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Columbia Papyri IX: The Vestis Militaris Codex. American Studies in Papyrology 39

Jennifer A. Sheridan, *Columbia Papyri IX: The Vestis Militaris Codex. American Studies in Papyrology 39*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998. 174, 12 pl.

Review by

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It is a pleasant surprise to see such an important papyrus document being brought out in a critical edition after over a century as an unpublished part of Columbia University's collection. This codex, found in Hermopolis, is the earliest known documentary codex and is one of the most important sources for the *Vestis Militaris*, a Late Roman military clothing tax. Previously known as P. Col. Inv. 544, it was originally composed, either in 324/5 or 325/6, to record the payments of each *pagus* of the Hermopolite nome to the *Vestis Militaris*. More than 25 years later, a private account was written on some of the codex's blank pages. Sheridan publishes the codex in two parts, P. Col. 247, "Account of Military Clothing for the *Vestis Militaris*," superseding SB XX 14661 and Sheridan's publication of this portion of the document for her dissertation. The other portion, P. Col. 248, "Private Account," is published here for the first time. The interesting story of why such an important document was not published decades ago, after being worked on by both John Day and J. Frank Gilliam, is related by Sheridan in her introduction.

Sheridan provides a clear and concise discussion of early codices in general, and this most interesting example in particular. It originally consisted of at least ten sheets, of which five and a half survive. The leaves are remarkably large for a documentary codex, averaging 12 x 25 cm. It still contains evidence of its unusual binding: the lacing was strung through two holes in the back half of the codex, and not through the fold.

P. Col. 247 originally listed the *Vestis Militaris* payments for all fifteen *pagi* of the Hermopolite nome, but the portion listing the first six, as well as the document's title and date, is missing. Sheridan convincingly places the document between 324 and 326, based on administrative nomenclature and the similarity of *P. Col. 247* to other local documents written in the 320s. The document lists villages and hamlets (*epoiki a*) by *pagus*, and each one's contribution to the *Vestis Militaris* in five categories: *sticharia teleia*, *sticharia parateleia*, *delmatika teleia*, *delmatika parateleia* and *pallia*. The amounts contributed in each category are generally one or two per village, but range as low as one-half and as high as five. As Sheridan notes, this shows that the amounts are based

on the size of the villages, that is, of their taxable fields. The fractions indicate that the payments were made in cash, and not in kind. Highly abbreviated, and enigmatic, notations were made on some of the margins.

The private household account, *P. Col. 248*, which was written in two columns on the penultimate page of the codex, is of little intrinsic interest. Sheridan dates it to ca. 350-360 on the basis of wine prices listed in it, and its very existence thus shows that the *Vestis Militaris* tax records were kept for at least 40 years, an indication of their importance.

After her presentation of the texts, Sheridan discusses a number of special topics and problems in four chapters and two appendices. The first of these chapters is “The *Vestis Militaris* and the Uniform of the Roman Army.” While the *Vestis Militaris* was collected in cash by the 320s, the document still represents the tax in terms of pieces of clothing — the cash calculation must have been reflected elsewhere. Therefore the document gives important, though problematic, information on the uniform of the Late Roman Army. Overall, this chapter is the weakest in the book (as well as the shortest, at only eight pages). Sheridan cannot be faulted for not utilizing the discussions of military clothing in Southern & Dixon, *The Late Roman Army* (1996) and Stephenson, *Roman Infantry Equipment: The Later Empire* (1999), but the absence of Bishop & Coulston, *Roman Military Equipment: From the Punic Wars to the Fall of the Empire*, (1993) from her bibliography is unfortunate. Sheridan’s decision not to use sculptural and other illustrative evidence in explaining the meaning of various terms in the document may have led her astray. She fails to take into account the fundamental change in Roman military uniform that occurred in the late second or early third century. Conversely, she draws on 6th and 7th century sources (such as Isidore and Maurikios) without considering what changes had occurred since the 4th century. Finally, Sheridan does not sufficiently distinguish military and civilian clothing or consider that the same term might have quite a different meaning inside and outside the army (cf. the modern term “blouse”).

