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The Location and Size of Prektis in the Hermopolite nome

Ryosuke Takahashi

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- §1 This note seeks to resolve the issue of the location of a Hermopolite settlement named Prektis (↗ [TM Geo 2947](#)) and to assess its importance. I argue that Prektis was a substantial settlement located on the west side of the Nile rather than on the east side, as supposed by previous studies. This village is well attested in the surviving documentary evidence from the fourth century AD. Our records show that it belonged to the 13th pagus in c. AD 324–326 (↗ [P.Col. 9 247.258](#)) and then to the 15th pagus in c. AD 340.¹ The Hermopolite nome had 15 pagi in its territory, growing to 17 soon after AD 324–326. The pagi were numbered according to their position on a north-south axis, with the southernmost pagus counted as the first and the northernmost assigned the highest number. Some toponyms in the northern part of the Hermopolite nome can be identified with modern settlements, such as Thallou (12th pagus in c. AD 324–326; ↗ [TM Geo 4386](#)), which is now Talla near Minya; Peentalis (12th pagus; ↗ [TM Geo 4085](#)), which has become Bihdal, also near Minya; and Somolo (15th pagus; ↗ [TM Geo 3222](#)), now Samalut. We know, then, that Prektis must have been located to the north of modern Minya and to the south of Samalut.
- §2 In her fundamental work on the topography of the Hermopolite nome, Drew-Bear improves the text of ↗ [P.Strasb. 4 197](#) (4th c.) to read the toponym of Prektis in lines 4 and 7: ὁ πραιπ(όσιτος) τῆς Πρήκ(τεως) (the *praepositus castrorum* in Prektis) in lines 3–4 and ἐν τῇ α(ὐτῇ) [Π]ρήκ(τει) (in the same Prektis) in line 7. She identifies this site with Precteos, where the *ala I Valeria dromedariorum* (camel squadron) is said to have been garrisoned in Not. Dign. Or. 31.57.² The presence of soldiers in Prektis is also attested in Coptic and Arabic Christian texts in which the village is called Preht (ⲡⲣⲉⲩⲧ) and Qaṣr Abraḥt, respectively. According to the account of his martyrdom, Phoibammon, a Christian soldier from the camp at Preht, or Qaṣr al-Abraḡīt/Ibraḡīt, refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods in violation of Diocletian's decree, and was sent upstream to Antinoopolis and then to Asyut (Lykopolis) to be tried. His camp must, then, have been to the north of Antinoopolis.³ In his Arabic biography, Aba (A)Nub of Anṣinā (Antinoopolis) is said to have had visitors while in prison, among whom there were two soldiers from Qaṣr Abraḥt/Ibraḥt.⁴ This information does not tell us anything about how far or in which direction Prektis lay, but Amélineau concludes that the garrison was probably on the edge of the desert, in a suitable position, not far from Antinoopolis, to guard a commercial route across the desert.⁵ Taking this claim as her starting point, Drew-Bear suggests that Prektis stood on the east bank of the Nile, since the *via nova Hadriana* originated in Antinoopolis, from where it ran to the Red Sea.⁶ She gives another reason for locating Prektis on the east bank, which is that the reference to Precteos at Not. Dign. Or. 31.57 precedes the mention of southern garrisons on the east bank at Not. Dign. Or. 31.58–61, at Theraco (Hierakon; ↗ [TM Geo 3124](#)), Mutheos (Mouthis; ↗ [TM Geo 5832](#)),

1 ↗ [Drew-Bear 1979](#): 223.

2 BL 8.415; ↗ [Drew-Bear 1979](#): 222; for line 3, see BL 5.137. Not. Dign. Or. is dated to c. AD 400. While its descriptions reflect changes that occurred during the course of the fourth century AD, it presents the general picture that resulted from Diocletian's reforms: ↗ [Pollard 2013](#) and ↗ [Kaiser 2015](#).

