

# Visibility and Violence in Petitions from Roman Egypt

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THE STUDY OF VIOLENCE and violent behavior is of special sociological import. At moments of conflict, as anthropologist Anton Blok has noted, core values are disputed and interpreted;<sup>1</sup> status and position, which on a daily basis are often tacitly assumed and unarticulated, can be highlighted and reified into positive rights and duties—such as the ability to be free from insult, the duty of others to respect one’s personal territory, or the right to bring offenders to justice and have them punished. When disputes turn violent the stakes are raised: personal integrity can be threatened, challenged, or violated, and one’s position within a community can be endangered.

From Roman Egypt—defined for the purpose of this paper as the period from Augustus to Justinian—we have numerous accounts of violent behavior, especially in the form of petitions for redress by legal authorities.<sup>2</sup> These petitions come from

<sup>1</sup> A. Blok, “The Meaning of ‘Senseless’ Violence,” in *Honour and Violence* (Oxford 2001) 103–114.

<sup>2</sup> Complete lists of petitions for the later Roman Empire can be found in B. Kramer, “P.Strasb.inv. 1265 + P.Strasb. 296 Recto: Eingabe wegen ΑΝΔΡΑΠΟΔΙΣΜΟΣ (= *plagium*) und ΣΥΛΗΞΙΣ (= *furtum*),” *ZPE* 69 (1987) 155–161, and J.-L. Fournet and J. Gascou, “Liste des pétitions sur papyrus des V<sup>e</sup>–VII<sup>e</sup> siècles,” in D. Feissel and J. Gascou (eds.), *La pétition à Byzance* (Paris 2001) 141–196; other lists can be found in J. E. G. Whitehorne, “Petitions to the Centurion: a Question of Locality?” *BASP* 41 (2004) 155–170, for petitions to centurions; J. D. Thomas, *The Epistrategos in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* II (Cologne 1982), for petitions to the *epistrategos*; A. di Bitonto, “Le petizioni al re. Studio sul formulario,” *Aegyptus* 47 (1968) 53–107, for the Ptolemaic period generally; and H.-A. Rupprecht, “Straftaten und Rechtschutz nach den griechischen Papyri der ptolemäischen Zeit,” in M. Gagarin (ed.), *Symposion 1990* (Cologne 1991) 139–148, at 141–144, on violence. For subscriptions from officials see R. Haensch, “Die Bearbeitungsweisen von Petitionen in der Provinz Aegyptus,” *ZPE* 100 (1994) 487–

victims of violence within days of the attack, and are directed to a variety of legal authorities and occasionally ecclesiastical authorities at both the local and provincial level. In these petitions, the offended individual dictates to a scribe a narrative of the events that caused his or her suffering, and through a variety of formulaic addresses and requests asks sources of legal authority to intervene in his or her affairs. To use the term of Natalie Zemon Davis, petitioners create “fictions”—that is, they take care to shape individual instances of violence into narratives.<sup>3</sup> Through retelling the events in question, petitioners present the information that they see as relevant to their case, as well as what they think will be convincing to legal authorities. The records that preserve these fictions reflect a delicate balance between describing individual suffering in a general sense and making a formal and specific legal complaint (about violence, theft, or trespass, for example). Petitioners had to compose within the bounds of a certain legal genre and present legally actionable issues if magistrates were to take their complaints seriously. At the same time, their narratives had to be rhetorically effective, conveying sufficient pathos to substan-

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545. On petitions, see generally J. White, *The Form and Structure of the Official Petition* (Missoula 1972); D. W. Hobson, “The Impact of Law on Village Life in Roman Egypt,” in B. Halpern and D. W. Hobson (eds.), *Law, Politics, and Society in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Sheffield 1993) 193–219; and the essays collected in Feissel and Gascou, *La pétition*. On legal aspects of violence the early treatments of R. Taubenschlag, *Das Strafrecht im Rechte der Papyri* (Leipzig/Berlin 1916), and *The Law of Greco-Roman Egypt in the Light of the Papyri*<sup>2</sup> (Warsaw 1955), are seminal but in need of revision. The early discussions of violence in Egypt by B. Baldwin, “Crime and Criminals in Graeco-Roman Egypt,” *Aegyptus* 43 (1963) 256–263, and R. W. Davies, “The Investigation of Some Crimes in Roman Egypt,” *AncSoc* 4 (1973) 199–212, are highly problematic. More up-to-date but preliminary are R. S. Bagnall, “Official and Private Violence in Roman Egypt,” *BASP* 26 (1989) 201–216; Hobson, in *Law*; and R. Alston, “Violence and Social Control in Roman Egypt,” in A. Bülow-Jakobsen (ed.), *Proc. XX<sup>th</sup> Inter. Congr. Papyrol.* (Copenhagen 1994) 517–521. Most importantly, the recent dissertation of B. Kelly, *The Repression of Violence in the Roman Principate* (diss. Oxford 2003), collects evidence and bibliography and responds directly to a number of concerns presented in earlier work.

<sup>3</sup> N. Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford 1987) 2–3.

tiate petitioners' claims that they did, in fact, need immediate legal attention. As such, they offer the scholar a complex and problematic but nonetheless rich and rewarding data set for understanding social life in the Egyptian countryside.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, these narratives, though mediated through scribal traditions, allow social historians to understand how individuals interpreted violence and conflict, how they ordered their legal appeals, what they chose to highlight and to omit. This paper concentrates on one aspect of these narratives, the focus on visible wounds and public humiliation. The focus of petitioners on the visual aspects is important, I argue, not only because these visible cues are evidence of violence, but also because they serve as a lasting reminder of personal defeat and humiliation, available to the eyes of others, provoking comment and begetting stigma.<sup>5</sup> When bruises and scars are on public display, the viewing public can wonder what the victim is going to do to save face and preserve his or her integrity; the victim, as part of a face-saving ritual, turns to law and authority, and asks for redress.