Sheridan devotes some, but not enough, space to the meaning of the enigmatic terms “*teleios*” and “*parateleios*” (60 n. 14). *Teleios* does occasionally modify terms of clothing, in one case with the meaning of “adult-sized” as opposed to “child-sized” (*P. Hamb. 1.10*) and in Maurikios (*Strat. 1.2*), it is used with *plateia* to describe soldiers’ tunics. Sheridan concludes that, in this context, *teleios* means “full-sized” and *parateleios* “nearly full-sized.” This is a compelling suggestion, and would be our first attestation of differently sized Roman uniforms in any period. The idea is supported, to some extent, by evidence (not cited by Sheridan) that the height requirements for Roman soldiers seem to have been reduced in the fourth century (*Veg. Epit. 1.5, Cod. Theod. 7.13.3*). Thus, the villages would be supplying “large” and “small” sizes of the uniform, and while one might expect the document simply to say so, rather than using euphemisms, Sheridan’s solution may well be correct. There are, however, other possible translations for these terms. Sheridan, in her discussion of Day’s work on the papyrus, notes that he suggested “ready-to-wear” for *teleios*, with *parateleios* referring to pieces of garment not sewn together (2). Other options include “full-dress” and “undress,” “high quality” and “low

quality,” “decorated” and “undecorated” or (since breeches had become part of the Roman uniform by this time) “complete” (i.e. with breeches) and “incomplete.” Only further evidence and study can definitively decide which option is correct, and it should be noted that the question remains open.

Chapters Two (“Clothing Deductions and Acquisitions through the End of the Third Century”) and Three (“The Fourth Century *Vestis Militaris*”) discuss the various ways in which the army obtained clothing and the development of a special tax for that purpose. Sheridan begins her discussion with Polybius (6.39.15) but moves rapidly into the Imperial period, indeed so rapidly that she does not mention the Augustan reform and its impact on clothing requisition. Her discussion of the papyrological evidence is generally thorough, although she does not mention the military pay record found at Masada (*Mas. Doc. 722*), which includes clothing deductions. Evidence for clothing requisition in the early imperial period is thin, but it is clear that military officials were responsible for obtaining clothing from suppliers. Starting in the third century, responsibility for clothing requisition began to shift from the army itself to the bouletic class, a process that culminated, by the fourth century, in the *Vestis Militaris*. Sheridan’s discussion of how the new military clothing tax fit into the general scheme of the Diocletianic land tax system, and her “hypothetical collection model” of the Egyptian nomes, is excellent. A detailed description of the development of the tax over the fourth century follows, which clearly delineates the complicated, and evolving, chain of responsibility for, and accounting of, the new tax.

P. Col. 247 is also an important source of information on the toponyms and administrative organization of the Hermopolite nome in the fourth century. Chapter Four, “The Administration of the Hermopolite Nome,” discusses the new data published since Marie Drew-Bear’s seminal *Le Nome Hermopolite* (1979), adding the information now available from the codex (see also J. Gascou, *Un codex fiscal hermopolite* (P. Sorb. II 69) 1994). In most cases, *P. Col. 247* describes each tax-paying locality as a village (*kome*), but in six cases the term *epoikion*, translated as “hamlet,” is used. Sheridan does a special study on the difference between *komai* and *epoikia*, and by listing the tax liability of each locality (weighted in various ways) makes a persuasive argument that it is not merely a matter of size. The distinction, rather, appears to have developed historically: the *epoikia* were originally private estates, but by the fourth century, they were taxed and administered like villages. This chapter continues with a discussion of the change from toparchies to *pagi* at the turn of the fourth century, and the addition of two *pagi* (with a juggling of the villages assigned to them) that occurred in 326/7. Using the information in *P. Col. 247*, and drawing on Drew-Bear’s work, Sheridan creates a rough map of the Hermopolite nome and its political subdivisions before and after the reform.

The volume concludes with two useful appendices. Appendix 1, “Catalogue of Clothing Requisition Documents,” lists relevant papyri dating from the early second to the late fifth centuries, their date and provenance, a brief description and bibliography. The second appendix, “Catalogue of Toponyms,” lists the villages and hamlets of the

Hermopolite nome, each with its toparchy and pagus number (before and after 326/7), a bibliography and a list of references to the toponyms published since Drew-Bear's work.

The volume itself continues the high quality of the Columbia Papyri series. The publication of this papyrus is an important one for those studying the development of the codex, military logistics and taxation in the Late Empire, as well as for the administrative history of the Egyptian nomes. While there are several areas that need further study (and what *editio princeps* can claim otherwise?), Sheridan is to be congratulated for tackling such a major document and presenting it, and its perplexing problems, clearly and cogently. Her interpretations are well-argued and, for the most part, convincing. Youthful papyrologists might feel some melancholy at the publication of the 'last of the great papyri,' but recent discoveries in the western oases suggest that the 21st century may well provide them with documents as fruitful as *P. Col. 247*.