

Prison Management

BUREAUCRACY

We have suggested that ancient Mediterranean states employed punitive carceral practices which touched nearly every aspect of society. Yet such a deleterious state power to incarcerate also had a banality to it, emerging in the emotionless, tedious routines of bureaucracy—carceral regimes etched in administrative triplicate. (Arendt 1994, 287). As Traianos Gagos and Peter Sijpesteijn (1996) have observed, in the Roman period “several hundreds of petitions of all sorts, some complaining about injustice committed against certain individuals or reports on smaller and larger scale crimes, as well as reports and declarations on every imaginable aspect of the administration swamped the office of these administrators every day. The documents that have survived represent but a small portion of the amount of daily paperwork reaching these headquarters” (83). The sheer quantity of surviving documents illuminating the prison, its captives, and its oversight speaks to one of the central features of incarceration in antiquity: the system was fundamentally bureaucratic, involving not only judges and laws but private individuals and interpersonal conflict, all of which resulted in documents being produced, copied, reproduced, disseminated, collected, filed, consulted, and ultimately discarded, only to be excavated as part of the great scramble for ancient papyri in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this section we survey documents produced in the process of incarcerating individuals and maintaining carceral spaces.

It is important to keep in mind that our archive skews our vision most profoundly when discussing the topic of bureaucracy in particular. There is no doubt

that the overwhelming majority of ancient prisoners left no discernible mark on the archive. It is impossible to quantify the extent of what we have lost, though we can be certain of a few facts: papyrological sources survive overwhelmingly from the urban centers of Egypt, and they survive in significantly greater numbers from the early centuries of Ptolemaic and Roman rule than from later periods. Inconsistent patterns of preservation require us to take care in extrapolation from Egypt to other settlements in the Mediterranean basin, and the archive leaves rural contexts poorly understood and the late Ptolemaic period difficult to characterize. What's more, channels of documentary production differ between the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, while the turn of the third century CE witnessed another revolution in documentary production in what has been called the "municipalization of writing" in Roman Egypt (Clayton 2018). All this together might lead one to be reasonably skeptical that useful conclusions could be drawn from such an archive.

It is striking, however, that the papyrological archive includes prison documents from the entire breadth of our time period and represents prisoners from all segments of society. That is to say, the documentary record offers a window into the institution that does not seem irreparably skewed by class, location, or time period; it is a cross-section of society, though one cut with a dull and imprecise knife. While documentary production changed between the Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine periods—especially when it came to contracts and legal proceedings—the underlying carceral *practices*, it seems, remained remarkably intact.

Even individual documents attest to the extent of the bureaucracy inherent in carceral systems. In November of 22 CE, an agent working at the estate of a woman named Antonia wrote to the governor of Arsinoites, complaining that fifteen days earlier a group of herdsmen had led their flocks into his employer's fields and that the animals had consumed a modest quantity of wheat (P. Oslo 3.123, D90). The agent's letter ends: "I request that you write to the head administrator of Philadelphia so that the accused can be brought before you quickly for the necessary punishment, lest I be disadvantaged, given what I sent in the other petitions. Farewell." A second person supplemented the document in different handwriting, recording the day that the request was processed along with the governor's response: "On the sixteenth [November 11]. Send them up [from the prison to be tried?]." P. Oslo 3.123 is only one document, but it speaks to the grand paper trail following along behind accusations of even minor crimes.

Based on similar cases in our archive, we should expect some variation of the following chain of events occurring in connection with this single extant document: first (1) a letter had been written to the local authorities requesting the arrest of the accused and that, as a result of the accusation, (2) an arrest warrant was drawn up. Upon arrest their names would have been added to (3) a roll of prisoners when they arrived in jail. (4) A letter from an agent of the victim (P. Oslo

3.123, above) often elicited (5) a response from the governor back to the sender and (6) a further letter from the governor to the head administrator in Philadelphia (perhaps this same letter was simply forwarded, given that an order was appended to end with the decision of the governor). When the head administrator acted on the governor's order to transfer prisoners, they may be sent with (7) a written notice of transfer, and when the prisoners arrived, the governor would have likely written back to the victim's agent, with (8) a notice to appear for the trial. For their part, the prisoners may have done what countless others did in their position: (9) written a letter (perhaps several) to the governor to request that they be released on bail and also, perhaps (10) another letter to a family member, friend, or acquaintance in order to secure funds or assurances resulting in their release on bail. If granted, bail would be attested in a receipt, often in two copies: (11) one to be retained by the prison registrar, and (12) one kept by the imprisoned person.