The importance of visible injury, and the consequent exposure to public view, was a central concern in petitions from Egypt. Visibility was especially important as a motif in that it was a discourse that was accessible to all free individuals in a society. Current scholarship often overlooks the importance of the kinds of rhetoric that were available to all, preferring to see the world of the Roman Empire as a highly structured, hierarchical universe, where all individuals knew their place. The early treatments of violence in the papyri sought to understand how violence functioned within these hierarchies. Thus in his

<sup>4</sup> Petitions are, for T. Bisson, *Tormented Voices: Power, Crisis, and Humanity in Rural Catalonia, 1140–1200* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1998), “memorials of complaint,” esp. 1–7, 76. On Bisson, see J. G. Keenan, “‘Tormented Voices’: *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67002,” in J.-L. Fournet (ed.), *Colloque international sur les archives de Dioscore d’Aphrodite* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> This idea of stigma is derived from E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs 1963). On the importance of wounds and stigma, see the extended meditation of W. I. Miller, *An Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge 2006), who draws primarily on the early Near Eastern and Icelandic material.

important early study of violence in Roman Egypt, Roger Bagnall attempted to find instances where individuals complained of violence that cut across these hierarchies; he found very few. Deborah Hobson's valuable contribution on the "Impact of Law on Village Life" likewise sought to explain violence and petitions as a result of the differentials in status and access that were endemic in village life.<sup>6</sup> While both of these studies were critical for opening up the discussion of the violence in Egypt, the next step is to ask about the validity of these hierarchies themselves for how an individual living in the Egyptian *chora* saw his or her world. We can suspect that the individual living in the *chora* placed him or herself in the world in a way that was very different from the rhetoric of the Roman senator or jurist: rather than seeing a world of hierarchy and status, the rhetoric of injury in petitions points to a world in which individual position and dignity was in a constant state of evaluation by all.

<sup>6</sup> Bagnall, *BASP* 26 (1989) 201–216; Hobson, in *Law, Politics, and Society* 193–219. Some have conjectured that petitioners did not actually expect to receive any sort of follow-through by local officials: N. Lewis, "Judiciary Routines in Roman Egypt," *BASP* 37 (2000) 83–93, at 92, stated that "The existence of a single judiciary provided a single process for all, but that did not *ipso facto* dispense equal justice for all. Roman Egypt was a class-driven and class-ridden society." Hobson, in *Law, Politics, and Society* 212: "though the imperial legal system was omnipresent to the little villager, as a source of authority and obligation, it is unlikely to have functioned very effectively as a source of protection and a guarantee of his personal rights"; cited with approval by M. Peachin, "Petition to a Centurion from the NYU Papyrus Collection and the Question of Informal Adjudication Performed by Soldiers," in A. J. B. Sirks and K. A. Worp (eds.), *Papyri in Memory of P. J. Sijpesteijn* (Oakville 2007) 79–97, at 96. This may be the case, but the *belief* that things were otherwise is in some ways more powerful than the fact. *P.Yale* I 61 (A.D. 209) records the prefect Subatianus Aquila dealing with more than 1800 petitions from the Arsinoite nome itself during his *conventus*. It is impossible for me to conceive that these were all from the upper echelons of society. For a more balanced view on the possibility of obtaining justice, see H. Cotton, "The Guardianship of Jesus Son of Babatha: Roman and Local Law in the Province of Arabia," *JRS* 83 (1993) 94–108, at 107, and C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 2000) 73–80; with reference to the evidence from Egypt, J. Harries, "Resolving Disputes: The Frontiers of Law in Late Antiquity," in R. Mathisen (ed.), *Law, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 2001) 68–82.

Individuals at all levels of the hierarchy could be damaged by public wounds; this is precisely why violence is such a threat. Similarly, this explains why petitioners are often clear that they hope to use the legal system to pursue their complaints, and why petitions concerning violence mostly come within a day or two of the attack itself.<sup>7</sup> This is not to deny the realities of stratification, but rather to question the effect of these realities on the perceptions of the individuals.

Throughout this paper I preserve a distinction between the “facts” of a violent encounter and the narratives that are the products of these encounters. At the moment of a violent encounter, fists may be swung in the direction of any target, or in the direction of a particularly painful or accessible target—like the face, head, or genitals. The ordering and highlighting of the “facts” in a legal complaint, however, is a cultural product. As such, it draws upon a symbolic vocabulary of insult, presenting images that have a resonance in a given community. That is to say, there is nothing *prima facie* “natural” in a description of violence, nor are certain actions intrinsically humiliating. Actions are humiliating only in socio-cultural context.<sup>8</sup> It is worth comparing the description of violence in two different chronological and geographical contexts. In a valuable study of sixteenth-century Italy, for example, Thomas Cohen has characterized violent actions as a “lay liturgy of affront,” and pointed out that the Italians of the sixteenth century located honor in the head first, then the heart, finally in the hands and

<sup>7</sup> See Kelly, *Repression* 81, on the timing of petitions and the sorts of recompense that were desired. On subsequent legal processes (especially the request to have one’s opponents “arrested”), there is a lengthy debate on the “Orders to Arrest”: see A. Bülow-Jakobsen, “Orders to Arrest: P.Haun. inv. 33 and 54, and a Consolidated List,” *ZPE* 66 (1986) 93–98; T. Gagos and P. J. Sijpestein, “Towards an Explanation of the Typology of the So-Called ‘Orders to Arrest’,” *BASP* 33 (1996) 77–97; R. S. Bagnall and F. Mitthoff, “Order to Send a Person,” in H. Harrauer and R. Pintaudi (eds.), *Gedenkschrift Ulrike Horak* (Florence 2004) I 59–62; and J. G. Keenan, “Criminal Procedure,” in J. G. Manning, U. Yiftach-Faranko, J. G. Keenan (eds.), *Law and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt: Law in a Multi-Ethnic Society* (Cambridge forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> This is the main point of Blok, “The Meaning of ‘Senseless’ Violence.”

legs. As such, these were discussed as the targets of violence in a discourse which emphasized the stripping of honor from a victim.<sup>9</sup> To take a very different example from the Roman literary tradition: in a letter laced with irony, Pliny the Younger presents a narrative of the death of the senator Larcus Macedo, who died after being attacked by his own slaves while he was in the bath:

He was bathing in his villa at Formiae. Suddenly slaves surrounded him. One of them grabbed his throat while another one beat his face, another beat his chest and belly, and also—horrible to say—pounded his private parts.<sup>10</sup>

Pliny's description of the assault on Macedo is presented through the lens of privacy and vulnerability (both literally and figuratively); it is made more horrifying by playing on fears that are endemic in slave systems. The slaves' violation of Macedo deprives him of certain protections to his body that are guaranteed by his rank, and they do this by harming him in places that are off limits to others. The fact of the violence is that Macedo has been beaten to the extent that he will die shortly thereafter; the cultural product that emerges from the violence works at the symbolic level by manipulating notions of class, rank, and dignity. For Pliny the lesson is that slaves are wretched and brutal, and masters are exposed to this on an ongoing basis: "you see," he writes to Acilius, "the extent of the dangers, insults, and wantonness to which we are exposed" (*vides quot periculis quot contumeliis quot ludibriis simus obnoxii*).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> T. V. Cohen, "The Lay Liturgy of Affront in Sixteenth-Century Italy," *Journal of Social History* 25 (1992) 856–877, at 863–864.

<sup>10</sup> *Ep.* 3.14.2: *lavabatur in villa Formiana. repente eum servi circumstant. alius fauces invadit, alius os verberat, alius pectus et ventrem, atque etiam—foedum dictu—verenda contundit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ep.* 3.14.5. On Macedo and the dynamics of slave resistance, see K. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge 1994) 111–116. It would be a valuable exercise to compare the types of violence described in the torture scenes of martyr narratives with the sorts of violence discussed in either the legal or the papyrological sources. On judicial violence generally see the provocative discussion of M. Gleason, "Truth Contests and Talking Corpses," in J. Porter (ed.), *Constructions of the Classical Body* (Ann Arbor 1999) 287–313; on vengeance and the importance of viewing murdered bodies in

In what follows I argue that in Egypt there was a very different system of understanding violence and insult. The emphasis on rank and status that are such pressing concerns in the Latin legal and literary sources are almost completely absent in petitions.<sup>12</sup> In the rare instances in which status is emphasized, it is emphasized once by a Roman veteran,<sup>13</sup> and once (paradoxically) in a petition of an extremely low-status individual (a cemetery watchman) who petitions against other cemetery watchmen.<sup>14</sup> More commonly, petitioners claim that the higher

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the Roman Republic, see Y. Thomas, “Se venger au forum: solidarité familiale et procès criminel à Rome,” in R. Verdier and J.-P. Poly (eds.), *La Vengeance: études d’ethnologie, d’histoire et de philosophie* (Paris 1984) 65–100, at 71–72.

<sup>12</sup> See Gaius *Inst.* 3.225: *atrox autem iniuria aestimatur vel ex facto ... uel ex persona, ueluti si magistratus iniuriam passus fuerit, uel senatori ab humili persona facta sit iniuria*; see also *P.Oxy.* XII 1406 (A.D. 213–217). On status and violence in the papyri, crucial are Bagnall, *BASP* 26 (1989) 201–216, and *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993), esp. 172; on status and access to legal institutions, see recently J. Harries, “Violence, Victims, and the Legal Tradition in Late Antiquity,” in H. A. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices* (Hampshire 2006) 85–102; on status distinctions in the judgment of *iniuria*, see P. Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1970), esp. 198–203.

<sup>13</sup> Thus the petition of Gaius Apollinarius Niger, a Roman veteran living in Karanis, who complains that he has suffered violence “at the hands of an Egyptian” (ἵβριν] πέπονθα ὑπὸ ἀνθρώπου Αἰγυπτίου and ἀξιῶ ἄνθρωπος Ῥωμαῖος τ[οιαῦτα παθὼν ὑπὸ Αἰγυπτίου, *SB* XXIV 16252.5, 29–30, A.D. 163). The text is problematic. Originally published as *P.Mich.Mchl.* 12 [*SB* XII 11114], it was re-edited by P. J. Sijpestein, “Complaint to the Epistrategus Vedius Faustus,” *ZPE* 110 (1996) 183–187, who found a photograph of what is probably the first part of the document. However, Sijpestein notes that the top and bottom parts cannot be joined, so there is a section of uncertain length missing from the *narratio*. I work here from the text of Sijpestein. For background on this family, see R. Alston, *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt: A Social History* (London/New York 1995) 129–133. Another possible mention of “Egyptian” status comes as a vague reference in a letter: *P.Oxy.* XLII 3061.13 (I A.D.).

<sup>14</sup> *Chrest.Mitt.* 63 (= *P.Grenf.* II 78, A.D. 307), which uses the language of status but ultimately is more concerned with the preservation of freedom in a case of what might be debt-slavery. On the status of the petitioner, see H. C. Youtie, “Notes on O. Mich. I,” *TAPA* 71 (1940) 623–659, at 650–659. Another example of the emphasis on the question of status and violence is

status of assailants is a *cause* of violence.<sup>15</sup> Though this is surely a rhetorical device,<sup>16</sup> it is nonetheless an important clue for understanding how individuals in Egypt understood social hierarchies. More salient for petitioners, it appears, is not the distinction between individuals of varying status, but rather the distinction between free and slave, which is emphasized in both individual complaints and also by local officials when they adjudicate concerning violence or discuss the penalties that can be imposed on individuals.<sup>17</sup> The discourse on visibility and public humiliation contrasts neatly with Pliny's emphasis on damage to *verenda* by slaves. It is also, crucially, a discourse accessible to all free individuals in a society.