3 ↗ [Copt.Enc.](#): 1963–1964; ↗ [Timm 1991](#): 2110; Gesa Schenke, ↗ [Cult of Saints, E02109](#). I follow Timm's transcription of the Arabic version of the village name

4 ↗ [Amélineau 1893](#): 12; ↗ [Drew-Bear 1979](#): 221; ↗ [Timm 1991](#): 2110.

5 ↗ [Amélineau, 1893](#): 12. According to Timm, medieval writers knew of a village called Abraht/Ibraht near Deir el-Bersha (↗ [TM Geo 2834](#)) and to the south of Antinoopolis. Timm wonders if there were two homonymous villages; ↗ [Timm 1991](#): 2111.

6 ↗ [Drew-Bear 1979](#): 221–223.

Silili (☞ [TM Geo 8882](#)), and Peamu (Peamou; ☞ [TM Geo 6435](#)).⁷ Drew-Bear's view is followed by Worp and Kessler. Worp examines the disposition of military units in Upper Egypt referred to in Not. Dign. and proposes corrections for the locations of some of the units, placing Prektis to the south of Antinoopolis on his map, on the eastern side of the Nile across from Hermopolis.⁸ However, as Kessler rightly remarks, Prektis in fact was located in the northern part of the Hermopolite nome, although he too places it on the east bank.⁹

§3 Worp's supposed location for Prektis does not fit with his own account of the general pattern according to which the units listed in Not. Dign. are distributed. He points out that the *alae* (Not. Dign. Or. 31.43–57) and then the cohorts (Not. Dign. Or. 31.58–67) are each arranged in a largely 'clockwise' pattern, which is to say that the listed units of each type start with those on the northern part of the east bank of the Nile and then progress to the south, before crossing over to the southern part of the west bank and then moving back up to the north. According to this scheme, the appearance on the list of the last unit of the *alae*, the *ala I Valeria dromedariorum Precteos*, just before the first units of the cohorts does not support Drew-Bear's interpretation that the *ala* was on the same side of the Nile as these cohorts. According to the 'clockwise' disposition, Prektis should be located on the west bank, in the northern part of the Thebaid described in Not. Dign. Or. 31. Worp admits that the proposed location of Prektis on the east bank disturbs the pattern, but he explains this deviation on the grounds that the supposed system underlying the order of the list was not rigidly applied.

§4 Against these views, there is a good reason to locate Prektis on the west bank at the north end of the Hermopolite nome without supposing the deviation from the general 'clockwise' pattern of the arrangement of the units in Not. Dign. There is no need to hypothesise that the camel squadron garrisoned at Prektis aimed at protecting at least only the *via nova Hadriana* whose regular traffic and commercial role have been doubted recently.¹⁰ Instead, it is most probable that the last four *alae* in Not. Dign. Or. 31.54–57 together form a group whose purpose was to police the Western desert, as Kucera points out.¹¹ The *ala II Herculia dromedariorum* was garrisoned at Psinabla (☞ [TM Geo 8201](#)) on the west bank of the river, in the Panopolite nome (Not. Dign. Or. 31.54).¹² The *ala I Abasgorum* and *ala I Quadorum* were both located in the Western oases (Not. Dign. Or. 31.55 (=41) and 56). The former was garrisoned at Hibis (☞ [TM Geo 2786](#)) in the Kharga oasis, while the latter is described as being based at 'Oasi minore, Trimtheos', namely Trimithis (☞ [TM Geo 2733](#)) in the Dakhla oasis.¹³ Then, another camel squadron, *ala I Valeria dromedariorum*, was garrisoned at Prektis. Even though the two camel squadrons were stationed in the two settlements in the Nile Valley, they were well-suited to the desert environment and seem to have operated in the Western desert.¹⁴ If this grouping is correct, it is reasonable to suppose that Prektis should be on the west bank, like Psinabla, rather than on the east bank. Taking into consideration its location in the northern part of the Hermopolite nome, however, Prektis must have connected with neither Hibis nor Trimithis but rather with the 'Oasis Minor' proper, namely the Bahariya oasis (☞ [TM Geo 2829](#)) where the *ala II*

