

### THREE JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF LOWER EGYPT IN THE PTOLEMAIC PERIOD\*

From the beginning of the Ptolemaic epoch, Egypt served as a focus for various kinds of immigration, including that of Jews. The latter's need to preserve their national and religious identity against external influences led them to maintain a tightly knit internal organisation. A. Tcherikover, basing himself on epigraphical and papyrological sources, sets up what is a valid criterion for positing the existence of a Jewish community. "Since in the Diaspora the synagogue was the centre of Jewish political and cultural life," he writes, "we may assume that any reference to a synagogue indicates the existence of an organised Jewish community."<sup>1</sup>

Several conclusions are to be drawn from this statement:

a) Since any unauthorised building of synagogues is hardly credible, we may assume that any synagogue erected was constructed in accordance with the general Hellenistic formula by which the right of "living by ancestral laws" was granted to various ethnic groups and communities.<sup>2</sup>

b) It seems obvious that this type of institution would be built only where justified by sufficient numbers, viz. within a Jewish settlement comprising at least a few score of families, and located within well-defined territorial limits.

c) Equally obvious is the fact that the act of synagogue construction together with the fact of ownership of the land upon which it stood,

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<sup>1</sup> A. Tcherikover, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* (hereafter cited as *CPJ*) I *Prolegomena* pp. 7 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Arr. An.*, 1.17. 4; 1.18. 2; 7. 20.1; *Plb.* 2.70. 4; *SIG I'* (ed. W. Dittenberger) 390 (1.14 ff.); *BCH*, 44 (1920) p. 73, no. 4, *et al. multa*.

indicates the Jews' right to own public property and administer public funds.

d) The administration of a synagogue implied the existence of a well-organised Jewish congregation equipped with independent leadership.

e) Since most of the synagogues in Ptolemaic Egypt were dedicated by public decree to the reigning family, it may be assumed that the Jewish communities enjoyed the privilege of ψήφισμα which was reserved for political organisations and corporate bodies.

These conclusions, in as far as they apply to three Jewish communities in Lower Egypt, will now be considered. Further details, such as service in the Ptolemaic police, likely to shed some light on the character of the Jews settled there, will come under scrutiny too.

#### SCHEDIA—ΣΧΕΔΙΑ

The place now known as Kafr ed-Dawar was originally located about 20 kilometres east of Alexandria on the main canal that lead to the capital through the Canopic Branch of the Nile.<sup>3</sup> Σχεδία means “ferry,” “raft,” or “float,”<sup>4</sup> from which it can be inferred that the place of that name must have been a harbour through which cargo passed on the way to Alexandria. This is suggested by the writings of Strabo (16.1.16).

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was discovered in Schedia one of the oldest Jewish inscriptions extant, carved on a marble slab, and containing a dedication to King Ptolemy III Euergetes I (246–221 B.C.E.) and his family.<sup>5</sup> It reads as follows: ὑπὲρ βασιλέως Πτολεμαίου καὶ / βασιλίσσης Βερενίκης ἀδελ / φῆς καὶ γυναικὸς καὶ / τῶν τέκνων / τὴν προσευχὴν / οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι. Th. Reinach, taking into consideration the close proximity in which Schedia lay to the capital, concludes that the local Jewish community constituted a “daughter” community of the Alexandrian one.<sup>6</sup> The suggestion seems a reasonable one, particularly since it gives credence to Josephus' testimony regarding the antiquity of the “mother” community.<sup>7</sup> The extent to which

<sup>3</sup> v. Str. 17.1.16.

<sup>4</sup> *LSJ* s.v.

<sup>5</sup> *CIJud.* II 1440. (= *CPJ* III, 1440).

<sup>6</sup> Th. Reinach, Sur la date de la Colonie Juive d'Alexandrie, *REJ*, 45 (1902) 164.

<sup>7</sup> J., *BJ* 2.487; *Ap.* 2.35; 37; 42.