Before considering the papyrological evidence in greater detail, it is necessary to limit the scope of the discussion somewhat. Violence is a word that has tremendous lexical range in modern discourse: it can extend from fistfights at one end of the spectrum to general ideas of coercion and even to harassment of individual conscience at the other end.<sup>18</sup> But this broad definition is fundamentally a modern one. Egyptians recog-

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found not in a legal document, but in a strange and problematic personal letter: *SB XII* 10841. For the text and its interpretation I have benefited much from J. R. Rea, "Two Christian Letters," *ChrEg* 45 (1970) 357–368, at 363–368. There is also commentary in M. Naldini, *Il cristianesimo in Egitto. Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli II–IV* (Florence 1968) no. 64.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. *P.Cair.Goodsp.* 15.19–20 (A.D. 362), θαρρῶν ὁ αὐτὸς Ἰσακὶς τοῖς χρήμασι αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῦ πλούτου βούλεται μ[α]λὶ ἐξελάσαι ἀπὸ τῆς κόμης; *P.Sakaon* 36.15–16 (A.D. 280), [εἰσεπήδησε βο]υλόμενος ὁ Συρίων καὶ ἀφαρπάξειν τὰ τῶν [νηπίων μου τέ]κνων τῇ τοπικῇ δυναστείᾳ χρώμενος. Similarly *P.Kell.* I 23 (A.D. 353), which contains a number of statements about power and status; *PSI VIII* 872 (VI A.D.).

<sup>16</sup> Bagnall, *BASP* 26 (1989) 211–212.

<sup>17</sup> On penalties: *P.Oxy.* IX 1186 (IV A.D.). Adjudication of violence: *P.Lips.* I 40.ii.20–21 (IV–V A.D.). Petitioners concerned with distinctions between free and slave: *P.Wisc.* I 33 (A.D. 147), *Chrest.Mitt.* 63 (A.D. 307); similarly *P.Oxy.* L 3581.10 (IV–V A.D.), a petition concerning a divorce, in which the violent behavior of a husband is defined as ἀνελεύθερα πράγματα.

<sup>18</sup> B Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London 2000), is helpful in contextualizing the history of the modern definitions of violence.



nized—and discussed—only one kind of violence, namely, violence against the person and his or her reputation, generally defined in the papyri as *hybris* or one of its cognate forms (*hybrizein*, *exubrizein*), though some complaints simply speak of blows (*plegai*).<sup>19</sup> The ways in which *hybris* is used in the papyri tracks closely with definitions of *iniuria* in Roman law, though the papyri tend to use a more circumscribed territory of the definition than the legal codes which permit actions on *iniuria* done either through physical violence or through defamation and slander, uses of the term which are largely absent from the papyri.<sup>20</sup> It is also important that we distinguish *hybris* from *bia*, which refers to what we would understand as violence against property, forced appropriation of goods, or coercion and duress.<sup>21</sup> It is when we begin from this relatively narrow definition that important patterns can be extracted from the evidence.

Among the papyri there are several documents that focus on violence to the head and face. *Chrest.Mitt.* 126 (= *P.Amh.* 141) is a petition from Aurelia Thasis of Hermoupolis Magna (IV

<sup>19</sup> Taubenschlag, *Law* 440–441, understands two senses of *hybris*, a wider and a narrower, with the narrower including *plegai*; see also Rupprecht, in *Symposion* 142. What, if any, difference there is between these two terms is still unclear; in my view, *plegai* are a specific instance of *hybris*, but both are legally actionable in an identical fashion. In the discussion that follows I focus exclusively on low-level violent interactions between individuals; riots and banditry fall outside the scope of the present discussion and deserve to be treated as separate phenomena. On banditry, see the discussion of W. Riess, *Apuleius und die Räuber: Ein Beitrag zu historischen Kriminalitätsforschung* (Stuttgart 2001).

<sup>20</sup> References to *iniuria* in Latin are absent from the papyri; the closest example is a restoration in *C.Gloss.Biling.* 10 on Aesop *Fabulae* 264: [*iniuriantur*] = ὑβριζοῦνται. On *iniuria* in Roman law see M. Kaser, *Das römische Privatrecht* I (Munich 1971) 26, and the extended discussion of M. Hagemann, *Iniuria: Von den XII-Tafeln bis zur justinianischen Kodifikation* (Cologne 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Taubenschlag, *Law*, preserves the outline of this distinction, but breaks these two categories into more subcategories than the evidence itself will allow; see W. Dahmann, *H BIA im Recht der Papyri* (diss. Cologne 1968), for *bia*. Dahmann essentially follows Taubenschlag's method. On the strict application of Roman legal categories to the Egyptian evidence, see R. S. Bagnall, "Response to Hans-Albert Rupprecht," in *Symposion* 149–152, and Keenan, in *Law and Justice*.

A.D.):

[πα]ρὰ Αὐρηλία[ς Θαήσι]ος Παθερμουθί[ο]ν ἀπὸ κώμης Πεννη[. τοῦ] ὑπὸ σὲ πάγου. ὁ ὁμο[γνήσι]ός μου ἀδελφ[ὸς . .]σσοσ συνοικ[εῖ μοι] καὶ μηδεμία[ς ἀμ]φισβητήσεως [οὔσης] πρὸς ἀλλή[λους ἐ]κ [τυ]υχόντων ἐπήλ[θεν] μοι μετὰ τῆς [συ]μβίου αὐτοῦ Ῥίας, καὶ [κατ]ενεγκότες εἰς τὸ ἔδαφος πληγαῖς ἱκαναῖς με κατέκτει[να]ν γρόνθοις τε καὶ λακτί[σ]μασιν καθ' ὅλων τῶν σωμάτων καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ὤψεών μου τὰ οἰδήματα φαίνεται, ἡμθανῆ καταστήσαντες, οὐδὲν ἦττον [κα]ὶ τὴν περὶ ἐμὲ ἐσθήτα περιέσχισαν. [ὄ]θ[ε]ν οὐ δυναμένη ἀφησυχάσαι γυνὴ [ἀσθε]νῆς καὶ χήρα ἐπιδίδωμι τῇ ἐπεικεία [σο]ν τάδε τὰ βιβλία [μο]ν τοσοῦτο μαρτυραμένη [κ]αὶ ἀξιούσα τῆς παρὰ σοῦ ἐκδικίας τυχεῖν.

from Aurelia Thaesis daughter of Patermouthios from the town of Penne-- in your pagus. My brother from the same parents --ssos lives with me and we have never had a quarrel among ourselves. He attacked me along with his wife Ria. They knocked me on the ground with their fearsome blows and nearly killed me with their punches and kicks all over my body, and there are bruises appearing on my face. They knocked me half-dead, and what is more, they tore my clothes. Thus, not being able to keep silent about this, since I am a weak and widowed woman I submit this petition to you telling you about such things and asking that I receive justice from you.

