

WHERE DID THE THIRD LEGION OF
AUGUSTAN EGYPT HAVE ITS BASE?¹

*Piis Manibus Georgii Kolendo
praeceptoris et amici nostri*

Strabo, who visited Egypt between 26 and 24 BC, indicates that the Egyptian garrison of that time consisted of three legions, nine auxiliary cohorts, and three cavalry units.² Of these three legions, one stationed near the capital and two in the *chora*. The geographer informs in another place of his work that one of the *chora* legions had its quarters in Babylon,³ but gives no indications as to the base of the other *chora* legion. In 23 AD, there were only two legions in Egypt, as pointed out by Tacitus,⁴ both having Alexandria (Nikopolis) as its base. One assumes that one of the three legions, specifically the second *chora* legion, the stationing place of which is unknown to us, left the land on the Nile in the last years of Augustus or

¹ The authors wish to thank H  l  ne Cuvigny for reading an earlier version of this paper and commenting upon it.

² Strabo XVII 1, 12: ἔστι δὲ καὶ στρατιωτικῶν τρία τάγματα, ὧν τὸν ἐν κατὰ τὴν πόλιν ἴδρυται, τὰλλα δ' ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ· χωρὶς δὲ τούτων ἐννέα μὲν εἰσι σπεῖρα Ῥωμαίων, τρεῖς μὲν ἐν τῇ πόλει, τρεῖς δ' ἐπὶ τῶν ὁρῶν τῆς Αἰθιοπίας ἐν Συνήν, φρουρὰ τοῖς τόποις, τρεῖς δὲ κατὰ τὴν ἄλλην χώραν. εἰσι δὲ καὶ ἱππαρχαὶ τρεῖς ὁμοίως διατεταγμένοι κατὰ τοὺς ἐπικαίριους τόπους. 'There are three legions of soldiers, one in the city and the others in the *chora*. In addition there are nine Roman cohorts, three in the city, three on the border with Ethiopia at Syene, as a guard for those places, and three elsewhere in the *chora*. There are three horse-units which are likewise positioned in the important places'. Translation after: R. Alston, *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt. A Social History*, London – New York 1995, 28. In the translation, both the legion and three cohorts are said to be 'in the city' while in Strabo's text the cohorts station ἐν τῇ πόλει and the legion κατὰ τὴν πόλιν, which must refer to the camp in Nikopolis *ad Alexandream*.

³ Strabo XVII 1,30: ἀναπλεύσαντι δ' ἐστὶ Βαβυλῶν φρουρίον ἐρυμνόν, ἀποστάντων ἐνταῦθα Βαβυλωνίων τινῶν, εἴτα διαπραξαμένον ἐνταῦθα κατοικίαν παρὰ τῶν βασιλέων· νυνὶ δ' ἐστὶ στρατοπέδον ἐνὸς τῶν τριῶν ταγμάτων τῶν φρουρουμένων τὴν Αἴγυπτον.

⁴ *Annales* IV 5: *cetera Africae per duas legiones, parique numero Aegyptus . . . coercita.*

the first years of Tiberius. The two legions that remained in Egypt can be identified as *III Cyrenaica* and *XXII Deiotariana* thanks to documentary sources of Egyptian provenance dating from the first and beginning of the second century AD.⁵ The third ephemeral legion left no traces in the documentation at our disposal and its name is unknown to us.