Before the prisoner ever arrived before a judge, twelve distinct documents, involving no fewer than six people, are likely to have been produced by this one case—some in multiple copies—and the trial itself involved a flurry of additional documentary production. Further, many of these documents pertain to just one of the arrested men, but P. Oslo 3.123 points to three prisoners accused of the same crime, each of whom were at liberty to write their own letters seeking supplies or release. Even if administrative corners were cut and the men sat quietly with their accused crimes, sending no requests for aid, documents already start to pile up—even if these men were only in prison for the fourteen days between their accused crime and the processing of this letter, as opposed to the more than three years that other prisoners waited for release in evidence from the second century BCE (P. Coll. Youtie 1.12, D4 [177 BCE]; *CIIP* 4.3.3689, D170 [second century BCE]). The corpus includes examples of every type of document listed above. In a handful of instances, we have more than one document from a single prisoner, though in the vast majority of cases only one piece survives. Every puzzle piece implies an entire lost dossier. We are fortunate, however, that enough bureaucratic papyri survive that it is possible to understand the typical flow of documents resulting from even brief incarceration. This production and flow of bureaucratic documents is itself meaningful and worth careful consideration.

The preponderance of bureaucratic sources for the carceral system relate to the movement, status, and provisioning of captives: arrest warrants, lists of prisoners, and individual requests and records of prison deliveries, along with reports on labor, release, escape, and death. Of this group, the largest collection is arrest reports, which survive from every period covered by this book. As noted above, the fastest track to incarceration across the ancient world was to owe somebody money, especially someone of high social status who had well-established connections to social and political power, and a willingness to grease the wheels of the carceral apparatus to turn in their favor. The decision to arrest someone could be taken by any number of people, and, as Gagos and Sijpesteijn (1996) have noted,

at least in the Roman period such orders were only drawn up if the accused were already assumed to be guilty (78). Papyri like P. Hib. 1.34 and 1.73 are typical of early Ptolemaic sources, according to which a prison guard himself was tasked by a local administrator with locating and arresting a debtor and extracting from him either the loaned item (a donkey), or its monetary equivalent. In a complaint to the king, the guard claims that another man (apparently the head prison guard of the region) released the debtor without exacting payment (P. Hib. 1.34, D48 [244–243 BCE]; P. Hib. 1.73 D49 [244–243 BCE]; Bauschatz 2013, 107–9). Interestingly, P. Hib. 1.73 is only a draft of the guard's complaint to the local administrator (*epistatēs*)—before the document was dispatched a clean copy was likely composed, adding yet another layer to the proliferating paperwork that was part of the carceral apparatus.

One letter to Zeno speaks expressly about the “regular procedure” of documentary production on behalf of people in prison. A man named Philo writes to Zeno, thanking him for attempting to secure the release of a man named Hermokrates who had been arrested. He claims that in addition to Zeno, “several other people put themselves to trouble on his behalf, but the most effective was Kaphisophon son of Philippos, the physician. The written report of the inquiry, which acquits him of all the charges, is already in the hands of Dositheos the recordkeeper [*hupomnēmatographos*] in order that the king may read it before letting him be released, as this is the regular procedure [*para to ethos einai houtos ginesthai*]” (P. Mich. 1.55, D87 [240 BCE]). Here we see explicitly stated what other papyri simply imply—prisoners would write to multiple people with the hope that at least one recipient would be able to secure their release.

Documentary production was a regular part of the social institution of incarceration in Ptolemaic Egypt and, as we have seen, a sense of “regular procedure” continued in the Roman and Byzantine period. It is this environment, in which documents ensure a prisoner's bondage as much as the fetters affixing them to their prison, that makes sense of the report about the emperor Gaius (Caligula) burning records so that he would be “unable to punish” political prisoners (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 59.6.1–3, L126 [ca. 230 CE]). Two papyri from the late antique Apion archive are nearly identical—using the same format and language to request release on bail for different defendants, showing that the formulaic and bureaucratic nature of paperwork for requesting release on bail for Egyptian debt prisoners continued largely intact throughout the period covered by this book (P. Oxy. 83.5373, D217 [552 CE]; P. Oxy. 83.5375, D216 [557 CE]).

