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ORIGINAL PAPER

Archives and imperial power: archival destruction in the Roman context

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Abstract

Rich evidence from Egypt as a province of the Roman Empire documents a curious story of local public archives being mismanaged over a period of several decades after their creation by the Roman state in the mid-first century CE. The events involved the destruction of records by pests and through a failure to catalogue and index them. Precisely why this happened remains a mystery. Was this a case of subaltern resistance by local elites tasked with maintaining Roman state archives, a targeted aim of which was to generate administrative knowledge about private wealth? Or had local liturgists misunderstood or been overwhelmed by the demands imposed by the Roman imperial administration? This story will be compared with other evidence of the destruction of public records in the Roman Empire, which underscores how invasive Roman record-keeping institutions were perceived to be.

Keywords Roman history · Roman empire · Roman administration · Roman archives · Provincial rebellion in the Roman Empire

Mettius Rufus, the incoming Roman governor of Egypt, received an unpleasant surprise while taking an annual assize tour of his province (Burton 1975; Haensch 1997). It was the year of the census (89/90 CE), a momentous occasion when provincial inhabitants submitted declarations detailing their households and property holdings, while officials conducted an intensive review of the institutions and revenues of the empire (Ando 2000: 351-362; Le Teuff 2012). One would imagine that it was rather infuriating for Rufus when, during an assize in the Arsinoite district, a papyrus roll of administrative documentation was produced from the local archive that was missing its beginning. Evidently, the outer portion of the roll had suffered damage, proably by termites or other book-eating insects, destroying the heading and the initial columns. An investigation revealed that many rolls in the archive were in a similarly dismal state. The Arsinoite archive-keepers Protogenes and Isidoros—two

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senior members of the local officeholding class, who had supervised the archives for nearly twenty years—defended themselves by claiming that they had received the records in this condition from their predecessors, with many rolls damaged or stuck together, and that the flow of records from local administrators was so immense that these lay in unsorted heaps. The keepers argued that the fact of records being damaged through frequent use or eaten by pests was a natural process of wear and tear (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.): 97–98 and no. 15 lines 75–97).

Rufus' immediate reaction was to demand that all records be collated and catalogued and all damaged rolls recopied from the central archives in the provincial capital of Alexandria at the expense of the keepers—and these demands were reiterated by subsequent governors. Over the course of the next decade, the retired keepers and their families were forced to finance the collation of the rolls, as well as the construction of a new archival building, because the old one had collapsed multiple times. After Protogenes and Isidoros died, the two keepers who happened to be in office (Herakleides and Patron) were saddled with the financial burden of inventorying uncollated records and recopying damaged rolls (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.): 91–94, 99–108). The last we hear of this affair is a declaration by the heir of the archive-keeper Herakleides, opting out of his father's debt-laden inheritance (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.) no. 17 = P. Coles 20, after 117 CE; Parsons 2015).

The story of the Arsinoite archives, as told to Roman officials in highly rhetorical petitions by the archive-keepers and their family members (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.) nos. 15 and 24), displays a number of contradictions. On the one hand, the accumulation of unsorted records and their destruction by vermin seem incompatible with the claim that these were consulted daily and suffered natural wear and tear. On the other hand, persistent objections against assuming responsibility for damaged rolls undermine the plausibility of the keepers having previously consented to receive dilapidated records from their predecessors.

The circumstances of the Arsinoite archive fiasco remain mysterious. Was this an instance of archival destruction through deliberate mismanagement? The central archive of the Arsinoite nome was a relatively new Roman institution, introduced approximately two decades before the faulty archive-keepers took office (Burkhalter 1990: 192–197, 209). Were the keepers engaged in subaltern resistance to Roman administrative demands? Or had they misunderstood their duties or been overwhelmed by the enormity of their task? Does the failure of the archive and the reactions of successive Roman officials, who penalised local families over the course of three decades, demonstrate dysfunctionality and a limited capacity for enforcement in a premodern administrative apparatus? Or should the relentless Roman determination to restore the damaged rolls—which, in the end, were six or more decades old—be interpreted, instead, as reflecting the outsized ambitions of Roman government?

In investigating these questions, I will begin by contextualising the Arsinoite archive crisis in the institutional history of Roman archives and compare this episode to a noteworthy number of reports of archival destruction in the Roman Empire.

