

MULTILINGUAL MILITARY FORTS IN ROMAN EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

The Roman army was actively present in the Eastern Desert of Egypt in the 2nd century CE, from Trajan to Antoninus Pius. Soldiers lived in small forts, called *praesidia*, along the roads from the Red Sea to Nile. Results of numerous desert surveys indicate that the Roman route system in the Eastern Desert was elaborate and sophisticated. As well as by Egyptians the roads were also used by speakers of other languages, e.g. Nabateans, Arameans, but also speakers of North Arabic and South Arabic varieties and languages of the Balkans. Soldiers, mainly auxiliaries from Egypt, lived with locals, and both groups actively corresponded between the *praesidia* mainly in Greek writing on potsherds, ostraka. The extra-linguistic background of the letters was multicultural and, thus, multilingual. This kind of language contact could be seen also earlier, but it was not as clear as later. Living in an extremely difficult area, people had to be able to write or they had to find somebody who had – even very modest – writing skills. An important fact is that the writers used only ostraka, never papyrus, which they did not own. Conclusions: the ‘ostraka’ variety in the Eastern desert seems to differ from the ‘papyrus’ variety used in the Nile valley. This variety could be characterized as a striped cocktail, i.e. memorized phrases mixed with very shaky Greek (or, very occasionally, Latin), where elements of everyday phonetics are combined with learnt orthography and hypercorrect forms, as well as L2 induced uncertain morphology and syntax. The multilingualism of Egypt is a major factor to our understanding of the Greek spoken in Egypt. There might have been an Egyptian variety of Greek influenced by language contacts, but individual writers have a lot of variation that is not always typical of the whole. All contact induced variation is certainly not caused by Egyptian speakers, but some of it was – without any doubts. I would argue that language internal change in Greek was more rapid in regions that were multilingual.

1. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic research is very informative in the analysis of local speech communities, even if language was not yet such an ethnically defined item, as it has become to be after the 19th century ideas of nationalism. Even if Greek and Latin were the ruling languages of the Roman Empire, various vernaculars were used throughout¹.

Multilingualism² in Egypt has been studied from different angles in the volume *Multilingual Experience in Egypt from the Ptolemies to the 'Abbāsids* edited by Arietta Papaconstantinou (2010). Originally, Greek and Egyptian population lived separate, and as a rule Egyptians gained more by trying to learn Greek than L1 Greek speakers by trying to learn Egyptian. However, already during the Ptolemaic period some Greek speakers seem to have adapted far more to the local Egyptian environment than others, and even took Egyptian (double) names (see Clarysse 2010: 68-70), but later, for example in Kellis at the Great Oasis (present day Dakhleh Oasis) numerous *ostraka* and *papyri* show widespread Greek-Coptic bilingualism during the mid-fourth century (Clackson 2010: 90-92). Accordingly, when coming to the Roman period, bilingual speech communities were numerous and written Egyptian (first Demotic, then Coptic) and Greek were used side by side (see Papaconstantinou 2010: chapters by W. Clarysse, S.J. Clackson, J. Dieleman, and M. Choat). As these chapters are excellent analyses, I am not going to repeat their contents

¹ See e.g. Adams-Janse-Swain (2002); Adams (2003).

² I prefer to use the term multilingualism, as it is in general use, even if plurilingualism has been introduced as a term for another kind of simultaneous use of different varieties (languages) in a speech community. See the definition: “Plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw” (Coste *et al.* 2009: 11 note 3).

here. Suffice it to say that bilingualism in some speech communities was generally intense during the Roman period (e.g. Kellis), and extended both to public and private sectors (see Torallas Tovar 2010: 17-43).

Originally, the relations between different ethnic groups were not good, and even later on, the Greek descendants enjoyed privileges that gave them a higher social standing compared to local Egyptian population. Attitudes between Hellenes and Egyptians were sometimes bumpy (Torallas Tovar 2010: 21-24) and differences between social classes were generally sharp (Lewis 1983: 18-35). However, the intense influence of Greek to Coptic and, to a lesser extent, even vice versa, shows that L1 speakers of Egyptian used a lot of Greek in their daily business affairs (Clackson 2010: 79-87; Leiwo 2017: 252-258; Leiwo 2003; Dahlgren 2017 with a rich bibliography).

