more generally, see Amphilochios Papathomas, “Höflichkeit und Servilität in den griechischen Papyrusbriefen der ausgehenden Antike,” PapCongr. XXIII, 497–512.

7 Cf. Hickey, Wine, 99. See below, however, concerning the date.

8 An estate notarios (cf., e.g., P.Oxy. VI 940 [V]) seems less appropriate for our context, but note P.Oxy. LV 3804.230 (566). Thaumasiōtatos is attested with an epikeimenos in, e.g., P.Oxy. XVI 1836.6 (+ BL IX 189; V–VI) and LXIX 4754.7 (572).

9 For pronoêtaí and their territories (prostasiai), see Hickey, Wine, 26. The sharing of expenses between prostasiai is, however, attested; cf., e.g., P.Oxy. XVIII 2195.89–90.

10 Cf. the extant labor contracts of pronoêtaí (e.g., P.Oxy. I 136) with the epikeimenos contract preserved in P.Oxy. XIX 2239 (noting especially, given the content of P.Lond. inv. 2238, the references to χωρία [l. 12] and the planting of acacia trees [to strengthen embankments; ll. 14–15]). In general, the sphere of pronoêtaí seems to have been fiscal and financial (so also in our letter), while epikeimenoi (among others) were concerned with the oversight of agricultural labor. We may also note the involvement of epikeimenoi with the projects of potamitai in, e.g., P.Oxy. XVIII 2195.134–38 (+ BL XI 160) and LV 3804.213–17 (+ BL XI 171).

Though the work described in our letter might also appear to fall within the bailiwick of ergodiōktai — indeed, Mazza, Archivio, 145, indicates that these foremen were the Apion equivalent of 2239’s epikeimenos — I take pause because the title thauamasiōtatos may not have been applied to them (cf. SB XVIII 13601.15, 17 [V–VI]), and epikeimenoi and ergodiōktai appear alongside each other in Apion texts (cf., e.g., P.Oxy. XVIII 2197, where their roles are distinct). The matter would benefit from further study. Incidentally, on a photo kindly furnished by Rosario Pintaudi, I read PSI VIII 954.53 as follows: τὸ ἐργοδιώκτη τῆς τὸν κτὴριον(τόν) λόγο(ν) μεταθ(οῦ) κ(τῆς) τ(ῶν) ἕθ(ος); the abbreviation of κτηριοτόν is exempli gratia.

11 Cf., e.g., the assessment in Chris Wickham, Framing the early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800 (New York 2005), 274: “In Egypt wage labour was widely used, in
covering a spectrum of labor statuses; viz., tenants operating under various agreements (including sharecroppers) as well as wage laborers.\textsuperscript{12} That noted, I would suggest that the \textit{géorgos} in the present text was an estate employee. As we have already seen, Iakob’s status was such that he could be summoned (\textit{μεταστέλλασθαι}, 1.2) by the letter’s recipient, but this is not determinative: Such a request is conceivable also under a tenancy scenario (in which, moreover, some level of coercion would invariably have been present).\textsuperscript{13} More dispositive is the reference to “his” \textit{mēchanē} (l. 3). It is well known that the word \textit{mēchanē} can indicate both \textit{sāqiya} and (by synecdoche) the parcel of land irrigated by this equipment,\textsuperscript{14} and so it might seem permissible, prima facie, to interpret Iakob as a tenant of such a parcel (making it, loosely speaking, “his”). But evidence from the Apion estate and elsewhere indicates that \textit{géorgoi} quite frequently worked as irrigators, occasionally as tenants in share leases, but more often as employees engaged in the running and oversight of irrigation machinery.\textsuperscript{15} Iakob was probably employed by his estate in this capacity, and it was his \textit{mēchanē} that would water the new vineyard (cf. next paragraph). Whether the \textit{mēchanē} (qua parcel) was let out or directly exploited by the estate (or exploited through a combination of tenancy and \textit{autourgia}) must remain an open question.

