

The Postal Station at Polemonos Meris, Egypt in 253 BC (Richard Frajola, May 2009)

The postal system in Egypt, circa 253 BC, was limited primarily to official correspondence. The model may have been the Persian system which utilized couriers operating from permanent stations placed at regular intervals along the main transportation routes. The system facilitated the timely flow of information which was critical to the domination of the extensive empire. In contrast to the scant evidence pertaining to the Persian postal system, mostly available in written accounts prepared by their Greek enemies well after the fact, the Egyptian postal system is documented by the survival of physical evidence such as paypri. In addition to the rare survival of actual letters written on papyrus, such as that shown in Figure 1 from a later period, there exist papyri documents of the actual service.

One of the earliest and most interesting of these documents was written circa 253 BC at Polemonos Meris (see Figure 2 map). It was likely written by an administrator of the postal station named Phantias. The text of interest is written in Greek on the reverse side of a papyrus mummy cartonnage written earlier (ca. 270 BC) and the date is estimated to be 259-253 BC during the reign of Ptolemy II. It was first published by B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt, *P. Hibeh I 110* [London 1906], pp 286-294, also discussed by F. Preisigke, "Die ptolemaische Staatspost", *Klio* 7 (1907), p 245; and more recently by S.R. Llewelyn in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, Volume 7* [Macquarie University 1994], pp 5-13.

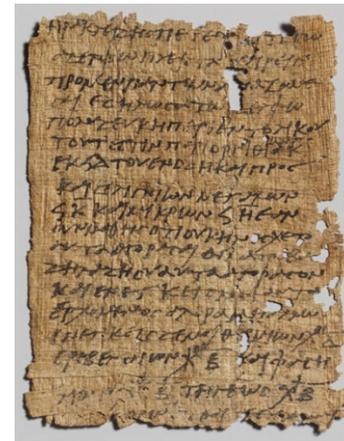


Figure 1. Papyrus letter in Greek, early 3rd century AD from Egypt.

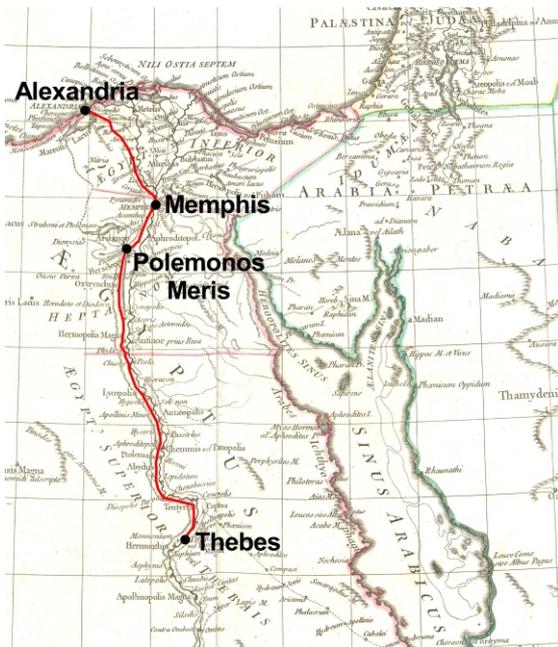


Figure 2. Map showing location of Polemonos Meris on the postal route between Thebes and Alexandria in the ancient period.

The pertinent text (lines 54 - 114) is a daily log of mail received and dispatched, over an eight day period, of the station at Polemonos Meris. Fortunately, Llewelyn has provided a line by line translation from the Greek and suggested words and phrases where there are missing, or illegible, portions of the original text. Beyond the literal translation of the text, Llewelyn has also summarized the several conflicting interpretations of what the text means in the larger context of how the postal system actually worked.

I have tabularized the content of the entries, all made in the same hand, and presented them in the table which follows. The Llewelyn text translation for entry numbers 3 and 4 is:

At the first hour Theochrestos delivered from upper (Egypt) to Dinias 3 rolls, (of these) for king Ptolemaios 2 rolls; for Apollonios, the dioiketes, 1 roll, and Dinias delivered (them) to Hippolysos.

At the 6th hour Phoenix, son of Herakleitos, the elder, Macedonian (holder of a hundred-aroura allotment), of Herakleopolite (nome), one of the first (in the regiment) of Esop [...] delivered 1 roll to Phantias, and Aminon delivered (it) to Timokrates.