2. LANGUAGES, *PRAESIDIA* AND ROMAN MILITARY ROADS

The only written languages with sufficient linguistic data in Egypt are Egyptian, Greek and Latin. This does not mean, however, that they were the only languages used in speech. From Plutarch we know that Cleopatra VII could speak at least seven languages³. Some Semitic vernaculars are documented in the Desert, and obviously they were spoken more than written (e.g. Nabatean and Thamoudean, cf. Fournet 2003: 428). Vernaculars from the Balkan area, especially from Thracia, were also used in the Roman Army in Egypt, as there were

³ Plut. *Ant.* 27: “There was sweetness also in the tones of her voice; and her tongue, like an instrument of many strings, she could readily turn to whatever language she pleased, so that in her interviews with Barbarians she very seldom had need of an interpreter, but made her replies to most of them herself and unassisted, whether they were Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabians, Syrians, Medes or Parthians. [4] Nay, it is said that she knew the speech of many other peoples also” (Transl. B. Perrin, 1920).

soldiers from that region who seem to have their own in-groups, and who, for sure, were not L1 speakers of Greek or Latin (see below).

There is one area, however, that still needs much more linguistic research. That is the Eastern Desert with its “Ostraka culture” (see Cuvigny 2003: 265-267; Leiwo 2017; Leiwo forthcoming).

The Eastern Desert was really anything but deserted, as it was a treasury of valuable stones and ores. A lively caravan route from the south to the Nile Valley crossed it, and there were also numerous military routes between the Red Sea and the Nile (see Sidebotham 2011). Because of immense mineral riches and huge mining activity in the Eastern Desert, it was in the Emperor’s personal interest to keep these routes safe, and, therefore, the Romans developed a strong security system in the area (see also Adams 2007: 8, 33-41, 196-219). The peak of the mining activities coincides with the Empires’ most powerful stage, from Trajan to Antoninus Pius. Many desert surveys have shown that the Roman route system in the Eastern Desert was surprisingly well constructed and dense (Sidebotham 2011: 136-138). The roads were unpaved dirt roads, *viae terrenaes*, and their width varied from about 5.1 to more than 30 metres. There were two main military roads. The road from Myos Hormos by the Red Sea to Koptos by the Nile is about 180 km long (cf. Strabo 17.1.45: the journey took six or seven days) and the road from the regional capital Berenike by the Red Sea to Koptos is approximately 380 km (described by Pliny *NH* 6.26.102-103; Sidebotham 2011: 128; Maxfield 2005). Both roads were strongly fortified and there was a Roman military post or *praesidium* every 30 km along both roads (see fig. 1). The *praesidia* were small and housed some hundreds of inhabitants. Mons Claudianus was probably the largest with some 900 inhabitants (Adams 2007: 209).

Figure 1. Roman road system and military forts (*praesidia*) in the Eastern Desert⁴



The soldiers and civilians at these military posts communicated by writing on pieces of pottery, *ostraka*. This is a remarkable fact, which shows that communication between the *praesidia* was mainly written, even if messages could have been sent orally. It seems that written letters were considered more reliable than oral messages. In any case, the level of total or partial literacy must have been surprisingly high among the soldiers, though letter-readers were common, too (Fournet 2003: 460-465).

3. LETTER WRITERS AT THE *PRAESIDIA*

All letter writers along the military roads were linked to the Roman army, whether soldiers or civilians related to the *praesidia*. The majority of the soldiers were auxiliaries, of which many were native Egyptians during the 1st and early 2nd century CE, when the mining

⁴ Sidebotham (2011: 136).

activity was at its peak. Regarding multilingualism, Fournet has described it lively (2003: 430):

“Victimes d’une véritable schizophrénie linguistique [...] les auxiliaires égyptiens parlent égyptien entre eux, mais doivent correspondre en grec, en tout cas quand ils peuvent maîtriser cette langue. Ils sont même sporadiquement confrontés au latin, qui [...] leur est plus encore étranger. Ce divorce entre langues parlée et écrite explique le très mauvais niveau de langue que manifeste la plus grande partie de notre documentation”.

This is a colourful and certainly well documented description, but I would not say that the situation was actually schizophrenic, but more or less normal in Egypt. Multilingualism was an everyday fact in several ancient societies, and people were quite accustomed to use a *lingua franca* be it Aramaic, Greek or Latin⁵. The bias in written documentary data arises from the fact that most vernaculars were not written languages⁶. But as we know ca. 4000 group names of ancient peoples, there must have been quite a lot of vernaculars used within families even if we do not have written evidence of them⁷.