Alexander the Great settled Jewish soldiers in Alexandria may be controversial,<sup>8</sup> but what is certain is the fact that Jews were buried in a suburb of the capital (Al-Ibramiyeh) at the beginning of the third century B.C.E. This means that they were settled there during the reigns of Ptolemy I and Ptolemy II too.<sup>9</sup>

Obviously these conscripts must have been called up either by Ptolemy I, or by his son. It seems fairly certain that they were in some way connected with the policing of the Nile (ποταμοφυλακία). I agree with Tcherikover<sup>10</sup> that the *fluminis custodia* of the Roman period, referred to by Josephus in *Ap.* 2.64, is to be identified with the ποταμοφυλακία mentioned in certain of the *ostraka*.<sup>11</sup> It has to be noted that Josephus made it very clear that Jews had indeed served in this capacity in the Ptolemaic period.<sup>12</sup> As recorded in 3 *Ma.* 4.11, Schedia was the last stage in the journey made by the Jews condemned to death by Ptolemy IV Philopator. The place was chosen for "its suitability in exposing the former to the public gaze so that those entering the city of Alexandria, and those leaving for the country, (i.e. χώρα) could have a good view of them. It was also a position from which "they could neither make contact with the army nor obtain protection from the walls." Since police service in Ptolemaic Egypt was frequently connected with the regular army, (*infra* n. 40) the words underlined may serve to reinforce the assumption that Jewish settlers in Schedia were somehow connected with the policing of the Nile.<sup>13</sup>

The existence of an organised local community is indicated in the last word of the inscription, 'Ιουδαίου.<sup>14</sup> Its full designation appears to have

<sup>8</sup> I have dealt with this question, *inter alia*, in my dissertation pp. 205 ff. Cf. A. Kasher *Beit-Mikra*. II 61 (1975) pp. 187 ff.

<sup>9</sup> v. *CJud*. II 1424-1426; 1431 Cf. ps. Aristeas, 12 ff.; 22 ff.; 36 ff.; J., *AJ* 12.8; 45-47; *Ap.* 2. 44.

<sup>10</sup> *CPJ* I *Prolegomena*, p. 53, n. 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ostr. Theb.* 36, 93; *WO.* 507; *Ostr. Ashm.* 41; Cf. U. Wilcken, *Griechische Ostraka aus Aegypten und Nubien* (Leipzig & Berlin, 1899) 282 ff.; L. Mitteis und U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomatie der Papyruskunde* (Leipzig & Berlin, 1912) I pp. 392, 396.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire Romain* (1914) II p. 257.

<sup>13</sup> Str., *loc. cit.*; Agatarchides, *Geog. Gr. Min.* I p. 122; for further details, v. S. L. Wallace, *Taxation in Egypt from Augustus to Diocletian*, 1936 (1958), pp. 258; 262; 268; P. M. Fraser, *Berytus* 13 (1960) p. 146; *idem*, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, (1972) I pp. 144; 149.

<sup>14</sup> *CJud* II, 1440, line 8.

been οἱ ἐν Σχεδία Ἰουδαῖοι or οἱ ἀπὸ Σχεδίας Ἰουδαῖοι. Designations of this kind are used for permanent residents of Ptolemaic cities (*poleis* and *metropoleis*) who enjoyed the privilege of *origo* and were called κατοικοῦντες or μέτοικοι<sup>16</sup>. The same designation is used in the case of self-organised communities as well as in that of provincial towns or rural districts.<sup>17</sup> We do not know exactly to what extent corporate bodies of this type were accorded full legal representation.<sup>18</sup> However, when classed with the Ptolemaic system of associations, they seem to fall into place as legal organisations.