Thaesis' petition incorporates a number of features found in other petitions concerning violence, such as references to being "half-dead" and having her clothes torn.<sup>22</sup> What is important, however, is that the way in which she frames the violence is by contrasting the attack as a whole to the specific manifestations of the violence. She claims that she was beaten "all over my body," but specifies the locus of the wounds as the face, which is presented not simply as a target of the violence but as proof of it as well. Perhaps not accidentally the term used for "bruises" (*oidemata*) is otherwise found exclusively in doctors' reports from Egypt, not in petitions.

Damage to the face is specified in another petition as well, the somewhat fragmentary *Chrest.Mitt.* 127 (= *P.Lips.* I 39, A.D.

<sup>22</sup> Another instance of tearing of clothes will be discussed below. Being "half-dead" (ἡμθανῆς): *P.Abinn.* 46.4 (A.D. 343), *Chrest.Mitt.* 126.13 (A.D. 350), *P.Lips.* I 37.22 (A.D. 389).

390), in which Aurelia Demetria describes an ongoing conflict with a man whose name is not preserved. She claims that there had been some sort of prior legal proceeding between the two of them, and despite the decision he broke into her home and “beat me mercilessly and broke my hands and as a result I also have on my cheeks from all of the [blows? ...]” (τύψας με [ἀν]ελεῶς κλά[σα]ς καὶ χεῖράν μου ὡς καὶ τὰ ὑπώπια ἔχω ἀφ’ ὄλων τῶν ὠ[...]).<sup>23</sup> The references to the cheeks and face in these two petitions may perhaps be understood as a reference to “black eyes”—a highly visible mark of injury which is notoriously slow to heal.<sup>24</sup> Thus we see in a trial-transcript of the fourth or fifth century that men are questioned by the *praeses Thebaidos* concerning an assault that has left a mark on the victim’s eyebrow (*ophrys*). The transcript begins by noting that the wounds are still visible even at the time of the trial.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the visibility and duration of these wounds, it should be added that damage and deformity to the eyes and face were considered particularly upsetting in the ancient world, especially because damaged eyes were linked to the evil eye (*baskanos*).<sup>26</sup> Thus injuries to the face could do double damage: not only were they painful to receive, but they marked out the individual who had received them as being potentially problematic in the community as a whole.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For a similar construction see *P.Kell.* I 23 (A.D. 383), where the left eye is specified. A late example comes from a letter in the papers of Dioscorus of Aphrodito, *P.Cair.Masp.* 67077.15–16 (VI A.D.), Ἰωάννης πλήγματα [π]ολλὰ ἔχει περὶ τὴν ὄψιν; a Ptolemaic example is in *P.Tebt.* III.1 797.19 (II B.C.).

<sup>24</sup> For this suggestion I thank the anonymous reader. From personal experience I can attest to the slowness of this injury to disappear: a particularly unpleasant racquetball injury once left me with a black eye for nearly a month.

<sup>25</sup> *P.Lips.* I 40.ii.7, τὰ πλήγματα φανερά; ii.25, τραύματα ... κατὰ τῆς ὀφθούσης. On this document and on the question of visibility generally, see below.

<sup>26</sup> Plin. *HN* 7.16; Plut. *Mor.* 681D–E; on art-historical representations of the evil eye, see K. Dunbabin and M. Dickie, “*Invidia rumpantur pectora*: the Iconography of *Phthonos/Invidia* in Greco-Roman Art,” *JAC* 26 (1983) 7–37.

<sup>27</sup> Thus *P.Mich.* VI 422, 423, 425 (A.D. 197–198), petitions from Gemellus Horion, a Roman and Antinoite citizen living in Karanis. Gemellus was missing one eye and had a cataract in the other. He claims that two of his

Injuries to the face are also specified in *P.Oxy.* XXXIII 2672 (A.D. 218), a petition from Aurelius Aphynchis. Aphynchis describes two separate attacks, one against himself and a prior one against a female slave in his family:

τῆ ἐνεστώσῃ ἡμέρᾳ μαθὼν Ἀχιλλέα πλακουντᾶν ἐπελθόντα Σαραπιάδι δουλῆ τοῦ ἀφήλικός μου υἱοῦ καὶ τετραυματικένας αὐτὴν κατὰ τοῦ χεῖλους ἐξαυτῆς γενομένῳ μοι πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ λογοποιο[υ]μένῳ περὶ τῆς τοαύτης αὐτοῦ αὐθαδίας ἐπήλθεν καὶ ἐμ[οῖ κ]αὶ [ἐ]ξέβρισην καὶ διελοιδορήσατό μοι οὐ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ λίθῳ με ἐνετίναξεν κατὰ τῆς κεφαλῆς.

on the present day, finding out that the pastry chef Achilles had attacked Sarapias the slave of my young son and wounded her on the lip, I right away went and had a discussion with him about such outrageous behavior of his. He in turn attacked me, committed *hybris* against me, and verbally abused me. Not only did he do these things, but he also hit me in the head with a rock.<sup>28</sup>

Violence against slaves is probably not *hybris*, technically speaking, but more likely should be categorized as *bia*, violence against property.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, it is telling that the violence against the slave-girl is described as a trauma to the lip. In the papyri, to my knowledge, *trauma* refers specifically to visible injuries and not, as in English, to severe (but potentially invisible) injuries. Doctors' reports from Egypt use this term as a general

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neighbors attacked him because “they look down on my weak countenance” (καταφρονούντες τῆς περὶ τὴν ὄψιν μου ἀσθενείας) and that another individual assaulted him for the same reason. On Gemellus' petitions see recently D. Frankfurter, “Fetus Magic and Sorcery Fears in Roman Egypt,” *GRBS* 46 (2006) 37–62.

<sup>28</sup> For a similar instance of a rock thrown at someone's head, see *P.Fouad* 26 (A.D. 224).