The *lingua franca* of the Roman Army in Egypt was definitely Greek and private correspondence was done mainly in Greek⁸, as numerous (more than 10.000) ostraka show⁹. As regards writing

⁵ There are various examples of both modern and ancient societies, where multilingualism was a norm, see Papaconstantinou (2010); Mullen-James (2012); Clackson (2015); Thomason (2001: 27-58); Operstein (2015).

⁶ An exceptional publication of inscriptions is H. Cotton *et al.* (2010-2014), where all documents no matter in what language they were written have been collected together. Four languages were in regular use in, e.g., Judaea-Palestine, see J. Clackson (2015: 151-154). Egypt was definitely not poorer as regards the use of written vernaculars.

⁷ See The Herodotus Project <https://u.osu.edu/herodotos/>

⁸ The generalization that the ‘official’ language of the Roman army was Latin does little justice to the real situation (Kaimio 1979: 27); Adams (2003: 599-600) explains the complexities.

⁹ See also Adams (2003: 527-529).

letters in general, the greatest difference between the Eastern Desert and the Nile Valley (and Fayyum) was the availability of competent scribes. The residents of the *praesidia* either had to write themselves or use anyone who had – even very modest – writing skills¹⁰. As mentioned above, the writing material was almost without any exception potsherds (see also Maxfield 2003), and even *curatores* of the *praesidia* used ostraka. Only the most official correspondence, for instance that with the central administration in Berenike, was written on papyrus.

A typical writer of these desert letters has a fluent hand but conspicuous difficulties with standard koiné grammar and orthography. Only a few of the writers seem to have been professional (army) scribes, the majority were clearly private persons, who were taught to write¹¹.

According to what we know of the auxiliaries and other residents of the *praesidia*, many of them were L2 speakers of Greek: among them there were at least Arabic, Aramaic, Egyptian, Latin, Nabatean and Thracian L1 speakers. Naturally, also L1 Greek and Latin speakers belonged to these speech communities, but even they usually had a very modest command of standard Attic or Koiné or Latin grammar. As it is, there were many non-native Greek speakers, for whom L2 phonology and morphology created difficulties. Their L1 caused difficulties in choosing letters from the L2 alphabet to correspond to those phonemes of L2 that are foreign to the L1 of the writer (Horrocks 2010: 112; Clackson 2010; Dahlgren 2017; Dahlgren-Leiwo, forthcoming). One of the clearest L1 transfer features from Egyptian to Greek is the merger of voiced and voiceless stops /k, p, t/ and /g, b, d/. The phonetic process behind this merging is under-

¹⁰ Even the origin of the scribes who wrote Latin or Greek texts for military personnel is mainly unknown to us, see Adams (2003: 527-528).

¹¹ This information can be collected from the various ostraka editions of the *praesidia* edited by Adam Bülow-Jacobsen and Héléne Cuvigny in the *IFAO* series. See also Leiwo (2003; 2005; 2010), where I have tackled this theme.

differentiation¹². The multilingual situation in Egypt clearly favoured an expansion of a contact variety of Greek that began with mixing and with the creation of a feature pool drawn from all the language varieties present in that contact environment¹³. Various studies (see Operstein 2015 for references) indicate that contact environments are basic to linguistic change, creating a period of rapid change.

4. LATIN

Even if there is evidence mainly from Greek and, to some extent, Latin and other languages, it is possible to trace down characteristic features that can tell us about the multilingualism in Egypt on an idiolectic level. If we can detect linguistic idiosyncrasies that are not typical of Greek or Latin language internal variation together with, for example, names that mainly originate from some other geographic area of the Roman Empire, we can quite confidently argue that the linguistic variety in question has contact-induced causes. An expressive example of this is an ostrakon from the *praesidium* of Didymoi (O.Did. 334)¹⁴:

- (1) Cutos · Drozeus· salutem
 ut ·Logino curatoriu· et ·
 Antoniu · sixoplixo· et·
 Bitu · semiaphori · et · Dales
 et · Dinis Mopori · f(ilio) · ex mea· 5
 opuras· uino ·haperis· ut

¹² Weinreich (1953: 18) lists underdifferentiation among the most frequent contact phenomena.

¹³ See Operstein (2015: 4). The feature pool is a set of linguistic variables available to speakers in a contact environment.