It is quite obvious that the Jewish dedication from Schedia was official, from which it can be concluded that the community had full public recognition. In other words, consequent on their being organised as a legal body, the Jews had royal sanction for erecting a synagogue, owning and administering public property, as well as for issuing public decrees, ψηφίσματα. It would seem that the synagogue was under royal protection as regards violation, a fact to be inferred from another inscription, probably dating from the same period, where the granting of asylum (ἀσυλία) to a synagogue somewhere in Lower Egypt<sup>19</sup> is recorded. It seems to me that the Jewish community of Schedia must in any case have been endowed with official leadership, for there is no other way of explaining the fact that it held the right to pass resolutions, as is proved in the dedication, as well as the right to implement them. Clearly, privileges conferred on them by Ptolemy III must have earned the gratitude of the Jews, a fact that emerges from the dedication, as well as from that of a similar inscription in Arsinoe-Crocodilopolis containing a dedication to the same monarch.<sup>20</sup> It has to be noted at this point that Josephus likewise cited the good relations that were obtained

<sup>15</sup> As should be inferred from other inscriptions of that time: *CIJud* II, 1441–1443; *CPJ*, III, 1532A.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. P. Jouguet, *La vie municipale dans l'Égypte Romaine*, (1911), pp. 55 ff.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. E. Bickermann, *Archiv für Papyrusforschung*, 8 (1929), pp. 234 ff.; W. Ruppel, *Philologus*, 82 (N. F. 36), p. 448, n. 289.

<sup>18</sup> See R. Taubenschlag, *The Law of Greco-Roman Egypt in the Light of the Papyri*, (1944) I pp. 43 ff. (especially p. 47).

<sup>19</sup> *CIJud* II, 1449; cf. also *CIJud* II, 1433 an inscription from Alexandria which refers probably to the same phenomenon, and see also Philo, *In Flacc.*, 48; *Legatio*, 137. For further details, v. *infra* n. 45.

<sup>20</sup> A. Vogliano, *Riv. di Filologia*, 57 (1939), pp. 247 ff.; cf. *CPJ*, II, 1532A.

between this same ruler and the Jews of Judea.<sup>21</sup> His testimony serves to reinforce the positive character of the situation described hitherto.

### ATHRIBIS—ΑΘΡΙΒΙΣ

This town is located near Benha at the southern tip of the Delta, on the Damietta Branch of the Nile, about forty-five kilometres directly north of Cairo. Three Jewish inscriptions containing references to the local synagogue<sup>22</sup> were found there:

1) *CIJud* II 1443— ὑπὲρ βασιλέως Πτολεμαίου / καὶ βασιλίσσης Κλεοπάτρας / Πτολεμαῖος Ἐπικύδου / ὁ ἐπιστάτης τῶν φυλακιστῶν / καὶ οἱ ἐν Ἀθρίβει Ἰουδαῖοι / τὴν προσευχὴν θεῷ ὑψίστῳ.

2) *CIJud* II 1444— ὑπὲρ βασιλέως Πτολεμαίου / καὶ βασιλίσσης Κλεοπάτρας / καὶ τῶν τέκνων / Ἑρμίας καὶ Φιλοτέρα ἡ γυνὴ / καὶ τὰ παιδιά τήνδε ἐξέδραν / τῷ προσευχῆ.

3) *CIJud* II 1445— This inscription is in a bad state of preservation and only the following words are decipherable:

οἱ ἐκ τῆς ... [στρα]ιωτικῆς ... ὁδὸν ... The exact date of these inscriptions is uncertain though there is a tendency to link them with Ptolemy V Epiphanes, Ptolemy VI Philometer, Ptolemy VII Physcon (Euergetes II), and even with Ptolemy IX Lathyrus, each of whom had a queen called Kleopatra. But in view of the fact that Ptolemy VI Philometer was known for his friendship towards the Jews, it seems right to assume that they date from his reign.<sup>23</sup> Mainly for linguistic reasons, I have to disagree with D. M. Lewis' contention that the second inscription is later than the first.<sup>24</sup> In my view, the word τήνδε (*CIJud* II 1444, 1.5) connects the second with the first inscription being logically and syntactically continuous with it. It is only thus that its use here can be explained. Apparently, it was recorded so as to make a distinction between the donors and their contributions, these having been mentioned separately in the inscriptions. This alone is a good enough reason for assuming that one date is implied.

<sup>21</sup> *Ap.*, 2.48; *AJ* 12. 167–179; 185.