The importance of Roman archives

Archives and archival documents occupied a prominent place in the Roman cultural imagination. We find stories of archives in the semi-legendary history of early Rome as storehouses of arcane knowledge, monopolized by a narrow elite and brought to light in contexts of political upheaval, such as the publication of Roman religious ordinances (*leges regiae*) during the foundation of the Republic, or the revelation of Roman legal procedure from pontifical records during the struggle of the orders in the late fourth century BCE (Dion. Hal. 3.34.6; Dig. 1.2.2.2; Smith 2020; Valgaeren 2012). Key fields of knowledge and cultural production in the Roman context, including religion, historiography, and law, derived authority from archival repositories of documents and records. Just as the traditionally patrician genre of Roman annalistic historiography was notionally based on chronographic records compiled by the pontifical college (Rich 2018), plebeian histories of the Roman Republic invoked the authority of an alternative archive of linen rolls (Walt 1997: 75–85). Such was the subversive potential of archival documents that a trove of writings explaining Roman religious rituals, allegedly discovered with the body of the Roman King Numa Pompilius, was incinerated in the Roman forum by specialists of religious sacrifice (*victimarii*)—or, in some versions, secretly retained by the *pontifices* themselves (Willi 1998). The power conferred by archival knowledge is a recurrent theme in Roman sources.

As one might expect in light of this pattern, archives also played an instrumental role in Roman institutions and administration. The Roman census, a cyclical collection of data on the demography and property of individuals and a core mechanism of the Roman system of social stratification according to wealth, and civic and legal status, was the backbone of the political, administrative, and fiscal order of the empire (Dolganov 2021: 187–199; Jördens 2009: 62–94; Le Teuff 2012). Roman demographic and fiscal records were closely interconnected, since the census was linked to the poll taxes imposed on the majority of provincials. Apart from taxation, census records also served the Roman system of compulsory public services (*munera publica,* δημόσιαι λειτουργίαι), which comprised administrative duties and obligations to finance local institutions—including archives, as we have just seen (Lewis 1997[2]; Oertel 1917). This was an indirect way of harnessing the wealth of the propertied classes, for whom liturgies were a prerequisite for the progression of public careers. Alongside the census, topographic surveys employing specialised Roman techniques of land measurement generated detailed records of private and public landholdings (Campbell 2000; Morris 2018). The census and land surveys were progressively extended within and beyond Italy to Roman colonies and, by the early Principate, to all Roman provinces. These record-keeping procedures were directly linked with the expansion of Roman rule, and were widely perceived by provincials as a form of fiscal subjection, a point to which we will return.

In theory, the detailed demographic and topographic records produced by the Roman government in a cyclical fashion created a formidable basis for controlling and extracting resources from the territories and populations of the empire. However, as is well-known from comparative contexts, the mass production of

records was, in itself, no guarantee that these could be wielded effectively as a source of administrative knowledge (Clanchy 2012[3]: 156–173). The practical impact of Roman administrative documentation hinged on a developed system of archival institutions and effective strategies for turning archival records into useful information. Evidence from Republican Rome already attests to different types of records being cross-checked and searched across spans of multiple decades, implying significant archival capabilities (Cic. *Arch*. 7–11; Dolganov 2021: 187–189). By the turn of the first century BCE (and probably much earlier), cadastral maps, records of land assignations, and census records from Roman municipalities in Italy and the provinces were being centrally archived in copy at Rome, in addition to being deposited in local archives (Arnaud 2003; Moatti 1994; Nicolet 1987). Under the Principate, the archival system of Roman Egypt shows records produced in the hinterland being systematically archived at the local level and in the provincial capital, with numerous genres of records—such as those pertaining to Roman citizens and the Roman army—further centralised in a third copy in the imperial capital (Burkhalter 1990; Dolganov 2021: 199–219).

A synoptic view of Roman archival practice reveals several methods of managing records that enabled Roman archives to function as integrated systems of information. A key strategy for facilitating the retrievability of records was precise and consistent indexing, typically by documentary genre, date, and (if relevant) topographical place name, with numbered bundles of waxed wooden tablets and rolls of papyri. Accordingly, copies of records contained detailed information about the physical location of the originals within the archive, specifying the page and bundle number or roll and column number (Burkhalter 1990: 195-197, 201-202; Dolganov 2021: 193–194, 199–200). There were corresponding rules for the format of archival documents, which were collated and bound into bundles of tablets with numbered pages or glued together into pasted rolls of papyri with numbered columns (Clarysse 2003). Roman regulations prohibited documents with erasures or alterations from being accepted by public archives to preclude forgery (Burkhalter 1990: 205–206; Wörrle 1975: 254-285).

Another characteristic feature of Roman archiving was the centralised flow of records to provincial and imperial centres, meaning that records stored in local archives were reduplicated in central master archives. This practice is already illustrated by the Republican *tabula Heracleensis,* documenting co-ordinated census procedures in Rome and Roman municipalities, with census records being archived locally and drafted in a separate copy to be reviewed, processed, and archived in Rome (CIL I 593 = ILS 6085 = FIRA I2 no. 13 = Crawford 1996 I no. 24, 1c. BCE; Nicolet 1987, 1991: 127–129). In addition to facilitating the oversight of local administration, the centralisation of records functioned as a backup mechanism whereby local records could be verified or recovered from central archives and vice versa. Accordingly, when a fire on the Roman Capitol destroyed thousands of historic bronze documents—"a most beautiful and ancient documentary record of the empire" (*instrumentum imperii pulcherrimum ac vetustissimum,* Suet. *Vesp.* 8)—the emperor Vespasian was able to restore the archive from copies preserved on various media in other locations throughout the empire.