¹⁴ I will give all examples as they are written on the ostrakon. Editorial marks are limited to the most important ones. All ostraka and papyri here cited can be found in the web site papyri.info. Photo of O.Did. 334: <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/publications/fifao67/?os=341>.

exçipia . . . um · [. . .]i[. . .]relico quas
 [-ca.?-] habis hopiras
 [-ca.?-] uino · si tibi casum ·
 [-ca.?-] uirant · ut · 10
 [-ca.?-] asilam·
 [-ca.?-] . o

“Cutus to Drozeus, greetings, as well as to Longinus, the curator, Antonius, the *sesquiplicarius*, and Bitus the *signifer*, and Dales and Dinis, son of Mocapor. Through my doing you have (?) wine [...]” (Transl. A. Bülow-Jacobsen).

The letter contains both names and linguistic idiosyncrasies that can be connected to L2 Latin. The writer of this letter has written two other letters (O.Did. 335 and 336), too. His name Cutus/Cutos can be a Thracian name (Κότυς, see Bülow-Jacobsen, commentary, O.Did. 334)¹⁵. His fellow soldiers all have names that are common in Thracia: Bitus, Dales, Dinis son of Mocapor and Drozeus (See Bülow-Jacobsen, O.Did. 334, commentary; LGPN IV). The soldiers mentioned in the letter of Cutus are known elsewhere, for example Bitus from the *turma Aseni* and Dinis from the *turma Norbani* in a list written by the hand of Cutus (O.Did 63; Bülow-Jacobsen, O.Did. 334, commentary). It is noteworthy that Cutus is writing in Latin. He would have, in all probability, known Greek better, if he was of Thracian origin, and he, indeed, uses a Greek word for *signifer*, writing *semiaphori*. As his Latin is, to say the least, devoid of any higher education, but, at the same time, he knows to write, it seems that he had learnt writing in the army, earlier in a place Greek was not used, and, therefore, uses Latin instead of Greek even in Egypt, where

¹⁵ The name is attested written with an ypsilon, but the stem *Cut-/Κυθ-* is common in Thracia (see LGPN IV, s.v.). There is also a lot of variation in the vowels of the ostraka letters written by private persons, as they did not always know, how to write unstressed vowels, especially those unfamiliar to their L1, and there is variation between the graphemes <o> and <u> even in the letters of Cutos himself (Bülow-Jacobsen, O.Did. p. 333; see also Dahlgren-Leiwo, forthcoming).

Greek was the main language of communication even in the Roman army¹⁶.

There are several interesting Latin linguistic details in his two longer letters. He does not inflect the name Drozeus in the address formula (*Drozus = Drozei*), but, at the same time, in the list of names to whom the letter is addressed, especially the Latin names are inflected: *Logino curatoriu = Longino curatori*, *Antoniu sixoplixo = Antonio sesquiplicario*, *Bitu = Bito*, *semiaphori* (corrected from *semiaphri*), but the names *Dales* and *Dinis* are in the nominative. *Sixoplixo* is a desperate attempt to get the lexeme *sesquiplicario* (dat.) written down. I would not say that the writing is phonetic, but some phonetic reality might be seen in the spelling. The clause after the address (l. 5-6) *ex mea·opuras· uino ·haperis ut excipia* (uncertain reading of the last word) has a shaky syntax, but it can be due to uncertain orthography together with possible morphological difficulties of an L2 speaker. Uncertain orthography can be seen at least in *opuras*, as it is probably written phonetically with a weak unstressed vowel in the middle syllable, but the final grapheme <s> is hypercorrect (= *opera*). The form *vino*, instead, seems to be a nominative/accusative with the familiar internal Latin change *vinum > vino*. In the line 6 there is the verb *haperis*, which is difficult to interpret. Bülow-Jacobsen suggests all the options: *habetis* (or *habebitis* or *habueris*). As the clause is difficult to understand, the morphosyntax remains obscure. It is not necessary to try to analyse linguistically the remaining part of the letter, as the beginning of it clearly shows that Latin is not the L1 of the writer. To give another example of the same writer, I would like to cite his other letter, O.Did. 335, that supports the arguments above¹⁷.

¹⁶ See Adams (2003: 620).

¹⁷ {r} means that the writer has written the letter, but the editor considers it superfluous. Photo <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/publications/fifao67/?os=343>.

- (2) Cutus · Taru-
 la· salutm ·
 rugu ti frati-
 {r}r · quas hbis mea
 drac(mas) · XXXIV 5
 salutem · Lugino nost(ro).