The recipient of the letter is to task Iakob with escorting a group of \textit{potamitai}, “rivermen” who performed specialist work on irrigation systems,\textsuperscript{16} to the site of a new vineyard.\textsuperscript{17} Here they would work on an embankment, probably intended to protect the vineyard from the annual Nile flood.\textsuperscript{18} Theodoros instructs the letter’s

\textsuperscript{12} Recognizing, of course, that some forms of tenancy verge on wage labor; cf. the remarks of Jairus Banaji, \textit{Agrarian change in late antiquity: Gold, labour, and aristocratic dominance} (Oxford 2007), 217.

\textsuperscript{13} In this regard we may also note the presence of labor dues, \textit{hypēresiai}, in leases; see Hickey, \textit{Wine}, 63 n. 5 and the references cited there. For coercion by landlords in the Byzantine Oxyrhynchos in general, see Hickey, \textit{Wine}, 79–88.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Hickey, \textit{Wine}, 50–51.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Geōrgos} can appear in place of the precise Greek designation for the occupation, \textit{hydroparochos}. For more on the involvement of \textit{géorgoi} in irrigation, see Hickey, \textit{Wine}, 75–77, 83–85.


\textsuperscript{17} The vineyard is described as \textit{νεοφύτος} (l. 4, probably sc. \textit{χωρίου}; cf. Hickey, \textit{Wine}, 40–44), literally “newly planted.” Theodoros’ mention of the area of the vineyard (ll. 4–5) seems to imply that there is some risk of the embankment impinging on this — if so, \textit{neophytos} should have at least some prospective force. Indeed, the reference to area would be odd if the vineyard were already completely laid out.

\textsuperscript{18} For the presence of embankments around vineyards, cf., e.g., \textit{P.Baden IV} 95.215, a concession \textit{ὑπὸ(πρ) ἀνδρόλογ(ος)} τοῦ \textit{χωρίου} \textit{νεοφύτου} \textit{Κενβάτου}; \textit{P.Oxy. IV} 729.8–9, τῶν τοῦ οὗτος \textit{νεοφύτου} \textit{χωρίου}, 23. τά \[το]υ κτήματος [= “vineyard”] \textit{χώματα ἐστεγαμένα καὶ}
recipient that the vineyard should have an area of four *arourai*, exclusive of the embankment.\(^\text{19}\) He also indicates that he has directed Theodoros the *pronoētēs* to distribute grain and money to the *potamitai* (see further 6–7 n. below).

The letter is written *transversa charta*, with a horizontal *kolēsis* running 2.7–2.9 cm from the bottom edge of the papyrus (through and then just above l. 5 of the text). The text on the front of the letter is complete, though the margins are narrow on the bottom and nonexistent on the right. The front hand is a fluid, right-sloping cursive with letter forms that have been associated with the fifth century; in this respect, note particularly the large oval *sigmas* that fill the interlinear space above them (e.g., ἀποσταλεῖσιν [only the second *sigma*], l. 3, and ἐργάσονται, l. 4) and the *kappas* with pronounced endstrokes that invade the lines below them (e.g., ἵακῳβ, l. 2, and ἔκτος, l. 5).\(^\text{20}\) The author’s use of *thaumasiōtatos* for a subordinate (cf. above) cautions, however, against assigning a date too far back in the fifth century,\(^\text{21}\) and palaeographic comparison does not permit me to exclude a date in the sixth; cf., e.g., the letters *P.Oxy.* VII 1071 (dated 1st half VI; see *Tyche* 17 [2002] 250) and XVI 1938 (dated VI). The address on the back of the papyrus apparently would have been complete were it not for the loss of a band of horizontal fibers in and over much of its first line. The letter was folded once vertically (in half) and several times horizontally; the former act is confirmed by the position of the address, which occupies only the right side of the papyrus, and by the position of the seal device in the center of the right side.