<sup>29</sup> In no case that I know of is violence against a slave called *hybris*: thus for example *P.Oxy.* VIII 1120 (III A.D.), in which a woman complains of an attack against several people at her home: an attack against the woman's son-in-law is called *hybris* (the specifics are not preserved), while the attack against her slave girl is referred to as *bia* (violence against property). *P.Ryl.* II 144 (A.D. 38) however preserves the complaint of a slave named Ision, who claims that another (presumably free) individual mistreated him. Although he does not define this as *hybris*, he does ask for “fitting punishment” (δέουσαν ἐπέξοδον).

description of the injuries that they observed. Perhaps more important, however, is the emotional reaction of Aphynchis to the injury to the slave-girl: he claims that he went to “have a discussion” (*logopoieisthai*) with Achilles—a common euphemism for taking the law into one’s own hands.<sup>30</sup>

In *P.Mich.* XVIII 793 (A.D. 381) the face is also specified. As the top of the papyrus is missing we cannot reconstruct the full narrative, but this papyrus almost certainly deals with a violent encounter: the petitioner claims that she was in danger of losing her life, and that this was only averted accidentally. The preserved part reads:

[λέγων εἰς π[ρ]όσωπ[όν] μου διὰ τῆς ἑαυτο[ῦ] ῥίνος βουλ[ι]όμεν[ός] με τοῦ ζῆν ἀπαλλάξαι, καὶ εἰ μὴ βοηθίας τε[τυχηκ]εῖν ὑπὸ Πα-  
μοῦν ὁμοκομήτου μου πάλε ἂν εἰς ψυχὴν μου ἔφθακεν.

speaking at my face through his nose, wishing to end my life,  
and if I had not obtained help from Pamoun my fellow villager,  
he would long since have reached (the end) of my life. (transl.  
Bagnall)

This papyrus is exceptional in that the loci of the violence match up closely: the offender directs the violence out through his nose, and the petitioner receives it in the face. As Roger Bagnall pointed out in his edition of this document, noses are loci of anger and contempt. Though it is surely an odd locution, Bagnall correctly compares a letter from fifth-century Karanis in which the writer describes a fight between himself and a resident over the collection of taxes. The individual from whom the official sought to collect the taxes “snorted his contempt for me (*περιερωρόγχασέν μοι*) and wanted to attack me.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Other instances of victims “discussing” with offenders: *BGU* VIII 1855.11 (I B.C.); contrasted with verbal abuse, *Chrest.Mitt.* 65 (IV A.D.), *P.Ryl.* 144.10–11 (A.D. 38); contrasted with physical violence, *P.Mich* V 228, 229, 230 (A.D. 47–48), *P.Ryl.* 136 (A.D. 34), 141 (A.D. 37), and *SB* VI 9458 (II A.D.). In a similar vein is *P.Sakaon* 48.15 (A.D. 343) *δικαιολογομένου*, an extremely euphemistic variant used by a petitioner in the context of protecting his grandfather from an assault with axes.

<sup>31</sup> *P.Col.* VIII 242 (V A.D.). He also cites A. S. F. Gow, “Notes on Noses,” *JHS* 71 (1951) 81–84. On *P.Col.* 242 see also J. R. Rea, “P.Col. VIII 242: Caranis in the Fifth Century,” in *Proc. XX<sup>th</sup> Inter. Congr. Papyrol.* 266–272. A similar usage might be found in the Hebrew word *af*.

That “snorting” and “speaking through the nose” are in fact examples of violence is supported by *P.Oxy.* VI 903 (IV A.D.), a document which seems to be part of a dossier of divorce proceedings. That papyrus gives a list of offenses under the heading of “all of the *hybris* he said against me” (περὶ πάντων ὧν εἶπεν κατ’ ἐμοῦ ὕβρεων). Among these *hybris* are that the offending husband “said to my face many offensive things through his nose” (πολλὰ ἀσελγήματα λέγων εἰς πρόσωπόν μου καὶ διὰ τῆς ῥινὸς αὐτοῦ).

In addition to parts of the face, injuries to the head are also specified in complaints. Thus, using a locution comparable to the petition of Thaesis, the petitioner in *P.Sarap.* 1 (A.D. 125) claims that “they hit me many times, and beat me with shepherd’s crooks on the head and on the other parts of my body” (πληγὰς πλείστ[α]ς ἐπέθηκάν μοι κολλωρόβοις πλήξαντας τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὰ ἄλλα [μέ]ρη τοῦ σώματος). The pattern of focusing the narrative attention on the head occurs also in *P.Oxy.* XVI 1885 (A.D. 509) where the petitioner claims that some men had attacked someone (perhaps an employee of his) and “beat him unsparingly on the head and delivered him a deadly blow” (κατὰ τῆς κεφαλῆς κόψας ἀφειδῶς καὶ θανατηφόρον ἐπενεγκῶν [κατ’ αὐ]τοῦ πλη[γ]ήν). The fragmentary *P.Harr.* II 192 (A.D. 167), a petition which seems to request that a public doctor come to view an injured individual, may also include a reference to blows to the head. It is worth noting, however, that while the symbolism of the face might be clear, that of the head is not nearly so. It may be that heads are simply relatively convenient targets for violence. There is, however, a hint in one fragmentary document from the late fourth or early fifth century of the head being understood as the locus of punishment: in *P.Berl.Frisk.* 4 the petitioner, in the course of his discussion of his opponent’s *hybris*, says that “for such things, one head would not be sufficient for his punishment” (ἐφ’ οἷς οὐκ ἂν αὐτῷ πρὸς τιμωρίαν ἀρκέσει κεφαλὴ μία). In this statement there is a resonance of Roman ideas of the head as a locus not only for capital punishment, but also as metonymy for status and personhood. If this statement is a clue to the significance of the head as a recipient of violence, it may be that petitioners see an additional level of meaning in discussing blows to the head.