“Cutus to Tarula, greetings. I ask you brother, for the 34(?) drachmas of mine that you have. Greeting to our friend Longinus” (Transl. A. Bülow-Jacobsen).

In this letter, Cutus wrote his name with <u>, Cutus, instead of Cutos as in Ex. 1, and here the curator’s name is written with <u> in *salut<e>m · Lugino nost (= Longino nostro)*. The names Τάρουλα and Ταρούλας are attested Thracian names (LGPN IV s.v. Τάρουλα and Ταρούλας). Cutus’ vowels appear to have similar variation as in Ex. 1, with a strong tendency to write the Latin /o/ with <u> as in *rugu ti fratir (= rogo te frater)*. Also some vowels are not written at all (*salutm, hbis*), but these are probably slips of pen, as he writes *salutem* with the correct vowel in the last line, though the form is strange here, as it belongs to the opening formula. It is possible that Cutus could not inflect the verb *salutare* correctly, as Bülow-Jacobsen suggests in the commentary. The name of address Tarula is not inflected to the dative either, and the final <s> is lacking in *mea drac (= meas dracmas)*.

We can thus conclude that Cutus was a non-native Latin speaker, who could write but had various difficulties with grammar, which were not typical of L1 Latin speaker. What would then a letter of a L1 Latin speaker look like? A choice of Latin letters is limited in number, but an example of a probable L1 Latin speaker, is the letter O.Did. 362:¹⁸

¹⁸ Photo: <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/publications/fifao67/?os=370>

- (3) C(aius) · Lurius · Ario · fratri ·
 sal(utem). · ante omnia · opto · te · recte ·
 ualere. · nuga · facitis · quod ·
 rixsatis. · omo · ueteranus
 eş · ili · tirones · sunt. · tu · de- 5
 bes · ilis · monstrarem · ego ·
 . r[.] semper · epstumas
 r. . tu · mi · non · salu-
 tabis · Antestium
 et · Longinum · uexs(illarum) 10
 ual(e) · vac. ?.

“C. Lurius to his brother Arius, greetings. First of all I hope that you are well. You are quarrelling about nothing. You are an experienced man and they are recruits. You should teach them [...] Greet Antestius and Longinus the *vexillarius*. Farewell” (Transl. A. Bülow-Jacobsen).

The writer has difficulties with final <m> and <s>, as can be seen in the line 3 *nuga* (*nugas*), where the most common idiom would be *nugas agitis* instead of *nugas facitis*. In the line 6 he writes *mostrarem* (= *monstrare*). Weak final *-m* and *-s* belong to the most typical and well-known internal Latin variation characteristics, and need not be due to L2 speakers’ foreign language difficulties. A more problematic is the word in the line 7 *epstumas*. It is not a Latin lexeme as such, but Bülow-Jacobsen suggests plausibly that it is a lapse for *epistulas*, and we would, then, have the most common phrase *semper epistula<s> scribo tu mi non* “I always write letters, you never write to me”¹⁹. If *non* were to be connected to the following clause, it would not have sense, as the writer would not write *non salutabis Antestium...* “Do not greet Antestius”. The writer also had difficulties in writing the phoneme /ks/ depicting it with <xs> (l. 4 *rixsatis*, l. 10 *vexs(illarum)*).

¹⁹ This formula is one of the most common in the letters on papyri and ostraka, and it was borrowed to Coptic as well.

The other non-standard spellings *omo* (l. 4 *homo*) and *ili, ilis* (l. 5-6 *illi, illis*) are also typical of Latin internal variation.

5. GREEK

As the examples 1-3 show, some soldiers used Latin in their private correspondence, both L1 and L2 Latin speakers, but, as mentioned above, Greek was the normal language of communication in Egypt. In Greek ostraka letters we can observe both variation that is typical of Greek internal development and variation that is clearly contact-induced. An example of an Egyptian Greek variety of a native Egyptian L2 Greek speaker is a letter from the *praesidium* of Krokodilo, O.Krok. I 73²⁰:

- (4) Ἰουλᾶς Λοκρητίῳ
 τῷ γυρίῳ χαίριν. κα-
 λῶς ποιήσας περὶ οὓ
 σε ἠρώτηκα τερματίου
 μικρὸν εἰς λαντάλια, 5
 τῷ τρεππῶ σου ποιή-
 κον τῇ χάριταν. ἀσπά-
 ζομαι Κάσσειν· καλῶς
 ποιήσης τώσις αὐτῷ,
 Λονγίνῳ. 10

“Toulas to Lucretius my lord, greetings. Please, could you do what I asked you (and send) some leather for sandals. Do this favour for your servant²¹. I send greetings to Kassis. Please, give this to Longinus”.