A further strategy was the practice of double-archiving, which involved depositing copies of the same records in two separate archives in the same location, with one of the archives being actively consulted and the other functioning as cold storage and used only for reference. This method is already attested under the Republic for the decisions and proceedings of the Roman senate (*senatusconsulta, acta senatus*), and a similar archival constellation is documented at Alexandria under Hadrian for records of private legal transactions (Coudry 1994; P.Oxy. I 34, 127 CE; Burkhalter 1990: 203–208). Double-archiving was meant to insure records against damage and specifically against manipulation and forgery—if, for example, a document stored in one archive were missing or appeared dubious, it could be recovered or verified from the reference archive.

These techniques of record-keeping and archiving equipped Roman administrative institutions with advanced capabilities for processing and wielding information. As an example, population registers deriving from the census and continually updated from other records enabled officials to keep track of taxable individuals, including those who changed their status, left their residence, traveled beyond their province, or were due to enter the age of tax liability each year (P.Lond. II 260, ca. 73 CE; Dolganov 2021: 192–193). No less importantly, a functional system of retrievable records permitted the Roman administration to navigate records of its own acts, which placed greater control in the hands of officials and discouraged the fabrication of claims by interested parties. Legal claims and applications for fiscal privileges in Roman Egypt were expected to be accompanied by authenticated copies of archival documents (Dolganov 2021: 193–194, 222–224). Such an expectation was predicated on a generally accepted notion that archival records were complete and the relevant documents could be readily found. This highlights the role of well-functioning archives as the basis of key administrative claims underpinning the Roman management of provincial affairs. We will return to this point.

Copious documentary evidence surviving from Roman Egypt furnishes a detailed diachronic view of an evolving archival system in a Roman province (Burkhalter 1990). With the provincialisation of Egypt under Augustus, Roman indexing methods by bundle/tablet and roll/column were introduced across documentary genres and are attested into the fourth century CE (e.g., P. Oxy. Hels. 10, 34 CE; SB XVIII 13780, 4c. CE). The Roman administration also instituted a centralised flow of administrative and notarial documents from the hinterland into central archives in Alexandria. This was followed by the establishment of a second tier of central "archives of public records" (βιβλιοθῆκαι δημοσίων λόγων) in Egypt's regional capitals about 53 CE. After this point, the records of local officials and notaries existed in duplicate—in the regional archives and the provincial capital. The Arsinoite archive of public records was the ill-fated institution experiencing severe problems a few decades after its creation, as discovered by the Governor Mettius Rufus.

A decade before the crisis of the Arsinoite archives, the Roman administration introduced an ambitious new archival technology for monitoring private wealth. A second branch of archives was instituted in Egypt's regional capitals in the reign of Nero (ca. 67–68 CE) alongside the archives of public records that already existed (Claytor 2020: 39–42). The new "archives of acquisitions" (βιβλιοθῆκαι ἐγκτήσεων) were registries designed to provide a complete record of the real property holdings

of every provincial inhabitant, drawn up in files under the person's name and residence (e.g. PSI V 450, 2–3c. CE; Burkhalter 1990: 199–201; Wolff 1978: 222-255). The files of these registries were meant to be updated with changes of ownership (e.g. through sale or inheritance) and encumbrances through financial transactions (e.g. liens or real securities). The declaration of properties to the archives was incentivised as a prerequisite for obtaining full property titles. In theory, the new archives constituted a powerful technology of fiscal surveillance—and this point was not lost on provincials, as we will see. In practice, however, their functionality depended on accurate and continual upkeep, without which the files would be rendered useless. This was a persistent problem encountered by governors during the first decades of the archives' existence—including Mettius Rufus, who, as he proceeded on his assize tour after the Arsinoite debacle, discovered that the registry of acquisitions in the neighbouring Oxyrhynchite nome was being poorly maintained. Rufus ordered fresh declarations of all property holdings and financial encumbrances in a dramatically worded edict (P. Oxy. II 237, 8, 27–43, 89 CE), "so that those entering contracts are not ensnared through ignorance" (36). To lay emphasis on the archives as a source of legal security was an elegant way of deflecting attention from their role in providing officials with an unprecedented level of insight into private assets and financial transactions.