The question that interests us here is where did the third legion (the second *chora* legion) of Augustan Egypt station? The most widespread opinion in present-day scholarship is that the legion was garrisoned in Thebes.⁶ This opinion was first formulated by Michael Speidel.⁷ He based his argumentation largely on a visitor's graffito in the tomb of Ramses V in the Theban Valley of Kings, left by a certain Ἀλέξανδρος, ἑπαρχὸς κάστρων Θηβῶν, who visited the place in the company of his *notarios* Isak, an Alexandrian.⁸ Speidel accepted the first century AD date given to this graffito by its editor (Jules Baillet) on palaeographic grounds and concluded that *κάστρα Θηβῶν* must be the camp of the legion under consideration.⁹ The date ascribed to this graffito by Jules Baillet is most probably false, however. The palaeography of the inscription clearly shows Late Antique traits¹⁰ and the mention of *notarios* Isak also directs us towards Late Antiquity with its already Christian population, the members of which were prone to using Biblical names. If so, *κάστρα Θηβῶν*, of which Alexandros was prefect, must refer to the military camp arranged in and around the Luxor temple in the time of the tetrarchy and not the camp of the third ephemeral legion of Augustan Egypt.

⁵ Recently, A. Coşkūn suggested that Galatian legionaries came to Egypt only towards the end of the Augustus' reign. They were incorporated into the *legio XXII* (until that time) *Cyrenaica*, which eventually changed its name to *Deiotariana*. Cf. A. Coşkūn, 'Galatische Legionäre in Ägypten: die Kontinuierung der Legio XXII Deiotariana in der frühen Kaiserzeit', *Tyche* 23 (2008), 21–46.

⁶ Thus for example V.A. Maxfield, "Where did they put the men?" An enquiry into the accommodation of soldiers in Roman Egypt', in W.S. Hanson (ed.), *The Army and Frontiers of Rome. Papers Offered to David J. Breeze on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday and His Retirement from Historic Scotland*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 74, Portsmouth, Rhode Island 2009, 66, and R. Haensch, 'The Roman army in Egypt', in Chr. Riggs (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt*, Oxford 2012, 69. Alston, *Soldier and Society*, 28, reaches a more balanced conclusion: 'it is likely that the third legion was based in Thebaid'. Livia Capponi, *Augustan Egypt. The Creation of a Roman Province*, London – New York 2005, 17–18, quotes Strabo's account without studying the point further. She says only that 'the headquarters [of the three legions] were in the newly founded camp of Nikopolis'. Apparently by inattention, among the legions 'left as a permanent garrison of the province' she listed *Legio II Traiana*.

⁷ M.P. Speidel, 'Augustus' deployment of the legions in Egypt', *CdÉ* 57 (1982), 120–124 (reprinted in M.P. Speidel, *Roman Army Studies* I, Mavors 1, Amsterdam 1984, 317–321).

⁸ J. Baillet, *Inscriptions grecques et latines des Tombeaux des Rois ou Syringes*, Cairo 1926, no. 1733.

⁹ Speidel's reasoning was accepted and developed by B. Dobson, 'Praefectus castrorum Aegypti – a reconsideration', *CdÉ* 57 (1982), 332–337, especially p. 331.

¹⁰ H. Cuvigny, 'Vibius Alexander, praefectus et épistratège de l'Heptanomie', *CdÉ* 77 (2002), 239–240.

Once the prefect Alexandros' graffito from the Valley of the Kings is eliminated as a source of information about the base of the third Augustan legion of Egypt, one has to look for other pieces of evidence, which would help to solve the problem. A hint at the solution may be found in Qasr Ibrim papyri.

Qasr Ibrim (Greek and Latin *Primis* from Meroitic *pdm*) was an important Meroitic settlement in Lower Nubia situated at the southern border of the Triakontaschoinos ('The Land of Thirty Schoinoi'), ca. 200 km to the south of the first Nile cataract. It was occupied in winter 25/4 BC by the troops of Caius Petronius, the third Roman prefect of Egypt, after rebuttal of a Meroitic attack on Philae, Syene, and Elephantine.¹¹ The Qasr Ibrim garrison consisted initially of 400 soldiers, as indicated by Strabo XVII 1, 54, but was strengthened in 22 BC in anticipation of another Meroitic attack.¹² The garrison was withdrawn to Hieras Sykaminos situated at the southern border of the Dodekaschoinos ('The Land of Twelve Schoinoi'), 120 km north of Qasr Ibrim, as a result of the so-called Samos treaty concluded between the Roman state and the Meroitic Kingdom in 21 BC.¹³