Report of Mails Received and Sent from the Postal Station at Polemonos Meris

Entry / Time				Inbound Mail			Outbound Mail		
No.	Lines	Day	Hour	Received from	Courier	Delivered to	Forwarded by	Courier	Addressed to
1	54-60	16	?	(south)	?	Appollonios	Appollonios	Nikodemus	6 rolls to ? 3 rolls and letter for king
2	61-64	17	early hour	(north)	Phoenix the younger	Aminon	Aminon	Theochrestos	1 roll and the <i>axion</i>
3	65-69	18	1	(south) upper Egypt	Theochrestos	Dinias	Dinias	Hippolysos	2 rolls for the king Ptolemy 1 roll for Apollonios
4	70-74	18	6	(north)	Phoenix the elder	Phanias	Aminon	Timokrates	1 roll
5	75-85	19	11	(north) lower Egypt	Nikodemus	Alexandros	-	-	rolls from king to Antiochos 1 roll for Demetrios 1 roll for Hippoteles 1 roll from king to Theogenes
6	91-96	20	?	(south)	Lykokles	Aminion	Aminion	Hippolysos	3 rolls for king Ptolemy 1 roll for Apollonios 1 roll for Hermippos
7	97-99	21	6	(north) lower Egypt	[incomplete]	[incomplete]	Horos	Dionysios	2 letters
8	100-105	22	1	(south)	[incomplete]	Dinias	Dinias	Nikodemus	16 rolls for king Ptolemy 4 rolls for Antiochos
9	106-108	22	12	(south) upper Egypt	Leon	Aminion	Aminion	Hippolytus	? for king Ptolemy
10	109-114	23	early hour	(south) upper Egypt	Timokrates	(Alexandros)	Alexandros	[incomplete]	? for king Ptolemy ? rolls for Apollonios 1 roll for money-carrier 1 roll for Parik

From this report several insights into the postal arrangements can be deduced. The station served as a point where letters and rolls were delivered by one courier and transferred to a different courier for onward transmission. This relay station system required periodic offices along the length of the route. This is in contrast to a system in which a single courier traveled the entire distance. The latter method was frequently employed elsewhere in the ancient world when it was deemed necessary for the courier to provide verbal addenda to the written word, and the same courier was often employed to carry the reply.

In addition the papyrus shows multiple mail deliveries and departures on the same day. Presigke (op cit.) speculated, perhaps incorrectly, that the system operated on a six-hour plan with at least four journeys passing through the station each day.

As can also be seen from the summary, there are several entries for mail addressed to, or sent from, the king. At this time the king was Ptolemy II Philadelphus (Figure 3) who was living in Alexandria. For this reason, Presigke further believed that the account records only express mails between the central government and the local officials with additional non-service mails not being itemized.



Figure 3. Gold oktadrachm minted in Alexandria circa 255 BC bearing portraits of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (309 BC–246 BC) and Arsinoë II his sister-wife. The reverse, shown at right, bears conjoined busts of his parents, Ptolemy I and Berenike I.

Certainly after Egypt became a Roman province in 30 BC, and after the Roman "cursus publicus" reached Egypt somewhat later, the postal system was used by a wide range of civilians as well as public officials. During this later period the mail was carried via a land that was contiguous to the Nile River and extended from Alexandria in Lower Egypt to Thebes in Upper Egypt (see Figure 2 map). From the present document it seems certain that much of the route was already in use by 253 BC.

In fact, from surviving examples it seems that the use of papyrus letters increased as casual communication became more commonplace in the Roman period. An example from a papyrus letter written in Alexandria in 84 AD, addressed to a person in Arsinoite nome even includes a return address on the verso:

<p>16 ἐὰν δέ μοι ἐπιστολά[ς] πέμπης, πέμψεις εἰς τὸ Θεῶνος τρα- γματοπωλῖον ἐπὶ τὸ Χαριδήμου βαλανεῖον καὶ ἐν τῷ</p> <p>18 ἐργαστηρίῳ εὐρήσει Δεῖον τὸν τοῦ Σύρου καὶ αὐτὸς μοι ἀναδώσει ἢ παρὰ Ἡρακλειδίωνα τὸν τοῦ Ἀβά.</p>	<p>If you send letters to me, send (them) to Theon's confectionery shop beside Charidemos' bath and in the shop he (the courier) will find Dios, the son of Syros, and he will give (them) to me, or to Herakleidion, the son of Abas.</p>
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While postal artifacts from this period of antiquity are largely held by museums rather than privately, they need not be ignored by postal historians. Some of the systems, such as the relay station method employed at Potemonos Meris, were used again in later periods; including its use by the Pony Express in 1860.