Stories of archival destruction

Perhaps the most eloquent evidence illustrating the significance of archives in the Roman imperial context consists of narratives detailing their deliberate destruction. Fabius Maximus, governor of the nearby province of Macedonia, wrote a letter to the Achaean city of Dyme in the year 144 or 143 BCE, shortly after the Roman defeat of the Achaean League and the destruction of Corinth in 146, concerning the arson of the city's archives and public records (Boffo and Faraguna 2021: 458-459; Kallet–Marx 1995; Thornton 2001: 159–172). These crimes (ἀδικήματα) were committed by a certain Sosos, one of two annual magistrates in charge of legislation (νομογράφος), with the assistance of another official (δαμιουργός). It also happened that Sosos had "drafted laws contrary to the civic constitution restored to the Achaeans by the Romans" (8–10), a reference to the Roman settlement prescribing political institutions and laws to be observed by Achaean cities in the aftermath of the war. The misdeeds of Sosos and his accomplice were reported to Maximus by a group of fellow members of Dyme's city council. It may be deduced that the arson in Dyme was part of a factional struggle between pro- and anti-Roman elements within the city's elite. Having reviewed the case and interrogated the culprits, Maximus condemned the two arsonists to death and sent the second legislative official (νομογράφος) to Rome to account for his lesser crime (ἔλασσον ἐφαίνετο ἠδικηκώς, 24) before the *praetor peregrinus* (στρατηγός ἐπὶ τῶν ξένων), the chief Roman judicial magistrate in charge of foreigners in territories under Roman control.

The role of archives in this affair is intriguing. The letter of Maximus states that the crimes at issue are arson/destruction of the archives and specifically of the public records (ὑπὲρ τῆς ἐμπρήσεlως καὶ φθορᾶς τῶν ἀρχ<εί>ων καὶ τῶν

δημοσίων γραμμάτων, 6–7)—two distinct offences from a Roman juridical perspective—for which the instigator and his abettor were executed. The drafting of subversive laws by Sosos is treated as evidence of his malicious intent in performing the arson, warranting capital punishment under Roman law (Dig. 47.9.9, Gaius, 4 *ad leg. duod. tab.*; Mommsen 1899: 646–647). By contrast, the role of the second *nomographos* not implicated in the arson was deemed less serious and dealt with by a civil magistrate. Maximus speaks of archival destruction as "laying the groundwork for the worst sort of unrest (ταραχή, sc. *tumultus*)" by undermining contractual relations (ἀσυναλλαξία) through the cancelation of debts (χρεωκοπία). This statement reflects a well-known discourse of Roman imperialism, whereby civil strife (στάσις), typically involving popular agitation through populist measures, such as debt cancelation, legitimised Roman interference in the political affairs of Greek cities (Champion 2007). The discourse of στάσις framed events as internal conflicts between local actors, shifting the focus away from opposition to Roman rule—in particular, the dangerous problem of organised resistance by local elites, as was evidently the case in Dyme. It is revealing that the death sentence issued by Maximus juxtaposes the burning of the archives with legislation "bent on dissolving" (ἐπὶ καταλύσει) the Roman settlement in Achaea. It seems clear that Maximus regarded the arson of public records in Dyme as a seditious attack against the new order established by Rome.

Why the local archives of a Greek city possessed this sort of significance is not immediately obvious. Although the contents of the archives are not described, some plausible inferences are possible. It seems highly likely that new population registers and a property assessment of the citizens of Dyme (and other Achaean cities) were drawn up after the Achaean war (cf. Boffo and Faraguna 2021: 693–750). Such records would have reflected reprisals (e.g. exile, disenfranchisement, expropriation) against Rome's opponents and functioned as the basis of the timocratic political institutions favoured and implemented by Rome in conquered territories (Liv. 34.51; Coudry and Kirbihler 2010; Spawforth 2012: 1–58). The archives would also have housed Roman ordinances and the new civic laws emanating from the Roman settlement (cf. Boffo and Faraguna 2021: 425–470). In all these respects, the archives of Dyme would have enshrined a new political and fiscal reality of the Roman conquest and embodied a forward-looking vision of local government in alignment with Roman interests. In view of the centralising tendencies of Roman archiving, there was also a material sense in which Rome intruded into the public memory of the city, inserting records of itself into the civic archives of which copies were kept in central archives in the city of Rome. This brings us closer to explaining why arson of the archives was regarded by Maximus as coextensive with dissolution of the Roman order. It seems that Roman leaders were already disposed to see archival institutions as part of the critical infrastructure of Roman domination in the second century BCE. The link between archives and Roman power appears to have been obvious to the local actors as well.