Faces and heads, however, are not the only visible parts of the body discussed by petitioners. Petitions also make mention of arms, as in *P.Oxy.* LXI 4122 (A.D. 305) and XLII 3074 (III A.D.), or legs, as in *SB VI* 9238 (A.D. 198–211). The reference in *P.Oxy.* 4122 is revealing. The petitioner, Hierax, appeals to the *logistes* of Oxyrhynchus to send a public doctor to investigate the condition of his wife who has been involved in an altercation. He states that “since my aforementioned wife was shamed with blows and they beat her on the arm I of necessity submit this petition” (ἐπὶ οὖν ἡ ἐνγεγραμμένη μου σύμβιος ἠχίσθη τῶν πληγῶν καὶ ἔπληξαν κατὰ τοῦ βραχεῖ[ι]ογος, ἀναγκαίως ἐπιδίδωμι τάδε τὰ βιβλία). The link between the blows to the arm and the concept of shame (*aikia*) should be a clue to how the petitioner wants the reader to understand his story.<sup>32</sup>

A combination of these factors is evident in *P.Lips.* I 37 (A.D. 389), which comes from the papers of the *beneficiarius* Flavius Isidorus. This document, written in Isidorus’ own hand, describes an attack against a shepherd. It is clear from the way that Isidorus contextualizes the attack that this was part of a larger set of conflicts—earlier in the document he claims that he had petitioned against the offenders on several occasions—but this seems to be the only time that the conflict turned violent:

οἱ δὲ γυμνώ[σαντες] εἰ[θ]ὺς μετὰ ῥοπάλων πρ[...ν] ... τὴν ἐπικειμένην αὐτοῦ ἐ[θ]ήτα διαρ[ή]ξαντες ἀφ[εῖ]λαντ[ο], ἔπειτα κατέκοψα[ν] πληγαῖς αὐτὸν κατὰ τ[ε] τῶν σκελῶν καὶ κατὰ τῶν ἄλλων μελῶ[ν] τοῦ σώματος, ἡμθανήν αὐτὸν καταστήσαντες ὡς κα[ὶ] φανε[ρ]ά ἐστιν τὰ προσφονηθέντα ὑπὸ τῶν ἐπιθεωρησάντων τὰ πλήγματα, ἀδήλου ο[ὔ]σης τῆς ἑαυτοῦ σωτηρίας.

<sup>32</sup> On *aikia* particularly interesting is the edict of a civil governor (*praeses*) prohibiting the whipping of free men: “Aurelius Herodes the most distinguished governor of the Thebaid declares: the subjection to disgrace (*αἰκίαν ὑπομένειν*) by lashing which is called *letar*... in the native language is grievous for those of slave status, but not entirely prohibited. But for free men to undergo such a disgrace is *hybris* and against the laws and is unjust”: *P.Oxy.* IX 1186 (IV A.D.), on which see Keenan, in *Law and Justice*, who also provides this translation.

But once they stripped him, straightaway with clubs they... they tore the clothes he was wearing and stole them, then they beat him along the legs and the other parts of his body, knocking him half-dead, such that the (marks from) the blows are clear, and have been attested to by those who have come to see them. Whether he will survive is unclear.

The description of the violence is perhaps an example of what Benjamin Kelly has termed “insult-related violence”—in other words, the violence that took place here was part of a deliberate attempt to humiliate the shepherd. The emphasis on the stripping of clothes *before* the attack and not as a consequence of a scuffle no doubt reflects a somewhat sexualized humiliation.<sup>33</sup> But Isidorus chooses to highlight, among the other parts of the body that were injured, the shepherd’s legs. The blows to the legs are visible evidence of the fight, as Isidorus makes clear: they have been attested to by “those who came to see them.” In the context, this may be a reference to the public doctors who made *προσφωνήσεις* (“official reports”) to officials after examining victims (cf. *P.Lips.* I 42.14-5, A.D. 391: *προσφωνοῦμεν ἐγὼ μὲν [ὁ] ἰ[α]τρὸ[ς] ἐπιτεθεωρηκέ- [v]αι*). Why he chooses to focus on the legs, however, is unclear. The papyrus dates from the beginning of May. The tacit understanding may be that the shepherd would be wearing only a short tunic, or that since the attackers had stolen his clothing he was still exposed while lying on his sick-bed.

In the reports of public doctors as a comparison to the way bodies are described in petitions,<sup>34</sup> we see a somewhat different

<sup>33</sup> For similar instances see *P.Cair.Isid.* 63 (A.D. 296/7), *P.Ryl.* II 151.13–15 (A.D. 40), *SB XVI* 12470.15–16 (I–II A.D.), and the fragmentary reference in *P.Erl.* 36.4 (V A.D.). On the stripping of clothes see J. E. G. Whitehorne, “Sex and Society in Greco-Roman Egypt,” in J. Bingen and G. Nachtergaele (eds.), *Actes XV<sup>e</sup> congr. inter. papyrol.* (Brussels 1979) 240–246. For a similar example from the literary canon, see Cass. Dio 79.4.2–5 describing the public humiliation of Cilo, the tutor of Caracalla: “The soldiers tore the clothing off his body (τὴν τε ἐσθήτα αὐτοῦ περιέροξεσαν) and disfigured his face (τὸ πρόσωπον ἠκίσσαντο).”

<sup>34</sup> The basic study is D. W. Amundsen and G. B. Ferngren, “The Forensic Role of Physicians in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt,” *BHM* 52 (1978) 336–353, now supplemented by S. Torallas Tovar, “La práctica forense en el Egipto romano,” *CFC(G)* 14 (2004) 183–200.



emphasis. Doctors were charged with finding evidence generally, thus they report injuries to both visible and invisible parts of the body. In *P.Oslo* III 95 (A.D. 96) the doctor reports a wound to the finger but also to the breast, and he focuses on the physical condition of the victim, pointing out that she is vomiting and has a fever, ἐξαιμούσαν και πυρέτ[τουσαν]. Feverishness and stomach sickness are natural after physical trauma so we might interpret these as the after-effects of violence. Another doctor's report, *P.Lips.* I 42 (A.D. 391), reports injuries to the testicles; likewise in *P.Oxy.* LXIV 4441 (A.D. 315/6), a set of reports to the *logistes* including two from doctors, the first report mentions wounds all over the body, including fingers, thighs, and shoulder blades, and the second, wounds to the shoulder blades.<sup>35</sup>