Archaeological excavations carried out on the site of Qasr Ibrim by a mission of the Egypt Exploration Society brought to light an important lot of Greek and Latin papyri connected with the Roman occupation of the site. Only a small part of these papyri has been published so far.¹⁴ In 2009, the present authors were

¹¹ For the date of the establishment of the Roman military post at Qasr Ibrim, see S. Jameson, 'Chronology of the campaigns of Aelius Gallus and C. Petronius', *JRA* 58 (1968), 71–84. Generally for the Roman occupation of Qasr Ibrim and the Roman military presence in Lower Nubia, see A.M. Demicheli, *Rapporti di pace e di guerra dell'Egitto romano con le popolazioni dei deserti africani*, Università di Genova. Fondazione Nobile Agostino Poggi 12, Milan 1976, 41–63; L.P. Kirwan, 'Rome beyond the southern Egyptian frontier', *PBA* 63 (1977), 13–31; S. Burstein, 'The Nubian campaigns of C. Petronius and George Reisner's Second Meroitic Kingdom of Napata', *ZÄS* 106 (1979), 95–105; W.Y. Adams, 'Primis and the "Aethiopian" frontier', *JARCE* 20 (1983), 93–104; W.Y. Adams, 'Ptolemaic and Roman occupation at Qasr Ibrim', in F. Gues, F. Thill (eds), *Mélanges offerts à Jean Vercoutter*, Paris 1985, 9–17; M.P. Speidel, 'Nubia's Roman garrison', *ANRW* II.10.1 (1988), 767–798; L. Török, 'Augustus and Meroe', *Orientalia Suecana* 38–39 (1989–1990), 171–190; J. Locher, 'Die Anfänge der römischen Herrschaft in Nubien und der Konflikt zwischen Rom und Meroe', *Anc.Soc.* 32 (2002), 73–133.

¹² The passage of Strabo dealing with the war between Rome and Meroe is conveniently edited, translated into English and commented in T. Eide, T. Hägg, R.H. Pierce, L. Török, *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*, vol. III, Bergen 1998, no. 190.

¹³ The date of the Roman withdrawal from Qasr Ibrim has sometimes been questioned in the scholarly literature. Some scholars believe it took place only under Tiberius. The papyri from Qasr Ibrim studied by us seem to confirm the traditional view; all dates occurring in them belong to the 8th and 9th year of Augustus (23/2 and 22/1 BC).

¹⁴ The finds of the 1974 season including three literary papyri in Greek with fragments of the Iliad and the Odyssey, seven possible literary scraps in Greek, 19 fragments of documents in Greek, and eleven fragments of documents in Latin were published in full; cf. M.E. Weinstein, E.G. Turner, 'Greek and Latin papyri from Qasr Ibrim', *JEA* 62 (1976), 115–130. Of the discoveries of the remaining seasons (1978, 1980, 1982, 1984), only elegiacs in Latin ascribed to Cornelius

granted permission by the Egypt Exploration Society to publish the remaining part of the lot.¹⁵ Our work on this material revealed 143 items, among them 102 papyri in Greek, 37 papyri in Latin, and four inscriptions on pottery, of which two are in Greek and two in Latin.¹⁶ The majority of the papyri are letters to the soldiers of the Qasr Ibrim garrison. In addition to them we have literary and sub-literary texts (fragments of book rolls and school exercises),¹⁷ and lists, including lists of deliveries and lists of soldiers.¹⁸