7 The first three toponyms are attested in the It. Ant. Aug. 167.2, 166.6, and 166.4; cf. ☞ [van Berchem 1952](#): 66–67. Seeck identifies Silili with Selino (☞ [TM Geo 6351](#)) in his edition of Not. Dign. (Berlin, 1876, p.65). However, this identification is not certain: ☞ [Bowman 1978](#): 35; ☞ [Worp 1994](#): 467. The last toponym, Peamou in Greek, is referred to in ☞ [P.Panop.Beatty 2.292](#) (AD 300) alongside the *Cohors XI Chamauorum*. It is described as being on the opposite side of Abydos.

8 ☞ [Worp 1994](#): 469.

9 ☞ [Kessler 1994](#): 94.

10 ☞ [Malouta 2016](#).

11 ☞ [Kucera 2012](#): 313–314.

12 In ☞ [P.Panop.Beatty 2.169](#), the *ala* is 'at Toeto and Psinabla'. See also ☞ [P.Panop.Beatty 1.39](#), 86–87, 386, 389, 406 (AD 298), and ☞ [P.Panop.Beatty 2.29](#).

13 On the documentary evidence of the presence of soldiers in Trimithis, see ☞ [Ast and Bagnall 2015](#).

14 Furthermore, the *cuneus equitum Maurorum scutariorum* and *ala VIII*, two units stationed respectively in Lykopolis and Abydos, cities from which the Kharga oasis could be reached, must have guarded routes across the Western desert. Soldiers of the former unit are known from evidence from the Oasis Maior: ☞ [SB 20 14760](#) (4th c., Kharga) and perhaps ☞ [O.Douch 4 457](#) (4th – early 5th c.); see the commentary to ☞ [P.Oxy. 72 4893](#).

Armeniorum was stationed (Not. Dign. Or. 28.22) because Prektis was not very far from Oxyrhynchus, where a road to the Bahariya oasis began.¹⁵ The need to guard against attacks from the Western desert was very real. In c. AD 259–264, the village of Nesmeimis (☞ [TM Geo 2864](#)) in the Oxyrhynchite nome was attacked by the Libyan tribe of the Goniotai (☞ [P.Oxy. 46 3292](#)). Nesmeimis belonged to the southernmost pagus of the Oxyrhynchite nome and must, therefore, have been close to the border with the Hermopolite nome.¹⁶ In order to prepare against possible further attacks from the Western desert, the *ala I Valeria dromedariorum* garrisoned at Prektis must have played a practical role along with other soldiers in the Oxyrhynchite nome and Bahariya oasis.¹⁷

§5 Other evidence suggests that Prektis was one of the largest settlements in the north-west corner of the Hermopolite nome. Three official documents from the fourth century AD give some indication of the relative size of the settlement by providing information about the levels of the quantities of taxation and requisitions imposed on Prektis and its neighbouring villages. The first document is ☞ [SB 18 13147](#) (AD 340/341; cf. ☞ [Clarysse 2014](#): 106 n.18), a list of wine, meat, barley, and chaff to be collected from villages of the 15th pagus for the *annona militaris* for the 14th indiction. The text seems to record the amount of the annual payment.¹⁸ The names of eight villages appear in the document and for three of these – Prektis, Admenthon, and Krokodilon – the amounts of the impositions are preserved in the surviving text. This information is summarised in Table 1 below. There is some variation in the proportion of the contribution made by each village with respect to different items. While Prektis provided more barley and chaff than the other two villages, Admenthon contributed larger amounts of meat and wine than Prektis. If we apply a monetary valuation to each item on the basis of other contemporary documents, Admenthon appears to have contributed the largest total amount,¹⁹ although we cannot be certain that the size of the contribution accurately reflects the size of the settlement, as it might have been the case that some goods were simply not available in certain places (e.g. wine in Krokodilon).