It is a significant pattern that archival destruction and violent resistance to Roman record-keeping are repeatedly documented in contexts of rebellion against Roman rule. The public archive of the southern Italian city of Heraclea was destroyed in 91–89 BCE in the context of a massive uprising of Rome's Italian allies (Cic. *Arch.*

8: *quas (tabulas) Italico Bello incenso tabulario interisse scimus omnis*). Somewhat ironically, a few decades later the same archive housed records of the Roman census, which was extended to Italian municipalities as a consequence of the war. The destruction by fire of the central public archive (*tabularium*) on the Roman Capitol in 83 BCE was believed to have been caused by arson (Moreau 1994: 141–142). Cicero mentions the criminal trials of three individuals, one of whom was also accused of embezzlement (*peculatus*) but acquitted of both crimes (Cic. *Rab. perd.* 8). Two others confessed to committing the arson as a means of destroying evidence of their manipulation of public records (Cic. *De nat. deor.* 3.74). Factional strife at Rome in the 50s BCE witnessed the burning of census records in the temple of the Nymphs (possibly as a means of interrupting the Roman grain dole, Nicolet 1976), described by Cicero as a seditious assault on Roman public memory. The association between sedition and the destruction of public records, similarly implicit in the Dyme affair, reflects an engrained Roman notion of archives and record-keeping as the lifeblood of government and public order.

There are also numerous stories of armed resistance to the Roman census. An armed revolt in the Thebaid "on account of taxes" (διὰ τοὺς φόρους, Strabo 17.1.53) shortly after the Roman conquest of Egypt illustrates resistance to Roman attempts to fiscally integrate the region (Monson 2014: 152–153). The introduction of the Roman census in Iudaea in 7 CE provoked an armed uprising led by a certain Judas of Gamala, who decried the procedure as a form of enslavement and exhorted Jews to assert their freedom (Joseph. *AJ* 18.1; Acts 5:37). In the account of Josephus, the census is denoted in purely fiscal terms as the assessment of property (ἀποτίμησις). Roman fiscal exactions are also cited as a primary cause of the revolt in Gaul in 21 CE led by Florus and Sacrovir, who garnered support by denouncing Roman tribute, burdensome interest rates, and the indebtedness of Gallic cities (Tac. *Ann.* 3.40–47; Lavan 2017: 30–32). The introduction of a Roman-style census in Cappadocia about 36 CE allegedly caused the tribe of the Cietae to retreat into the Taurus Mountains to avoid "rendering an account of their worth and undergoing tribute" (*deferre census, pati tributa,* Tac. *Ann.* 6.41). The tribe was besieged by an entire Roman legion under the governor of Syria, presumably less for the sake of the lost revenue they represented than as a matter of principle that no subject of the empire could be permitted to evade the census. The Emperor Claudius spoke of the procedure as an "arduous task" (*arduum opus*) aiming at "nothing more than to make our resources publicly known" (*nihil ultra quam ut publice notae sint facultates nostrae,* CIL XIII 1668; Malloch 2020: 159–161) in a speech delivered before the Senate in the context of an empire-wide census in 47/48 CE. Even this somewhat euphemistic description makes no mystery of the census as a technology of imperial fiscality.

Further episodes of archival destruction are documented in the provinces of Iudaea and Syria during the first Jewish revolt (66–70 CE). The rebels invaded the Upper City in Jerusalem, where they set fire to the residences of the high priest and the Roman client rulers, then proceeded to torch the public archives (τὰ ἀρχεῖα, Joseph. *BJ* 2.426–428; Mason 2008: 324–326). According to Josephus, their goal was to destroy loan contracts and "cancel the exaction of debts" (τὰς εἰσπράξεις ἀποκόψαι τῶν χρεῶν) as a ploy to enlist the support of debtors against the wealthy elite. Josephus also reports the burning of public archives in Antioch (the Roman

provincial capital of Syria) along with the forum and law courts (Joseph. *BJ* 7.54–61). An inquest by a Roman governor purportedly established that the culprits were not Jewish rebels but "delinquents oppressed by debt" (ἄνθρωποί τινες ἀλιτήριοι διὰ χρεῶν ἀνάγκας) who hoped to free themselves from their financial obligations. One is reminded of Cassius Dio's account of a fire in Rome under Tiberius that destroyed archives and other public buildings around the Roman forum, also rumoured to have been caused by debtors seeking to "cancel some of their debts" (ἵν' ἀποκόψωσί τι τῶν χρεῶν, Cass. Dio, 55.8.6).