The letters to the soldiers of the Qasr Ibrim military post mentioned above were written mostly if not exclusively by their colleagues stationing in Egypt. One can assume that the authors and the addressees belonged to the same tactical units; however, the latter were detached from them to form the Qasr Ibrim garrison, whereas the former remained in their permanent stationing places. The letters do not give explicit information on where they were written, however, this can be implicitly understood from the greetings formula contained in them. In its full form, the formula reads as follows: ὁ δὲνα τῷ δέινῳ τῷ ἀδελφῷ πλεῖστα χαίρειν καὶ ὑγιαίνειν· εἰ ἔρρωσαι, ἔρρωμαι δὲ καὶ αὐτός σου τὴν ἀριστὴν μνεῖαν ποιούμενος παρὰ τοῖς ἐν (name of a place in dative) θεοῖς. Two places occur in the formula: Koptos and Alexandria. The capital, which, as we learn from Strabo, was the base of a legion and three auxiliary cohorts, might have provided the Qasr Ibrim garrison with both legionaries and auxiliaries. The question is now what troops were sent to Qasr Ibrim from Koptos. In the first three centuries AD, Koptos was the

Gallus, statesman and poet, the first Roman prefect of Egypt, and a private letter, also in Latin, were presented to the scholarly world. *Editio princeps* of the Gallus papyrus: R.D. Anderson, P.J. Parsons, G.M. Nisbit, 'Elegiacs by Gallus from Qasr Ibrim', *JRS* 69 (1979), 125–155. The publication of the papyrus raised a vivid discussion in the scholarly world; for a summary of the discussion, see M. Capasso, con il contributo di P. Radiciotti, *Il ritorno di Cornelio Gallo – Il papiro di Qasr Ibrim venticinque anni dopo*, Lecce 2004. An overview of the later discussions is given by Paola Gagliardi, 'Rassegna bibliografica sul papiro di Gallo (2004–2012)', *Papyrologia Lupiensia* 20–21 (2011–12), 217–243. *Editio princeps* of the Latin letter: P. Rain. Cent. 164 (P. Parsons).

¹⁵ Our work on the papyri was financed by the National Science Centre (NCN) of the Republic of Poland.

¹⁶ For a preliminary presentation of results, see T. Derda, A. Łajtar, 'Greek and Latin papyri from the Egypt Exploration Society excavations at Qasr Ibrim: A testimony to the Roman army in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia in the first years of Augustus', in P. Schubert (ed.), *Actes du 26^e Congrès international de papyrologie, Genève, 16–21 août 2010*, Geneva 2012, 183–186; T. Derda, A. Łajtar, 'Roman occupation of Qasr Ibrim as reflected in Greek papyri from the site', in J. Hagen, J. van der Vliet (eds), *Qasr Ibrim, between Egypt and Africa. Proceedings of the Leiden Conference, December 2009*, Leuven 2013, 105–110.

¹⁷ Cf. T. Derda, A. Łajtar, 'P. Qasr Ibrim inv. 80/11: A testimony to the Zenodotos' edition of the *Iliad*?', in R. Ast et alii (eds), *Papyrological Texts in Honor of Roger S. Bagnall*, American Studies in Papyrology 53, Durham 2012, 75–78.

¹⁸ T. Derda, A. Łajtar, T. Plóciennik, 'Three lists of soldiers on papyrus found in Qasr Ibrim', in A. Tomas (ed.), *Ad fines imperii Romani. Studia Thaddaeo Sarnowski septuagenario ab amicis, collegis discipulisque dedicata*, Warsaw 2015, 47–57.

base of various auxiliary units.¹⁹ The same might have held true already for the early Augustan period, in which case the soldiers from Koptos in the Qasr Ibrim garrison would have been only auxiliaries. However, letters dispatched from Koptos to Qasr Ibrim seem to concern legionaries rather than auxiliaries. This is most clearly demonstrated by a letter addressed to a certain Caesius, a *bucinator*, by Licinius, most probably also a trumpeter.²⁰