²⁰ I cite here part of my analysis, see Leiwo (forthcoming).

²¹ About the meaning of this sentence, see Cuvigny (2003: 370).

Among the most typical features of Egyptian Greek is the merger of voiced and voiceless stops (see above). In the ex. 4 we have: γυρίω (κυρίω), τερματίου (δερματίου), λαντάλια (σανδάλια?), τώσις (δώσεις)²². Since Egyptian (in the form of Coptic) did not have an opposition between voiced and voiceless stops, they were frequently confused with one another as they represented a single phoneme for Egyptian L1 speakers (Gignac 1976: 77; Horrocks 2010: 112; Dahlgren 2017: 58).

The letter reveals other phonological characteristics that are typical of Greek in Egypt. Lucretius is written with <o> rather than <ou>. The variation between /o/ and /u/ (<ou>) is frequent in Egyptian Greek (Gignac 1976: 208; Dahlgren 2017: 83-84). In principle, there is a general tendency to transfer native language allophones to L2 (Major 2001: 31). It is precisely this tendency that created uncertainty in choosing the right letter for the unstressed /u/ or /o/, even if, in this case, the name Lucretius is a Latin one transcribed into Greek (see also ex. 1 and 2 above). We can suggest with confidence that the writer of this letter, Ioulas, was an Egyptian who uses Greek as his L2. Gignac (1976: 208) indicates that the majority of attestations of /o, u/ confusion occurs initially and medially, which means that this usage thus follows Coptic phonological rules (Dahlgren 2017: 83). It should be also noticed that Ioulas uses the indicative perfect (ἠρώτηκα) as a general preterit. This seems to reflect the on-going change of the kappa-perfect indicative to an unmarked preterit later used in Modern Greek deponent verbs (σκέφτηκα “I thought”, θυμήθηκα “I remembered”). This usage of the perfect indicative became more and more popular during the Roman period (see Kavčić 2017), and it may have arisen in contact situations. This suggestion needs, however, more research, which is not possible in this paper.

As in case of Latin above, I would then like to tackle a probable L1 Greek (or a real bilingual) speaker. This is a letter of a prostitute, Nemesous, to his pimps Ignatius and Potamion (O.Did. 400). The

²² τώσις (= δώσεις) αὐτὸ, see Leiwo (2010: 105, 112-113).

writer can be Nemesous herself, but it can be a scribe as well. The letter is written with a clear hand, and the letter 401 seem to be written by the same hand, but with a worse pen, and is thematically connected with number 400, so perhaps the writer is Nemesous herself. These letters are very interesting, as they show the cruel world of prostitution in the *praesidia*. In the letter (O.Did. 400) Nemesous, herself a prostitute, is transferring a girl to some *praesidium*. The letter shows lively, how the women were at the mercy of donkey drivers, who took advantage of their situation in the desert (see Bülow-Jacobsen, introduction to O.Did. 400, p. 330). The letter can be dated to the early second century, as it was dumped between c. 120-125, which means that it was written a little earlier. It is a narrative, and describes the most disagreeable journey in the desert. An important fact is that Nemesous is fully aware of the distances on the military road²³.

- (5) Νεμεσοῦς Εἰγνατ[ίω] [καὶ]
 Ποταμίῳνι τοῖς κυ[ρίοις]
 πλῆστα χαίρειν· γινώ[σκειν]
 σε θέλω ὅτι τὸ κοράσιον [. . .]
 οὐκ εὐτόνηκε περιπατῖ[ν] 5
 δύο βήματα. ἐγὼ περιπε[πά-]
 τηκα ἑπτὰ μίλια ὡσαύ[τως]
 περιπατῖ δύο μίλια καὶ
 ἔστακε ὁ ὄνηλάτης λυ- 10
 πούμενος τὸν ὄνον καὶ
 ἀνέβαλέ με. καὶ πάλι ἀπε-
 λθοῦσα ἄλλω ὄνηλάτη
 ἔστακε. χαλκὸν καὶ παρ' ἐ-
 ματῆς ἐκτέτικα. μνη-
 μικομέ[ν]η σου τῆς 15
 ἐλημοσύνη[ς] [. . .]μοι

²³ Photo: <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/publications/fifao67/?os=420>

ὅτι τὰ ἐξήκ[οντα (?) -2-3-]
 ὑποκάτω ην[-4-5-]
 μου αὐτῆς [-ca.?-]

“Nemesous to her masters Ignatius and Potamion, many greetings. I want you to know that [your] girl has not been able to march two steps. I marched seven miles and she in the same way two miles and the donkey driver stopped, grieving about his donkey, and he made me dismount. I set off again with another donkey driver, and he stopped. I paid him off of my own. Remembering your pity [...]” (Transl. A. Bülow-Jacobsen).