The similarity of these stories (including clear verbal echoes) indicates that archival destruction by debtors was a *topos* of Roman discourse—one that was evidently propagated by Roman administrators as an official explanation for the arson in Antioch. It seems to have been commonplace that Roman archives were a source of trepidation for fiscal debtors, who were eager to take advantage of political upheaval to attack these institutions. The vilification of the culprits as debtors and delinquents trivialised more menacing aspects of the respective historical events. We may recall Tacitus' description of the Gallic rebellion of Florus and Sacrovir attracting a "rabble of debtors" (*vulgus obaeratorum,* Tac. *Ann.* 3.42) and men driven by "poverty or fear of punishment for past crimes" (*ob egestatem ac metum ex flagitiis,* 3.40), downplaying the implications of the liberally educated Gallic elite taking up arms against Rome (3.43) and eliding the suspected complicity of two Roman governors, which is mentioned much later in the narrative (4.18 and 4.28). Stories of archival destruction by debtors seem to have had a similarly euphemistic function. In the context of a massive Jewish revolt, the burning of archives and other public buildings in Jerusalem and Antioch—the Roman provincial capital, where archives housed records from the entire province—looks like a targeted destruction of the Roman centres of power. The attribution of such acts to debtors elided their significance as subversive sabotage of the Roman order, directed against institutions of vital importance for the administrative and fiscal capabilities of the imperial state. The damaging effects of the arson may be gleaned indirectly from Josephus' remark that the rebels in Jerusalem had destroyed the "sinews of the city" (τὰ νεῦρα τῆς πόλεως, Joseph. *BJ* 2.428), a phrase used by Roman legal writers with reference to the taxes and revenues of the empire (Dig. 48.18.1.20, Ulpianus 8 *de off. procons*.).

Another attack on archives is documented in the Roman administrative centre of Cyrene during the revolt of the Jewish Diaspora in 115–117 CE (Maddoli 1965). Archeological remains attest to the burning of the *nomophylakeion,* a central archive for records of public administration and private legal transactions, preserving thousands of clay seals attached to incinerated documents. In yet another context of provincial rebellion, a key institution that appears to have been singled out for obliteration was the public archive.

The potency of Roman archival systems as a technology of imperial resource extraction is underscored by the performative destruction of archival records by the imperial state itself. Under the Principate, Roman emperors engaged in occasional remission of public debts, typically in the year of the census, which took the form of staged conflagrations of fiscal records (Howley 2017: 219–220). Augustus remitted debts incurred before the battle of Actium and the relevant records were burned in 28 BCE (a census year). A purge of old fiscal debts

is documented under Nero in 62 CE (a census year) and under Vespasian after his return to Rome, probably in the census year of 73/74 CE. The cancelation of 900,000 *sesterces* of debts by Hadrian in the census year of 118 CE, shortly after his accession as emperor, was widely advertised on imperial coinage, commemorated in public inscriptions, and depicted on monumental reliefs, which show piles of records on waxed tablets being ignited in the forum of Trajan (Torelli 1982: 89–118). Destruction of these records by fire had a clear performative function as a visible guarantee of their total elimination and the Roman state's renunciation of its claims, which notionally depended on the existence of the original records in Roman state archives (see e.g. 22.4.2, Paulus 5 *sent.*). This remission of fiscal claims was, at the same time, a potent public assertion of the Roman state's ability to wield archival records to access the resources of the empire's inhabitants—just as these were being tallied up during the ongoing census. Among the documents burned in Rome were Greek records of tax arrears from the eastern provinces (*syngrafis … incensis*, SHA *Hadrian* 7.6), highlighting the capacity of administrators at Rome to deploy the centralised Roman system of archival records to track people and resources in the remotest regions of the empire. In view of the multi-tiered structure of Roman archival systems, any records of provincial debts at Rome would have been backed up by exemplars and copies in provincial and local archives. It seems likely that such records were similarly destroyed, possibly in a comparably public and theatrical fashion before large gatherings of spectators, delivering tangible evidence of the emperor's magnanimous gesture throughout the Roman world.

There is a clear parallelism between the burning of records by Roman fiscal authorities and stories of records being burned by the debtors themselves. These seem to have been two sides of the same imperial discourse, whereby provincials burdened by Roman fiscal exactions expressed their grievances, occasionally engaging in rebellious acts that were duly punished, and were intermittently relieved by the state. The recurring motif of fiscal grievance in Roman narratives of rebellion (Lavan 2017: 30–36) imposed a reductive logic on historical contingencies that were more complex and more threatening to the imperial order—as exemplified by the revolt of Florus and Sacrovir, spearheaded by Gallic elites. Similarly, stories of archives being attacked by debtors understate the administrative importance of these institutions and are studiously silent about the damaging effects of their destruction. At best, the importance of Roman archives may be inferred indirectly from the fact of their destruction being repeatedly mentioned by imperial writers.

The Arsinoite archive crisis in context

This brings us back to our initial questions concerning the causality of the archive crisis in the hinterland of Roman Egypt. In view of the elaborate vision behind Roman archives, which were meant to function as centralised systems encompassing regional centres, provincial capitals, and the imperial centre, it is perhaps not surprising that their introduction at the local level encountered obstacles. The sheer ambition of these institutions was at odds with the structure of local administration

in the Roman Empire, where many essential tasks of imperial government were delegated to the civic elite of provincial communities.

