

Since the important work of Peter Garnsey (*Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire*, 1970) scholars have argued that the legal system in the Roman world was generally biased against non-elites. As a result of this bias, scholars have argued that non-elite individuals generally avoided bringing their disputes to the attention of provincial authorities, instead preferring to handle disputes at the local, sub-legal level through processes of mediation and arbitration. Though this thesis has in recent years been challenged by the revisionist work of Jill Harries and others, there is still a need to present a richer analysis of the legal system in Roman and late antique Egypt.

In the first part of this paper I attempt to present an outline of the ways in which rights were understood by individuals. I argue that individuals in Egypt (both elite and non-elite) were intensely conscious of the positive, statutory rights provided to them under the law and deliberately ignored potential disabilities. Rather than relying on vague notions of justice, individuals made specific and frequent reference to a variety of statutory rights. Thus in a petition concerning violence Satabous son of Erieus reminds the prefect of Egypt that the prefect has prohibited his opponent's actions "through edicts" (σοφῶν καὶ διὰ κθεμῶντων [ἑπα]γο[ρ]ε[σ]αντος], *SB* I 5235). In a case from late antiquity, a group of petitioners refers to (and provides a specific discussion of) two separate edicts (*PSI* VI 684: τὰ δύο με[γα]λοφυῆ ἡ δίκτα). In *PSI* XII 1243, an individual protesting a liturgy specifies that imperial law protects him from carrying out two liturgies at once (καὶ τοῖς κυρίοις ἡμῶν αυτοκράτορσι εἴδοξεν μὴ ὑφ' εἶνα καιρὸν δύο λειτουργίας τινὰ ἐκτελεῖν; c.f. *Dig.* 50.5.14.1). Other legal privileges were also evoked. Perhaps the most important example of consciousness of legal privilege and protection is the Petition of Dionysia (*P.Oxy.* II 237). In this document Dionysia presents a series of legal decisions to deny her father the ability to end her marriage; her father (whose petition is preserved as well) does the same to justify his right to control his daughter.

In part two, I argue that instead of a simple correlation between social status and access to institutions, access to the legal system was predicated on a series of transactions and justifications between individuals and their government. Individuals were well acquainted with law, and savvy about how they wrote the statutory language into their complaints. Legal language was loaded: officials were proud of the imperial legal system, and believed that its fairness and efficacy justified their rule. Invoking statute forced them to be consistent or jeopardize this legitimacy. The emphasis on rights must be contextualized as one (of many) techniques through which individuals used personal agency to hold the imperial legal system accountable.