Recto

Λικίνιος Κασιῶ τῷ ἀδελφῷ πλεῖστα
χαίρειν καὶ ὑγιαίνει[τιν]· εἰ ἔρρωσαι, ἔρρωμ-
αι δὲ καὶ αὐτός σου τὴν ἀριστὴν μνή-
4 αν ποιούμενος διὰ παντός ἐπ' ἀγ[γ]α-
θῷ παρὰ τοῖς θεοῖς τοῖς ἐν Κόπτῳ·
ἐρωτῶ σοὶ μὴ με [μν]ήσῃς ὅτι πυ-
κνά σοι οὐ γράφω ἀλ[λὰ] ἐλπίζω ὅ-
8 τι κοστοτε . . . [. . .]α πυκνότε-
ρά σοι γράψω· καὶ ἐπε . . . ος εἰς
Ἀλεξάνδρεαν ἀπ[ηλθ]ον πε-
ρι τοῦ κώδωνος ὃν μοι ἐνετείλου·
12 σύσκηνος [. . .] πειράσο-
μαί πω εἰ[. . .]εται σὺ κώδω-
να. καὶ ἀπέ[στ]ειλά σοι ἐπιστό-
λιον. πρῶτο[ν] διασάφησόν μοι
16 εἰ σὺ ἠνέχθη[ς]. καὶ γράψον μοι πῶς
ἔχεις καὶ ἂν [τι] χρεάν[υ]· ἔχεις. ἀσπά-
ζου Νίχρον [σα]λπιστὴν λίαν. ἐπιμε-
λῶς ἔσται εἰ ἔ[χης] παρὰ Ἑρωτος τοῦ
20 σαλπιστοῦ, [δι]ασάφησόν μοι. ἀσπά-
ζου σὺ δὴ [κ]αὶ πάντες τοὺς σαλ-
πιστάς. ἔρρω[σ()].

Verso

Λικίνιος Κασιῶ βουκινάτωρι
εἰς(ς) Πρίμα

3–4. μνεῖαν 17. χρεῖαν ἔχης 17–18. ἀσπάζου 18. Νίγρον 21. πάντας 21–22. σαλπιστάς

¹⁹ For a collection of evidence and discussion, see Alston, *Soldier and Society*, 165–189, and V.A. Maxfield, 'The deployment of the Roman auxilia in Upper Egypt and the Eastern Desert during the Principate', in G. Alföldy, B. Dobson, W. Eck (eds), *Kaiser, Herr und Gesellschaft in der römischen Kaiserzeit. Gedenkschrift für Eric Birley*, Heidelberger althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien 31, Stuttgart 2000, 407–444.

²⁰ What follows is only a text and a translation of the papyrus; for a complete edition, see T. Derda, A. Łajtar, T. Plóciennik, *Roman Army in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia in the First Years of Augustus. Greek and Latin Papyri from Qasr Ibrim*, forthcoming.

Licinius to Caesius, a brother, many greetings and wishes of health. If you keep your health, I am well too, and am doing best remembrance of you in everything for the good before the gods that are in Koptos. I am asking you do not remember me that I do not have written to you often but I am hoping to write you more often [- - -]. And [- - -] I came to Alexandria because of a trumpet that you asked me about. [- - -] a tent-companion [- - -] I will try [- - -] you the trumpet. And I sent you a letter [- - -]. Let me know first if you succeeded. Write me about how are you and if you need something [- - -]. Greet Niger, a trumpeter, very much. It would be interesting (to know) if you have (this) from Eros the trumpeter. Let me know. Greet all trumpeters. Remain in health.

Licinius to Caesius, a trumpeter, to Prima.

The letter obviously comes from the circle of military musicians.²¹ It makes known a group of at least five trumpeters, of which four occur with their names and some further are mentioned anonymously (in plural) in the final greeting formula. The trumpeters occurring in the document seem to know each other well, which suggests that they belonged to the same tactical unit. This could have only been a legion, as there is no place for five (or even more) trumpeters in an auxiliary unit.²² The onomastics of the men, with the *nomina gentilia* Licinius and Caesius borne by the sender and the addressee respectively, seems to confirm this supposition.²³

If the soldiers mentioned in the letter were indeed legionaries, one would have to conclude that Koptos was the base of a legion in the early Augustan period, and this could only have been the third (the second in the *chora*) legion of Strabo. One has to observe that Koptos as a base of the legion is much more reasonable than Thebes. The latter town was heavily damaged during the suppression of the