<sup>22</sup> v. Th. Reinach, *La Communauté Juive d'Athribis*, *REJ* 17 (1888), pp. 235–238. Full bibliography is to be found in *CIJud* II, 1443–1445 and in *CPJ*. III, 1443–1445.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Th. Reinach, *op. cit.*; E. Schürer, *GJV*<sup>8</sup>, 2 p. 500; 3 p. 43; *OGI* (ed. W. Dittenberger) I 96; 101.

<sup>24</sup> D. M. Lewis, *CPJ*. II, 1444 (p. 143).

The dedication of the synagogue to the “Most High God” (in *CIJud* II 1443) is not to be related to the cult of θεὸς ὑψιστος which gained a wide footing in the Roman Empire only at a later date.<sup>25</sup> Since this epithet recurs in the Septuagint and in Jewish-Hellenistic literature<sup>26</sup> with great frequency, there is some justification in concluding that it was employed as a name for God by the Jews of Egypt too. It is, in fact, in no way surprising that yet another synagogue of the period found in Alexandria was also dedicated to θεὸς ὑψιστος.<sup>27</sup>

Some scholars have, however, unfortunately failed to grasp the meaning of the ἐξέδρα. E. R. Goodenough, to take one example, has interpreted it as the “Seat of Moses,” meaning the seat of honour in a Jewish synagogue.<sup>28</sup> In point of fact, this object, examples of which were discovered in the synagogues of Dura Europos, Chorazin and Hammath (Tiberias),<sup>29</sup> became known as “Moses’ Cathedra” only at a much later date.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, what is meant by ἐξέδρα is a hall or arcade at the front of important public buildings such as the Gymnasia.<sup>31</sup> This type of structure is frequently mentioned in the ancient lexicon on Jewish masonry, and is found in the *Mishnah* and *Tosefta*.<sup>32</sup>

It seems obvious that the Jewish community in Athribis functioned as

<sup>25</sup> On this cult, v. E. Schürer, *Sitzungsberichte der Berliner Akademie*, (1897) pp. 220–225; Robert & Skeat & Nock, *The Guild of Zeus Hypsistos HTR* 29 (1936), p. 36 ff.; F. Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le Paganisme Romain*, p. 59 ff.

<sup>26</sup> See for example: *Ge* 14:18–20, 22; *Ps* 7:18, 17:14, 49:14, 77:35, 2 *Ma.* 3:31, 3 *Ma.* 7:9, and many places in Philo’s writings as well. Cf. A. Tcherikover, *The Jews in Egypt in the Hellenistic-Roman Period in the Light of Papyrology* (1963) (Hebrew), p. 102; H. A. Wolfson, *Philo, Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism Christianity and Islam* (1948), I–II passim.

<sup>27</sup> *CIJud* II 1433.

<sup>28</sup> E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (1953) II p. 85; cf. D. M. Lewis, *CPJ* III p. 143.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Matthew 23:2; *Pesikta De-Rab Kahana* (ed. Mendelbaum), p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> S. Krauss, *Synagogale Altertümer* (1922) p. 386; E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine* (1934) pp. 57–61; cf. E. R. Goodenough, *op. cit.* III figs. 554; 568.

<sup>31</sup> v. *LSJ* s.v. Certain scholars had in mind the *pronaos* which was mentioned in a Jewish inscription from Mantinea (*REJ* 34 (1897) pp. 148–149). See further the details discussed by S. Krauss, *op. cit.* p. 350; Th. Reinach, *REJ* 17 (1888), p. 238; J. B. Frey, *CIJud.* II, 1444; P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* II p. 443, n. 773.