Initially, key administrative functions were leased out by the Roman state to private contractors (*conductores, mancipes,* μισθωταί), such as the infamous *societates publicanorum* responsible for tax collection under the Republic and early Principate (Badian 1972; Oertel 1917: 111–131). Roman administration began to move away from this model in the first century CE towards a system of compulsory services imposed on the office-holding class of each province (Lewis 1997[2]; Oertel 1917: 131-356). One of the earliest documented compulsory services in Roman Egypt, where we have a clear view of this development, was the management of the regional archives (Claytor 2020: 35-42; Oertel 1917: 287–289; Sijpesteijn and Worp 1995: 526–532). The position of archive-keeper (βιβλιοφύλαξ) was clearly seen as a function of high responsibility requiring sizeable financial means, hence, the archive-keepers tended to be senior office-holders who had held the highest civic office of the gymnasiarchy. This also meant that keepers tended to be advanced in age, and several are recorded dying in office (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.): 106–107). In view of the extended period of 18 years that Protogenes and Isidoros spent as archive-keepers (72–90 CE), it appears that this function was renewable and may initially have been leased out on a voluntary basis. During the Arsinoite archive crisis, however, the terms abruptly shifted to much shorter intervals of about three years—possibly as a form of damage control, after the excessive risk posed by faulty keepers had become obvious to Roman administrators.

The apparent fact that Protogenes and Isidoros voluntarily supervised the Arsinoite archive for nearly two decades throws an interesting light on their motivations. Were the keepers acting in bad faith and consciously neglecting the archive, or did they somehow misunderstand or underestimate their task? The claim that they received records in poor condition from their predecessors (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.) no. 15 lines 78–81) seems weak, although it may be that former keepers had set a low standard for the job. It seems unlikely that Roman authorities had provided insufficient guidelines for archival management. When the new registries of real property were created in the late 60s CE, the Roman administration in Alexandria sent out pairs of imperial freedmen (as may be deduced from the names Tiberius Logismos and Tiberius Antiochos in SB XVIII 13229, 69 CE), who were most probably employees of the central archives in Alexandria, into the hinterland to set up the local archives and serve as the first keepers. One would expect Roman officials to have invested comparable effort in organising the earlier archives of public records and transferring them to local keepers.

Some of the problems in overseeing the Arsinoite archive may have been structural. The sprawling Arsinoite district in the fertile region of the Fayuum (Derda 2006) comprised three sub-districts under three regional governors (*strategoi*) and generated a vast volume of documents. Although the archive-keepers had a supervisory role and were financially responsible for the archive, it was a salaried clerk and his staff who physically handled the records (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.): 100–101). Papyri were susceptible to damage by insects, microorganisms, and mold, and traces of such damage are common in surviving documents (Leach and Tait 2000: 240–243). If the Arsinoite archive had become infested by bookworms or

termites (as seems likely, in view of the building itself collapsing), the consequences could have been devastating very quickly, especially if the shelves had not been regularly checked. The complaint of the keepers that incoming records were piling up in heaps (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.) no. 15 lines 67–69) also points to a backlog of unsorted material. Like the proverbial postal worker stockpiling undelivered mail, the staff of the archive may have been unable to cope with the influx of documents. On the other hand, the financing of sufficient numbers of workers to perform the essential tasks of pasting papyri into rolls, collating, filing, and monitoring the condition of the records was manifestly the responsibility of the keepers (Burkhalter 1990: 195–196), whose private fortunes were meant to cover all necessary expenses and repairs.

An alternative scenario is that the Arsinoite keepers lacked the motivation to maintain the archive in line with Roman standards. The institution of permanent archives in the regional capitals was a Roman initiative, underpinned by a distinctly Roman institutional vision of centralised archival systems and serving an array of Roman administrative claims and procedures. One would imagine that it was generally clear to Egyptian elites that they were being called upon to finance and run institutions that boosted the Roman governing power and enhanced their own governability—a point that presumably came into sharp focus with the creation of registries of real property, which gave administrators new and powerful means of overseeing private wealth. It should perhaps not come as too much of a surprise that in 103 CE, in the midst of the archive crisis, a Roman procurator discovered that the Arsinoite archive of acquisitions was also in a deplorable state, with records that kept vanishing or were impossible to locate (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.) no. 15 lines 110–130). The procurator also found a large parcel of damaged rolls sealed up because the keepers responsible for them had died. It may be inferred that one of the dead keepers was a certain Apollonios, who is attested in office for many years concurrently with Protogenes and Isidoros in the 70s and early 80s CE—the critical period of the archival mismanagement.