This Greek variety has nothing that could be considered typically Egyptian Greek variety (nor typically Latin, either), but represents, in my opinion, L1 speakers fluent narrative, with most common iotacisms and shortening of the ending *-ion* to *-in* (τὸ κοράσιον = τὸ κοράσιον). Morphosyntactically, the frequent use of the perfect indicative or a kappa-preterit is again very typical of the period. Nemesous uses it in the seldom attested verb εὐτονέω “to have power” (see <http://logeion.uchicago.edu/index.html> s.v. εὐτονέω), οὐκ εὐτόνηκε περιπατῖ[v] “she had not power to walk” in the line 5, but also in the line 6 ἐγὼ περιπε[πά]τηκα ἑπτὰ μίλια “I walked seven miles”. The perfect indicative is, moreover, used with the verb ἐκτίνω in the line 14 παρ’ ἐματῆς ἐκτέτικα (παρ’ ἐμαυτῆς ἐκτέτεικα “I paid of my own”), and ἔστακε “he stopped” with the perfect indicative of the verb ἴστημι formed with the στα-stem (Mandilaras 1973: § 435). As I mentioned above, the use of the indicative perfect as a general preterit becomes popular in the Roman period, and reflects the change to the Modern Greek system. Nemesous also uses a form created from the verb form μνημίσκομαι instead of the normal μμνήσκομαι “to remember”. The form has been seldom attested elsewhere, and it seems to be used in

speech in multilingual speech communities²⁴. It seems that the stem *μνη-* (for example in the noun *μνήμη* “a memory”) created an example for this levelling of the verb, which thus became more regular along the lines of nouns having the stem *μνη-*.

The letter O.Did. 401 completes the picture of the girls’ unhappy situation in the military forts²⁵. It seems to be written with the same hand as the previous one, but with a different pen (see Bülow-Jacobsen, introduction, O.Did. 401, p. 331). The letter has not a beginning, which must be on the lost inner ‘sheet’ of the ostrakon letter, as we are in the middle of a narrative. The real meaning of the letter remains a mystery.

- (6) [. . .]ηκα αὐτη. [- ca.10 -]
 κιθῶναν καὶ [. . .]. να[- ca.5 -]
 βαστάζω αὐ[τὸ]ν μετὰ [τοῦ]
 ὑπανκωνίου. εἰσπορεύομ[αι]
 εἰς τὸ πρα<ι>σίδιν καὶ εὔρηκα 5
 αὐτὴν φωνουμένην ὑπὸ τῆς
 κονδουκτρίας. λέγω αὐτῇ
 φέρε τὸν κιθῶναν. καὶ λέ-
 γει οὐκ ἔχω αὐτόν. σεσυκο-
 φάντηκε αὐτὴν ὁ ὀνηλά- 10
 της. ἐ[γ]εῖγερμαι καὶ περι
 τε. [. . .] τῷ ὀνηλάτη
 κ. [. . .]. ινος
 ----- (?)

“[...] her [...] the chiton and [...] I take it away along with the pillow. I came into the *praesidium* and I found her, called by the

²⁴ I found three other examples of this form: BGU 7, 1578 (212 CE, Philadelphia): 13: [-ca.?-]ν οὖν ταύτη[ν] μνημισκομένην τῶν ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ εἰς αὐτὴν πάντων; P.hamb. 1, 37 (private letter, 2nd cent. CE): 4-5: ἀναγκαῖον γάρ ἐστι μνημίσκεσθαι τῆς καλοκαγαθίας σου; O.lund 14 4-5: τὰ [-ca.?-] ἡμῶν ἀναμνημίσκου καὶ τὸ προσκύ- / [νημα ἡμῶν] ποίει ἐχόμενα τῆς κυρίας Λητῶ.

²⁵ Photo <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/publications/fifao67/?os=422>

conductrix. I say to her: ‘Bring the chiton’ and she says, ‘I do not have it’. The donkey driver denounced her. My suspicion ? is aroused and [...] to the donkey driver [...].”