<sup>32</sup> *M. Ma’assereth* 3:6, *M. Erubin* 8:4, *M. Sota* 8:3, *M. Oholoth* 6:2, *T. Erubin* 8:4 (ed. Zuckermann), p. 147). For further details, see S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter in Talmud Midrasch und Targum* (1889) II pp. 44 ff.; *idem*, *Talmudische Archaeologie* I p. 52; *idem*, *Synagogale Altertümer* p. 349.

a legal body enjoying the same privileges as its “sister” community in Schedia. Furthermore, the inscriptions found in Athribis prove that the Jewish community was entitled to administer public funds as well as to solicit gifts from private donors for public use. The importance of this fact lies in the light it sheds on the controversial question of whether bodies of this kind had the right to own property, or not, in Ptolemaic Egypt.<sup>33</sup> The aspect of the Athribis inscription which is of particular interest here is that which concerns the character of the local Jews. The title carried by Ptolemy, son of Epikydes, one of the donors mentioned in *CIJud* II 1443, ὁ ἐπιστάτης τῶν φυλακῶν, a leader of φυλακῖται surely, not of φύλακες who with his subordinates was no doubt engaged by the authorities as a policeman and not as a private watchman<sup>34</sup>, has great relevance to this problem. Even though his Jewish origins are doubted by some scholars,<sup>35</sup> their arguments have to be rejected on the grounds of their being based on a popular prejudice which has minimised the military significance of the Jews. Any further cause for doubt is cleared up by Tcherikover who asks rhetorically, “Why should a non-Jew associate himself with the Jewish community in the dedication of a synagogue?”<sup>36</sup> It is true that the aforementioned individual carved out a fine career for himself as a superintendent of police, but this has no bearing at all on the religious restrictions under discussion.

Officers of this rank were usually in command of all the policemen in a certain nome (νομός)<sup>37</sup> being only second to the στρατηγός himself in police matters, and possibly in juridicial ones too.<sup>38</sup> Since Athribis was a *metropolis* (of the Athribic nome), it would seem certain that an official of such high standing would be resident there, which, in turn, would imply the existence of a Jewish unit under his command for, as a rule, officers of this kind commanded units belonging to their own ethnic

<sup>33</sup> On this question, v. R. Taubenschlag, *op. cit.* (1955) pp. 650–651.

<sup>34</sup> A. Tcherikover, *CPJ I Prolegomena* p. 17 and n. 47.

<sup>35</sup> Th. Reinach, *loc. cit.*; OGI (ed. Dittenberger) 96; and cf. E. Schürer, *GJV*, III, p. 132.

<sup>36</sup> A. Tcherikover, *op. cit.*, p. 17, n. 46.

<sup>37</sup> v. J. Lesquier, *Les institutions militaires de l'Égypte sous les Lagides* (1911) p. 262; E. R. Bevan, *A History of Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty* (1927) p. 143.

<sup>38</sup> v. J. Lesquier, *op. cit.*, p. 193; A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire des Lagides*, (1903–1907) III pp. 139–140; IV, pp. 225–231; P. Jouguet, *op. cit.* (supra n. 16) p. 53.

group.<sup>39</sup> This assumption gains support from the fact that the synagogue bears the joint dedication of the officer and the community. It appears then, that the nucleus of the local Jewish community consisted of a police unit under the command of this officer, which probably belonged to the ποταμοφυλακία too.

There does not appear to have been any difference between the regular army and the Ptolemaic police of the second century B.C.E.<sup>40</sup> The Jews of Athribis can, therefore, be regarded as κληροῦχοι in the service of the police. The location of the “Land of Onias”, the well-known Jewish military settlement, strengthens this impression. There is, too, a papyrus (*P.Oxy.500=CPJ II 448*) dated 130 C.E. which proves that the Jews were landowners in the Athribic nome. There is no doubt that their lands, confiscated after the great revolt of 115–117 C.E., came down to them through an ancient Ptolemaic inheritance. These lands, called δημοσία in the papyrus (11.13.16),<sup>41</sup> probably were once classified as γῆ ἐν ἀφέσει or more correctly, γῆ κληρουχική.

The third inscription from Athribis is the last link in the chain of proofs offered here. It hints at the military character of the local Jewish settlement in explicit terms with: οἱ ἐκ τῆς ... στρατιωτικῆς ...