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1 vacat | π/ | vacat

† καταξιώσῃ σου ἡ θαυμασιότης μεταστείλασθαι ἵακωβ τὸν γεωργὸν τοῦ Γραῖδος καὶ ποιήσῃ αὐτὸν παραγενέσθαι ἐμὰ τοῖς ἀποσταλεῖσιν παρ’ ἕμοι ποταμίταις εἰ(ς) τὴν αὐτοῦ μηχανήν καὶ 4 δείξαι αὐτοῖς τὸν τόπον τοῦ χώματος τοῦ νεωρίτου ἵνα ἐκεῖσε ἐργάσονται. πληρωσὶ δὲ τὸν τόπον τῆς ἀμπέλου εἰς τὰς τέσσαρας ἀροῦρας ἐκτὸς τοῦ χώματος. ἔγραψα δὲ καὶ Θεοδώρῳ τῷ προνοητῇ παρασχεῖν αὐτοῖς λόγῳ

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\(^\text{19}\) Data concerning the areas of contemporary Oxyrhynchite vineyards are rare; cf. Hickey, *Wine*, 74–75, 174.

\(^\text{20}\) Following Harrauer, *Handbuch* 1: 431–32, where the description accords almost perfectly with the hand on the front of the London papyrus. Note also the front hand of *P.Oxy.* XVI 1833 (dated late V and, like the London text, a letter).

\(^\text{21}\) Note, e.g., *P.Oxy.* XXXIV 2724.7 (469), where *thaumasiōtēs* is used in reference to a *geouchousa* (a clarissima).
ἀραβῶνος, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν
σίτου ἄρταβας δύο καὶ ἄργυρίου μυριάδας τετρακοσίας πεντήκοντα.

2 Ἰακώβ παπ 4 ἵνα παπ.; 1. ἐργάσωνται, πληρώσαι 5 -ος of ἐκτός corr. 6 ἄραβωνος; first t of τοῦτ’ corr.?

On the back right side, parallel to the fibers:
8 ἐπίδ(ος) τῷ κυρ(ίῳ) μου θαυµ[±2]...ἀδε...[±1].[±1].
vacat
(x) π(αρά) Θεοδώρου λαμπρο(τάτου)
8 επίδ., κυρ. pap. 9 π’, λαμπρ’, pap.

Translation

(front)
“Would your admirableness kindly summon Iakob the geōrgos of Graeidos and make him come with the rivermen sent by me to his mēchanē and show them the location of the embankment for the newly planted [vineyard] in order that they may work there. The area of the vineyard must extend in full to four αρουαι, excluding the embankment. I have also written to Theodoros the pronoētēs to pay them by way of pledge, namely two αρταβαι of σιτος and four hundred fifty myriads of denarί.”

(back)
“Deliver to my lord ... from Theodoros, vir clarissimus.”

1 π’: See CPR XXV 8, 1n. for discussion and references.
2 καταξιώσῃ τηθαυµασίως: For this polite form of request, which is typically followed by an infinitive, cf. Mandilaras, Verb, no. 558; Henry A. Steen, “Les clichés épistolaires dans les lettres sur papyrus grecques,” C&M 1 (1938) 146–47; and CPR XXV 10, 2n.
4 Γραῖδος: For the evidence for viticultural activity here, see Hickey, Wine, 167.
6 Θεοδώρῳ τῷ προνοητῇ: Of the stewards attested with this name, the one to whom P.Oxy. XVI 1838 (VI) is addressed seems the most likely identification, but the name is exceedingly common.
6–7 ἀραβῶνος κτλ.: For the spelling with single rho (common), see Gignac, Gram. 1:156. Note that the species of the deposit correspond to the analōma or dapanē portion of the pay of potamitai, the part intended to maintain them (i.e., furnish nourishment) during their work task. For further discussion, see Morelli, “Sulle retribuzioni.” According to Morelli’s data, the amounts correspond to 1–2 months of analōma.

7 There is a long oblique stroke following the alpha of πεντήκοντα, presumably intended to mark the close of the letter.

8 The layer of horizontal fibers has been lost from much of this line, and reading becomes increasingly difficult as one moves towards its end. θαυμασιωτάτῳ no doubt appeared after μου; it was abbreviated if ἁδε has been read correctly. ἁδ̣ ε̣ suggests ἀδελφῷ, again abbreviated because there is no trace of the long tail of phi. For the collocation in this line of the address, cf. P.Oxy. XVI 1833.8 (late V), ἐπίδος τῷ κυρίῳ μου θαυμασιωτάτῳ ἄρεν (φυ...)
Brief über Arbeiten im Weingarten (P.Lond. inv. 2238); zu: T.M. Hickey, S. 302ff.