Table 1: Contribution of Prektis and other villages in ☞ [SB 18 13147](#)

	Wine (sextarius)	Meat (pound)	Barley (artaba)	Chaff (pound)
Prektis	5,439	2,408	888	40,000
Admenthon (☞ TM Geo 8309)	9,849	3,716	700	23,366
Krokodilon (☞ TM Geo 2309)	0	3,333	490	23,500

§6 The second document is ☞ [P.Col.](#) ☞ [9 247](#) (c. AD 324–326), a papyrus codex which records the burden either assigned to or collected from 72 Hermopolite villages for the provision of military garments (*vestis militaris*). While the text lists the types and numbers of the garments assigned to each

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- 15 On the road network in the Western desert, see ☞ [Kucera 2012](#): 313, ☞ [Rossi 2012](#): 334. On the road between the Bahariya oasis and Oxyrhynchus, see ☞ [Paprocki 2019](#): 215–218.
- 16 For Nesmeimis, see ☞ [Benaissa 2021](#): 217–219. Worp proposes that ‘Nitnu’, where the *cohors IX Tzanorum* (Not. Dign. Or. 31.62) was garrisoned, should be identified with Netneou epoikion (☞ [TM Geo 5938](#); ☞ [Benaissa 2021](#): 220–221), a settlement near Nesmeimis: ☞ [Worp 1994](#): 466–467. According to his explanation, Netneou was corrupted to ‘Nitnu’ in the process of copying the manuscripts and Not. Dign. Or. 31.62 and 63 (*Cohors IX Alamannorum*, Burgo Severi [☞ [TM Geo 3899](#)]) should be placed after 31.67, where the final cohort in Not. Dign. Or. 31 is listed. His argument is proposed as an alternative to previous attempts to identify this place with either ‘Nithine’ in the Delta (☞ [Calderini, Diz.geogr.](#) 3: 355) or Antinoopolis (☞ [van Berchem 1952](#): 67). Worp’s argument seems to me to remain a mere possibility.
- 17 The Oxyrhynchus papyri attest soldiers in Oxyrhynchus who belonged to the *equites Maurorum scutariorum* based in Hermopolis Magna or Lycopolis (☞ [P.Oxy. 60 4084](#): AD 339; ☞ [P.Oxy.](#) ☞ [63 4381](#): AD 375; ☞ [P.Oxy. 72 4893](#): AD 375; cf. ☞ [P.Oxy. 67 4628](#): 4th c.) and the fortress at Psobthis/Psoftis (☞ [TM Geo 8248](#); ☞ [P.Oxy.](#) ☞ [60 4089](#): AD 351), which can be identified with Sosteos where the *ala II Assyriorum* was stationed (Not. Dign. Or. 28.33). Psobthis is more likely to be located in the Oxyrhynchite nome rather than in the Oasis Minor. See ☞ [Colin et al. 2012](#): 113–114 and ☞ [Colin, Laisney, and Marchand, 2000](#): 158–163.
- 18 ☞ [Mitthof 2001](#): 415.
- 19 In ☞ [Stud.Pal. 20 75](#) (4th c.; Hermopolites), one sextarius of wine and one pound of meat each cost 4 talents 2,000 drachmas. One artaba of barley costs 15 talents; in ☞ [SB](#) ☞ [14 11593](#) (c. AD 338–341; Hermopolites), one sextarius of wine costs 3 talents 2,000 drachmas and one pound of meat one talent 2,000 drachmas; in ☞ [BGU I 21](#) (AD 340; Prektis), chaff costs 480 drachmas per pound: ☞ [Bagnall 1985](#): 64–67.

village, the landowners of the villages in fact paid their contributions in cash. The text records that the provision of 12 items of clothing was imposed on Prektis. According to the editor's calculation, the monetary value of the clothing in question was 51,500 drachmas (☞ P.Col.☞ ☞ 9 247.258–263). Prektis's contribution was the fourth largest of the villages in the Hermopolite nome and the second largest in the 13th pagus to which it belonged.²⁰