The conclusion that can be drawn from this set of facts is that the communal organisation of Jewish cleruch-policemen in Athribis follows that of the κοινόν or πολίτευμα model, corresponding to other ethnic units within the Ptolemaic army.<sup>42</sup> The inscription on the Idumaeen politeuma of policemen in Memphis<sup>43</sup> gives further support to this conclusion.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *CPJ I 24* which refers to two Jewish cleruchs settled by a Jewish officer called Dositheos. We may also take into account the example of Toubias, the head of a military cleruchy in Trans-Jordan, and of course that of Onias IV and his sons, the heads of several Jewish military settlements in the so-called “Land of Onias”. Cf. also to *politeuma* of the Idumaeans in Memphis (*infra* nn. 43, 56).

<sup>40</sup> J. Lesquier, *op. cit.* pp. 260–264; A. Bouché-Leclercq, *op. cit.* IV, pp. 52–62; Grenfell & Hunt, *P. Tebt.* I App. I 550–551; F. Ubel, *Die Kleruchen Aegyptens unter den ersten sechs Ptolemäern, Abhand. d. Deutschen Akad. d. Wiss. z. Berlin* (1968) p. 37 *et. al multa.*

<sup>41</sup> Or *ager publicus* in Latin. This term referred to the land, which was confiscated from Jews, as a result of the crushing of their revolt in 115–117 C.E.

<sup>42</sup> v. for example J. Lesquier, *op. cit.*, pp. 142–155; M. Launey, *Recherches sur les armées Hellenistiques*, (1950) II pp. 106 ff.; W. Ruppel, *op. cit.* pp. 299 ff.

<sup>43</sup> OGI, 737; W. Ruppel, *op. cit.* pp. 306 ff.; M. Launey, *op. cit.* pp. 1072–1077; U. Rapaport, *Rev. de Philol.* 40 (1969), pp. 73–82; P. M. Fraser, *op. cit.* I, pp. 280–281. Cf. *infra* n. 56.



## NITRIAI—NITPIAI

Nitriai is located in the north-east of the Great Libyan Desert, in the so-called Wadi Natrun, not far from the south-western limits of the Delta. The only evidence of a local Jewish community of the Ptolemaic period is found in an honorary inscription dedicated to Ptolemy VII Euergetes II and his family. It reads thus: ὑπὲρ βασιλέως Πτολεμαίου / καὶ βασιλίσσης Κλεοπάτρας / τῆς ἀδελφῆς καὶ βασιλίσσης / Κλεοπάτρας τῆς γυναικὸς / Εὐεργετῶν οἱ ἐν Νιτρίαις / Ἰουδαῖοι τὴν προσευχὴν / καὶ τὰ συγκύροντα.<sup>44</sup>

The inscription informs us concerning appurtenances (τὰ συγκύροντα) attached to the synagogue. Unfortunately, no details that can explain the exact meaning of this term, exist. The term τὰ συγκύροντα does, however, appear again in a contemporary synagogue at Alexandria, which, since it was surrounded by a sacred enclosure (ἱερός περίβολος)<sup>45</sup> may be taken as a case corresponding to that of Nitriai. In other cases τὰ συγκύροντα seem to consist of structures such as the exedra of Athribis,<sup>46</sup> the pylon (πυλῶν) of Xenephyris,<sup>47</sup> a ritual bath and public water supply,<sup>48</sup> and possibly a communal archive,<sup>49</sup> a lodging-house,<sup>50</sup> and accommodation for the study of the Torah. We cannot be certain

<sup>44</sup> *CIJud.* II, 1442, with full bibliography.

<sup>45</sup> *CIJud.* II, 1433; cf. Philo, *In Flacc.* 48; *Legatio ad G.* 137. The existence of a sacred enclosure around the synagogue is to be inferred also from *CIJud.* II, 1449 (of an unknown place in Upper Egypt), in which the right of asylum protecting the synagogue from violation is mentioned. In addition, it is worthwhile pointing out that sacred enclosures are referred to in different Jewish communities, outside Egypt, and in later times. *V.* for example, *CIJud.* II, 738; 752; cf. E. L. Sukenik, *op. cit.* pp. 8; 22; 28; 40; 42; 49; 79; 83.

