

The law enforcement officials who patrolled the Egyptian countryside came in a variety of shapes and sizes and filled many functions. Of these officials, the *phylakitai* most closely resembled a modern police force but exhibited a striking degree of adaptability in their occupational domain. The *phylakitai* were not only charged with conducting routine police business, but were also occasionally empowered to attend to police administration, assigned to government security details and even counted on to perform a whole host of miscellaneous tasks at the village level and beyond. The variety of tasks assigned to the Ptolemaic *phylakitai*, and the versatility of the officials who performed them, is nothing short of amazing.

This paper demonstrates that the Ptolemaic law enforcement system adapted to the needs of the towns and villages it served and the officials who protected those towns and villages. Both villagers and officials needed their police officers to be flexible. The requirements of policing varied from place to place, as did police organization. As the documents reveal, the *phylakitai* could be counted on to perform not only basic police functions, but also more complicated, time-consuming law enforcement tasks as well as a number of duties that overlapped with those of officials in other administrative spheres (the military, the economy) and lay outside the occupational domain of modern police. This flexibility made the *phylakitai* the “go-to guys” in a variety of situations and also made for a very successful police force.

Phylakitai performed the whole gamut of low-level police activities: arresting, transporting and detaining malefactors (e.g.: *P.Enteux.* 84); investigating crime scenes (e.g.: *BGU VI* 1253); sealing off the homes of those under investigation (e.g.: *P.Heid.* IX 423 Anhang); confiscating property (e.g.: *P.Cair.Zen.* IV 59620); and working with a variety of government agents to ensure justice (e.g.: *PSI IV* 393). Yet a *phylakitês* might occasionally perform administrative tasks similar to those normally entrusted to police supervisors (such as *archiphylakitai* and *epistatai*): receiving petitions from victims of crime (e.g.: *P.Hib.* I 36) and circulars from government agents (e.g.: *P.Heid.* VI 362), as well as employing subordinates to assist him in completing police work (e.g.: *O.Oslo* 2). In areas of the countryside where—and at critical times when—quick access to the higher rungs of police administration was impossible, *phylakitai* took on greater responsibility. The papyri show that they did so very well.

Incredibly, the activity of *phylakitai* was not limited solely to law enforcement. They were regularly employed by the central government to transport and protect state grain (e.g.: *P.Berl.Salmen.* 17), collect tax arrears (e.g.: *C.Ord.Ptol.*² 53) and perform other agricultural tasks, such as measuring allotments (e.g.: *P.Hib.* I 75). In all of these activities, the assets that served the *phylakitai* so well in their day-to-day policing doubtless came in handy. But *phylakitai* were also often called upon by their superiors to attend to more menial tasks: for instance, they sometimes served as couriers who delivered mail (e.g.: *P.Genova* II 55) and other goods (e.g.: *P.Hib.* I 54), might be dispatched to requisition items (e.g.: *P.Tebt.* III.1 749) and could even themselves be requisitioned (e.g.: *SB VI* 9104). Though at times empowered to attend to police business on his own, a *phylakitês* knew that he was also ultimately beholden to his direct superior(s) and was prepared to serve in whatever capacity was required.