§7 The third document is ☞ SB 16 12826 (AD 340), a report addressed to the *praepositus pagi* of the 15th pagus. It records payments by seven villages in the pagus. The value is represented in *folles* and *denarii*, one *folles* being 12,500 *denarii*. The komarchs of Prektis were to pay the largest amount out of all the villages, coming to 72 *folles* and an unknown number in *denarii*. These seven villages also appear in the record of the provision of military garments discussed above. The amount of the imposition on these villages is summarised in Table 2 below. While the relative size of tax liability of the villages is not always consistent when comparing the provision of the *vestis militaris* and the requisitions of cash, Prektis's position remains the same in both cases, providing the largest amount. Prior to the publication of ☞ P.Col. 9 247, Sijpesteijn had stated that we cannot know the population of Prektis and its neighbouring villages.²¹ While this remains true, the evidence now available permits us to conclude that Prektis had a greater capacity to bear the governmental impositions than its neighbours, probably as a result of a larger population and/or area under cultivation.²²

Table 2: Contribution of Prektis and other villages in ☞ SB 16 12826 and ☞ P.Col. 9 247

	Cash in SB 16 12826	Number of garments in P.Col. 9 247 ²³	Equivalent cash value in P.Col. 9 247
Prektis	72 <i>folles</i> NN <i>denarii</i>	12	51,500 drachmas
Admenthon (☞ TM Geo 8309)	33 f. 7,500 d.	2	8,400 dr.
Nache (☞ TM Geo 2955)	28 f. 2,600 d.	1 (together with Isieion)	4,000 dr.
Psychis (☞ TM Geo 2946)	19 f. 2,500 d.	1	3,300 dr.
Krokodilon (☞ TM Geo 2309)	13 f. 6,500 d.	2	9,400 dr.
Tiberiou epoikion (☞ TM Geo 7595)	9 f. 7000 d.	2	9,400 dr.
Isieion (☞ TM Geo 9923)	3 f. 8,500 d.	see Nache above	

²⁰ Of the 72 villages in ☞ P.Col. 9 247, with a pair of villages being dealt with in a single entry on two occasions, Kirka (☞ TM Geo 1107), in the same pagus as Prektis, pays the most, providing 65,300 drachmas for 15 garments.

²¹ ☞ Sijpesteijn 1987: 379. He also refers to a much less informative short memorandum, ☞ SB 14 11594 (4th c., Hermopolites), in which Prektis is written alongside '153 talents 1,000 drachmas' and Tiberiou epoikion alongside '200 talents'.

²² Worp suggests that Krokodilon should be identified with Tenis/Hakoris (☞ TM Geo 2309), a major settlement on the east bank between Minya and Samalut: ☞ Worp 1983. As Krokodilon does not appear as a large village in the fourth-century documents, one may doubt this identification. Worp also carefully points out the possibility that Krokodilon was '(semi-)independent' of Tenis/Hakoris, even though they were in the immediate neighbourhood of one another. I wonder if the whole or a part of Tenis/Hakoris and its territory belonged to the Antinoite nome in the fourth century. Alabastron Polis/Alabastrine (☞ TM Geo 2684), about 18 km south of Tenis/Hakoris, certainly belonged to the nomarchy of Antinoopolis in the second century AD and became the territory of the Antinoite nome in the fourth century AD: the introduction to P.Würzb. 8; ☞ Malouta 2012, 466; ☞ Eller 2022, 236; ☞ Gonis 2023 §7. However, there is no textual evidence to show how far the Antinoite nome extended to the north beyond Alabastrine.

²³ The number and cash value of garments in P.Col. 9 247 are taken from P.Col. 9 pp.110-113.



Fig. 1: A map to show ancient sites referred to in this article

§8 Villages neighbouring Prektis mentioned in the 4th-century documents and listed in Tables 1 and 2 are, however, not indicated in the map, except for Krokodilon. Sites whose exact locations are not certain are underlined and placed in approximate locations without dots. The map was created by the author based on the [Ancient World Mapping Center, “À-la-carte”](#). [Accessed: September 26, 2023].

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Takahashi, Ryosuke

ORCID:  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9865-2054>

Tokyo Metropolitan University

r_takahashi@tmu.ac.jp