²¹ For Roman military musicians, see P. Cauer, 'De aeneatoribus, bucinatoribus, cornicinibus, tubicinibus', *Ephemeris epigraphica* IV (1881), 374–378; F. Behn, 'Die Musik im römischen Heere', *Mainzer Zeitschrift* 5/2 (1912), 36–47; F. Fleischhauer, 'Bucina und Cornu', *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift* (. . .) Halle-Wittenberg 9 (1960), 501–504; B. Janda, 'Blechblasinstrumente des römischen Heeres', *Listy Filologické* 16 (1973), 217–232 (in Czech with German summary); M.P. Speidel, 'Eagle-bearer and trumpeter. The eagle-standard and trumpets of the Roman legions illustrated by three tombstones recently found at Byzantion', *Bonner Jahrbücher* 176 (1976), 123–162 (reprinted in Speidel, *Roman Army Studies* I, 3–43); R. Meucci, 'Roman military instruments and the lituus', *The Galpin Society Journal* 42 (1989), 85–97; J. Ziolkowski, 'The Roman bucina: a distinct musical instrument', *Historic Brass Society Journal* 14 (2002), 31–58.

²² Of course one can argue that the trumpeters were soldiers of various tactical units but knew each other through the very fact of belonging to the Qasr Ibrim garrison. This argument is not valid, however, as, at the moment of the letter's coming into existence, part of them was in Qasr Ibrim and part (at least the sender of the letter under discussion) in Koptos.

²³ Niger and Eros must have been *cognomina* of the men whose *nomina gentilia* remain unknown to us. The form Νῦρρσ is an interesting and rare example of the interchange of aspirated and voiced stops, for which see F.Th. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, *Testi e documenti per lo studio dell'antichità* 55, vol. I: *Phonology*, Milan 1976, 96 (for velars only one example quoted).

revolt of 90–88 BC and lost most of its former prestige, as observed by Pausanias (I 9,3). In contrast to Thebes, Koptos rose in importance in Late-Ptolemaic/Early-Roman times, mainly in connection with its key position in the exploitation of the Eastern Desert and the Far-Eastern trade. Installing the legion in Koptos during the organization of Egypt as a province, Romans would have assured both the peace in Upper Egypt and the smooth functioning of trade routes in the desert.

That Koptos hosted Roman troops in the Augustan period is known from elsewhere. A Latin inscription discovered in Koptos in a secondary context commemorates the construction of cisterns (*lacci*) by the road leading from Koptos to Myos Hormos and Berenike, and the renovation of the military camp in Koptos by the forces of detachments from the entire Egyptian garrison amounting at some 1400 men.²⁴ This operation took place in the last years of Augustus or under Tiberius, but already after the third legion left Egypt, for the inscription mentions legionaries of only two Egypt-based legions.²⁵ Perhaps the camp in question was the camp of the third Egyptian legion just abandoned by it and now prepared to house another unit, this time an auxiliary one.

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²⁴ CIL III, Suppl. 1 (1902), no. 6627 = ILS I 2483 = E. Breccia, *Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée d'Alexandrie*, Nos. 4–568. *Iscrizioni greche e latine*, Cairo 1911, no. 179 = I.Portes 56. An up-to-date commentary to the inscription is found in H. Cuvigny (ed.), *La route de Myos Hormos. L'armée romaine dans le désert Oriental d'Égypte*, vol. II, Fouilles de l'Ifao 48/2, Cairo 2003, 267–273 (by H. Cuvigny); see also D.L. Kennedy, 'The composition of a military work party in Roman Egypt (ILS 2483: Koptos)', *JEA* 71 (1985), 156–160.

²⁵ The date of the inscription was a matter of controversy. Some scholars believed it came from the second half of the first century AD. The Augustan date, now commonly accepted, was first suggested by Mommsen.