The language is again that of a fluent Greek speaker, probably an L1 speaker. The 3rd declension accusative singular is typically levelled to the 2nd declension in the lines 2 and 8 (κιθῶναν = κιθῶνα), other non-standard, but common, spellings are ὑπανκωνίου in the line 4. (= ὑπαγκωνίου “a pillow”), and ἐ[γ]εῖγερμαι (= ἐ[γ]ήγερμαι “I was aroused”). This last one is again in the perfect indicative, just like the verbs in the lines 5 and 9-10, εὔρηκα “I found” and σεσυκοφάντηκε “he denounced”, further emphasizing the general use of the perfect indicative (see above). The Latin loan κονδουκτρία is unattested, but κονδούκτριξ is found in the *praesidium* of Krokodilo, O.Krok. inv. 270 and τὴν κονδούκτοραν in O.Krok. inv. 270 (see Bülow-Jacobsen, commentary, O.Did. 401, p. 332). It must mean something like “madame” as brothel-keeper.

The letter also quotes direct speech. Direct speech is a popular mode of transmitting information in Greek private letters²⁶. The most general type of direct discourse includes a verb of saying or writing, and the writer, so to speak, puts words in somebody’s mouth. In this structure the direct discourse is usually introduced by the conjunction ὅτι. The example is from Mons Claudianus:

Ἄρπαήσιος ὁ κιβαριάτης εἶρηκέ μοι ὅτι ἐπιστολὴν ἔλαβα ἀπὸ τῆς γυναικός μου. (O.Claud. 155, 3-5).

“Harpaesios the *kibariates* said to me that I got the letter from my wife”.

²⁶ An old but fundamental treatment of direct speech in IE languages is E. Kieckers (1915; 1916).

The conjunction ὅτι is a standard way of introducing direct discourse even in classical literary style, as we can see, for example, from Plato (*Apol.* 21 b-c):

ἦλθον ἐπί τινα τῶν δοκούντων σοφῶν εἶναι, ὡς ἐνταῦθα εἶπερ που ἐλέγξων τὸ μαντεῖον καὶ ἀποφανῶν τῷ χρησμῷ ὅτι οὐτοσὶ ἐμοῦ σοφώτερός ἐστι, σὺ δ' ἐμὲ ἔφησθα²⁷.

Pronominal references are often difficult to analyse at the first sight, because direct and indirect discourse can be mixed together. For example, the expression “from my wife” (O.Claud. 155 above) remains slightly unclear, as it can also refer to the sender’s wife not only to Harpaesios’ wife, which is logically assumed from the syntax. In direct discourse pronominal references are always something that must be analysed carefully. Another potential reference problem is phonetic by nature, as the 1st and 2nd plural personal pronouns were phonetically merged, as we can see in the next example, where the writer jumps into direct discourse without the conjunction ὅτι like in my example 6 above:

γράψω αὐτῷ οὐχ εὔρηκα τυρεῖν, ἀλλὰ μὴ μέμφησθε ὑμᾶς (O.Claud. 278, 8-11).

“I’ll write to him I did not find cheese, but don’t blame us”.

In this case the interpretation is, however, easy, and the cause for the misspelling is purely phonetic, as ἡμᾶς “us” and ὑμᾶς “you” both have an unstressed vowel in the beginning. As the vowel was not pronounced, the pronouns were identical (cf. modern Greek μας, and a neologism σας created as the plural of the 2nd singular personal pronoun συ.)

²⁷ See also Maier (2012: 126-128).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The language of the ostraka letters of the *praesidia* in the Eastern Desert is like a cocktail drink, which has layers of different colours; the layers consist of memorized phrases with learnt orthography and hypercorrect forms, sometimes very shaky syntax, elements of everyday phonetics and uncertain Greek (and Latin) morphology. Language contact in this multilingual Egypt is one of the major factors to our understanding of the languages written in Roman Egypt. Many ostraka found in the Eastern Desert have elements that reveal intense language contact, but there are also clearly L1 speakers of Greek and Latin, whose variety contains elements typical of internal language change. There might have been an Egyptian variety of Greek influenced by language contact with Egyptian L1 speakers, but individual writers have a lot of variation that is not typical of the most general types of this variation. In my opinion, this rich idiolectic variation proves that the linguistic background of the persons settled in the *praesidia* was multilingual, not only bilingual.

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