Could it be that the two pairs of keepers in charge of the Arsinoite archives during the two decades after the introduction of the registries of acquisitions collectively adopted a lax attitude to the archives as a form of passive resistance to Roman demands? In view of the evidence for Roman record-keeping being resented by provincials, and even provoking violent destruction and armed rebellion, such a scenario seems entirely plausible. For the same reasons, Roman administrators may have been hypersensitised to the problem and inclined to suspect that the crisis of the Arsinoite archives was no accident but subtly orchestrated sabotage. The silent deterioration of archival records through neglect was arguably even worse than overt destruction, since it was performed in ways that were difficult to trace and could remain unnoticed for decades (as was the case here). Evasive reactions to orders issued by governors to have damaged rolls recopied from Alexandria probably reinforced the impression that the archive-keepers were dragging their feet and acting in bad faith. One can also detect an element of cultural misunderstanding in this situation. It appears that the bulk of the damaged documents dated to a specific period prior to 90 CE when Protogenes and Isidoros were in office. The dilatory tactics of subsequent archive-keepers suggest that they were hopeful that, once enough time

had passed, Roman governors would stop insisting on the restoration of damaged rolls that were many decades old. However, the completeness of the archive was an administrative claim of fundamental importance for governor after governor, and the pursuit of archival mismanagement seems to have been a matter of principle.

Finallym in 124 CE—thirty-four years after the archive crisis first broke out under Mettius Rufus—the Governor Haterius Nepos issued a peremptory ruling that the damaged rolls would be recopied from Alexandria within six months or a sum of one talent would be paid (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.): 104–105 and no. 24 lines 29–34). As the task was not executed (and may, at this point, have been impossible), the property of one of the keepers—who had nothing to do with the original events—was frozen and auctioned off to the amount of one talent with 16 % interest (van Groningen 1950 (P.Fam.Tebt.) no. 24 lines 106–110). It was bitterly ironic that the institution employed for this purpose was the Roman registry of real property in the Arsinoite nome.

Conclusion

In his account of a colossal fire that raged through Rome in 192 (not believed to be caused by arson), Cassius Dio describes the near-complete incineration of records pertaining to the empire in archives on the Palatine hill, which he interprets as an omen that the impending evil of civil war would extend over the entire inhabited world (Cass. Dio 73.24). This is a rare acknowledgment of the global significance of archives for Roman imperial government and the catastrophic consequences of archival destruction—an issue that is otherwise studiously avoided in the sources. But the importance of archives is clear from the documentary evidence of Roman administration, which shows centralised institutions with coherent strategies for collecting, processing, storing, and retrieving records, functioning as information systems at the level of each province and on an empire-wide scale. Roman registries of real property (βιβλιοθῆκαι ἐγκτήσεων), which merged administrative data from multiple sources into legible files illustrating the net worth of each provincial inhabitant, were, by any standard, a remarkable achievement of information technology. In addition to its functional impact, Roman record-keeping also did crucial work for the idealisation of the Roman order, its rationality embodied by procedures of cataloging and classifying people and territories that "brought decorum to life and government" in newly pacified provinces (Cass. Dio 53.22.5), and its power showcased by the possibility of pursuing or liberating debtors residing throughout the empire via a record office in the city of Rome. The agency of archives as embodiments of the Roman order made them a natural target for subversion and sabotage, as we have seen. One could argue that the Roman state's demonstrative burning of fiscal records in public spaces illustrates a homeopathic approach to the issue of archival destruction, a kind of ritualised exorcism of a problem so threatening that it was deemed unspeakable and suppressed in Roman discourse. It does seem paradoxical that attacks on archives in the Roman context are consistently attributed to impecunious debtors, eliding the instrumental role of archival records in granting the imperial state oversight of and access to the assets of the propertied classes. At

the same time, the figure of the desperate debtor may be understood as an ideation of the power of the Roman state to exact its due.

One suspects that it was the proleptic, constitutive force of the archive—its "messianicity" in the sense of Derrida 1995—that was so disturbing to opponents of the Roman order. One may note the striking futurity expressed in the edict of Mettius Rufus: The files of the registries of real property, without which "no public or private affairs may be conducted properly" (μήτε τὰ ἰ[δι]ωτικὰ μ[ήτε τὰ δημ]όσια | πράγματα τὴν καθήκουσαν λαμβάνειν διοίκησιν, P.Oxy. II 237 col. 8 lines 28–29), were to be maintained "securely and for all time" (ἵνα δ' οὖν βεβαία τε καὶ εἰς ἅπαν διαμένῃ, 40). This expression was a cognate of the permanence (αἰώνιος διαμονή, sc. *aeternitas*) invoked in oaths and prayers on behalf of the Roman emperor. Soon after their creation, Roman archives were already indispensable. Like the archives, the empire itself was there to stay.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest Anna Dolganov declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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