<sup>46</sup> *CIJud.* II, 1444 (discussed above).

<sup>47</sup> *CIJud.* II, 1441. As a matter of fact, the very existence of a pylon indicates that the synagogue was within an enclosure. According to the Jewish lexicon of masonry, the so-called 'gatehouse' (בֵּית־הַשַּׁעַר) was usually erected at the entrance of an enclosure, being designed for a sentry. *V.*, for example, *M. Ma'assereth* 3:6, *M. Erubin* 8:4, *M. Sota* 8:3.

<sup>48</sup> The kind of which is supposed to have been in Arsinoe-Crocodilopolis, *v. CPJ* II 432.

<sup>49</sup> The like of which is mentioned in *CPJ* II 143 as regards the Jewish community of Alexandria. This institution existed also in other communities outside Egypt; *v.* for example *CIJud.* II, 775 from Hierapolis in Phrygia.

<sup>50</sup> Like that mentioned in *CIJud.* II, 1404 τὸν ξενῶνα from a synagogue located in the Ophel (Jerusalem). Cf. C. H. Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura Europos* (1956) Final Report VII, p. 328; B. Maisler, *Iediot* 9 (1942) (Hebrew) pp. 15–16; J. Ben-Zvi, *JPOS*, 12 (1933) pp. 94–96.

that all of these were connected with the synagogue at Nitriai. In all events, the synagogue was not the only building which served the local Jews. This very fact indicates that the community was sufficiently well-organised and big enough to provide its members with communal services. In addition, the routine administration of such considerable holdings as allegedly existed in Nitriai, implies the existence of a capable local leadership.

Two questions now arise: what were the Jewish settlers in Nitriai like? and what reason had they for living in such a remote spot bordering on the desert? The answers to both lie in the geographical nature of the area in which Nitriai was located. Wadi Natrun consists of a stretch of marshland, about seventy kilometers long and five kilometers wide. Its bottom is twenty-three meters below sea level, and it contains several shallow salines, of a high salinity, with various minerals such as sodium carbonate, sodium bicarbonate, sodium chloride and some sulphates. It is no wonder that since antiquity this area has been one of the richest sources of salts in Egypt. The whole region is called by Strabo νόμος Νιτρῶντος and its saltworks and natron pits were without doubt state monopolies, at least in the Ptolemaic period.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps this fact can shed some light on the occupations of the Jewish settlers there in the middle of the second century B.C.E. They would have hardly been salt miners; for workers of this kind were for the most part condemned criminals or slaves.<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, they must have been present in the area as members of a security force, either of a police unit or of a military detachment, and their job must have been to deal with rebellions as they arose. Perhaps they were even part of the general defence system of the western border of the Delta. Jews, along with other Semitic groups in Egypt, were welcomed into the Ptolemaic desert-police, it seems; for, accustomed as they were to nomadic life, they were best able to keep raiding nomads in check.<sup>54</sup> The high percentage of Arabs in

<sup>51</sup> Str. 17.1.23; cf. Plin, *HN*, 31. 111. Even the Arab name *Wadi Natrun* still preserves the original name and its sound.

<sup>52</sup> U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge* p. 252; *idem*, *Ostraka I* p. 264; W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilization*<sup>3</sup> (1952) p. 192.

<sup>53</sup> M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*, (1953) I pp. 309; 1219–1220.

<sup>54</sup> See A. Tcherikover, *The Jews in Egypt* p. 44.

the desert police illustrates this phenomenon,<sup>55</sup> as do the Idumaeans in Memphis and Hermopolis Magna.<sup>56</sup>

Even if we have no very precise knowledge about the Jewish settlements in the Egyptian countryside during the Ptolemaic period, the matters discussed here may clarify some few aspects of the character of three Jewish communities in Lower Egypt, and their organisation.

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<sup>55</sup> A. Tcherikover, *loc. cit.*; *idem*, *CPJ*. I Proleg. p. 17 n. 47.

<sup>56</sup> OGI 737; SB. 681; 4206; 8066; cf. *supra* n. 43.