Doctors and petitioners clearly had different concerns, but the different ways they focus their narratives are revealing instances of the “fictive” process. Doctors were asked to give an account of what they saw as part of the evidentiary process; petitioners, however, worked at a stage earlier than this. They were seeking redress from legal authorities for humiliation and pain, and this is what they emphasized. Thus petitioners not only focus on different body parts than doctors do, but also make use of a vocabulary of publicity when speaking about their wounds, especially using the verb *phainesthai* and its cognate forms. For instance, in the petition of Isidorus discussed above, he emphasized that the blows to the shepherd's legs were “visible” (*phanera*). Similarly, in *P.Herm.* 20 (IV A.D.) the petitioner reports that the blows on his brother's body are visible (ὡς και φαίνεσθαι τὰ ἐπικείμενα πλήγματα τῷ αὐτῷ ἀδελφῷ μου), while in *SB* X 10287 (= *P.David* 17, A.D. 504) the petitioner uses nearly identical language to emphasize that the blows are visible “all over his body” (ὡς και φαίνεσθαι τὰ ἐπικείμενα [πλήγ]ματα κατὰ παντὸς τοῦ ἐμοῦ σώματος). Using slightly different language, a petitioner in the Abinnaeus ar-

<sup>35</sup> Another profitable comparison might be made with magical texts, especially love charms, which show an exceptionally broad vocabulary of targets for injury. See D. Martinez, *Michigan Papyri XVI A Greek Love Charm from Egypt* (Atlanta 1991).

chive (*P.Abinn.* 46, A.D. 343) emphasizes that he still has the (marks of the) blows (καὶ τὰ πλήγματα ἔχω νῦν). Finally, the coupling of *plegmata* and *phanera* appears most importantly in a set of court proceedings *P.Lips.* I 40. In the first line of this document, a lawyer declares that “the (traces of the) blows are visible” ([*Herminus a*]d(vocatus) d(icit): τὰ πλήγματα φανερά).

To see these accounts of public injuries only as evidence would be to see only half the point. Certainly they were evidence, as the court proceedings of *P.Lips.* I 40 make clear, but they were a very particular sort of evidence: Roman law recognized different levels of *iniuria*, and there is every reason to think that the discussion of blows that appear on the body made the *iniuria* public in a very peculiar way. We see some evidence of this in a passage from Gaius’ *Institutes* (3.225) describing the factors that could make *iniuria* particularly heinous (*atrox*): Gaius states that *iniuria* can be considered *atrox* if done in a public place, and there are numerous examples in the papyri of violence being done in public. Petitioners in Egypt did not spend their free time studying Gaius, but they used a similar principle. From a public place to a public wound is only a small jump.<sup>36</sup> To borrow the especially apt phrase of Maud Gleason, the narrative structure of Egyptian complaints reflects a concern with injuries available for display in the “forest of eyes” that made up the Egyptian towns and villages.<sup>37</sup> This is not, of course, to downplay the importance that visible wounds could play in the legal process. Knowing that someone had to wear

<sup>36</sup> The only instance I know of in which individuals attempt to bring order and structure to the breadth of offensive actions that may be encountered in daily life is in guild charters, where offenses are punished along a scale of monetary penalties. Comparison of the rhetoric of injury in these charters with petitions may bear fruitful results. Philip Venticinque’s dissertation *Common Causes: the Social World of Guilds and Associations in Roman and Late Antique Egypt* (Univ. Chicago, in progress) will improve our understanding of these documents.

<sup>37</sup> M. Gleason, “The Semiotics of Gender: Physiognomy and Self-Fashioning in the Second Century CE,” in D. Halperin, J. J. Winkler, F. I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton 1990) 389–416, at 389. My thanks to K. Rigsby for this reference.

the marks of defeat on body parts visible to the public could make it easier to obtain higher damages in court. The penalties for *iniuria* were evaluated “according to what is good and fitting” (*ex bono et aequo*: Ulpian in *Dig.* 47.10.11.1), but the ultimate breadth and vagueness of the scope of the damage done by an injurious action made the proper penalty exceedingly hard to quantify. Things stolen could be returned or their value paid in cash, but a punch in the face and the black eyes that result could follow one for weeks.

To contextualize the power that visible wounds might have had in Egypt, the work on face-to-face behavior by sociologist Erving Goffman is particularly instructive. Goffman’s work provides an evocative and prescient discussion of the ways in which individuals manage social interactions at the micro, rather than macro, level. Dealing in his fieldwork primarily with individuals of low status vis-à-vis society at large (the mentally ill, inmates, and Scottish crofters, to name just a few examples), Goffman highlighted the importance of managing one’s image in the context of public interactions. For Goffman, this management took the form of performance, and the performances, in turn, could be contested and challenged:

When an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part. When an event occurs which is expressively incompatible with this fostered impression ... the social interaction, treated here as a dialogue between two teams, may come to an embarrassed and confused halt; the situation may cease to be defined, previous positions may no longer become tenable, and participants may find themselves without a charted course of action. The participants typically sense a false note in the situation and come to feel awkward, flustered, and, literally, out of countenance. In other words, the minute social system created and sustained by orderly social interaction becomes disorganized.<sup>38</sup>

There is, I suggest, an important analogue in the papyri from Egypt. The emphasis on visibility can only be understood in the context of a social milieu in which all free individuals have

<sup>38</sup> E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York 1959) 242.

access to a certain kind of discourse. It is no accident, therefore, that the emphasis on visibility is found in legal texts. Despite the scholarly focus in recent years on the role of law in structuring differences in status and hierarchy, the ideology of the Roman legal system in the provinces was that fundamentally it was a system which could be accessible to all free individuals. This fact was not lost on petitioners. They ignored the role of law in reinforcing hierarchies, but used the legal system for redressing grievances. The act of making a legal complaint—and the documentary record that we have as a result of this—was a ritual of redemption through which individuals could save face in the community in which they lived.<sup>39</sup>

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