P. Hib. 2.249, from the mid-250s BCE, highlights another standard procedure: an Oxyrhynchite official wrote a letter ordering the arrest of a number of local grain gatherers. While it is not precisely clear to whom the letter was written, in the Ptolemaic period these letters were often written to either the treasurer (*oikonomos*) or head administrator (*epistatēs*) of the city, or to one of the chiefs of police, either the *archephodos* or the *archiphulakitēs*, while in the Roman period, such orders were

typically addressed to a prison guard or local official like a governor (*stratēgos*) (D53 [258–254 BCE]). P. Oslo 2.21 is a typical example: a request that a man named Apollonios from the city of Karanis be arrested, having been accused of the crime of picking olives earlier than the appointed harvest season. This letter, dated September 29, 71 CE, is addressed not to the governor, however, or to the local prison guard, but to the local Roman centurion (D89). Documentary sources like these confirm what we see in literary materials: Roman soldiers were not reserved for strictly “military operations.” Rather, they regularly appear in papyri and literary accounts alike as police officers. In the late fourth century, the orator Libanius reiterated the use of soldiers to carry out arrests, complaining to the emperor that rich landlords regularly lodge false accusations against their impoverished tenants; “just a word or two is needed, and a soldier goes down to the farm, complete with fetters, they are arrested, and the prison takes them in” (*Oration* 45.5, L52 [386 CE]). It may be the case that the centurion of P. Oslo 2.21 arrested the accused and delivered him to a civic prison, but it is perhaps at least as likely that this civil prisoner was incarcerated in a military prison, as we see in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 7. In either case, it is clear that the military played a hands-on role in arrests, even for petty crimes. The modern world mirrors the ancient in this respect: the boundary between the carceral and the military state is porous and often wholly indeterminate (Moran, Turner, and Arnold 2019).

The surviving summons are quite cursory, many resembling P. Mich. Mchl. 5, a small slip of papyrus from the second century CE roughly the size of a playing card that reads in its entirety as follows: “To the chief of police [*archifodōi*] of Taampemou. Send Markos surnamed Mallos and Eutyches with a guard, being accused by Sarapion” (fig. 21). Even our English translation inflates the text—in Greek it comprises a mere twelve words, and yet it contains all the necessary information for the local police chief. The order is written in a quick but trained hand, unsurprising given the ubiquity of such summons, many of which were apparently mass produced (Gagos and Sijpesteijn 1996, 83–85). Here we have an explicit order to move imprisoned individuals under guard, though it is not clear whether they have already been apprehended and are waiting in a jail or whether they are to be arrested and delivered. Following the text, the scribe wrote two lines of small strokes that are either decorative or, more likely, intended to hedge against a subsequent writer adding further text to the order—similar to a quickly disappearing relic of the modern era, in which entries on personal checks are completed with a horizontal line to guard against appended text that changes the meaning of the document. This scribe’s concern was not unwarranted: the documentary archive includes accusations from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods of carceral records being altered or fabricated, leading to further conflict and accusations of unjust imprisonment (P. Mich. 1.36, D214 [254 BCE]; BGU 16.2639, D212 [10–9 BCE]).

Even simple summons could sometimes elicit replies from the officers charged with carrying out the task, as in the case of P. Oxy. 7.1033. On October 19, 392 CE, a

order to adjudicate, the prefect asked that the *colletio* be brought in for inspection: apparently a list of people arrested, or perhaps simply the person who took down the testimony about the riot, which was extracted through torture. Because the request could not be fulfilled, the prefect ordered the prison registrar (*commentariensis*) to hold a man in custody until the proper documentation was produced. According to John R. Rea, editor of the papyrus, *commentarienses* “were in all probability not employed in recording the trial but rather were in charge of prison records”; they were the registrars of the prison, collecting records that could be produced during legal proceedings, such as in the trial against Verres in which Cicero demanded “let us have the prison record [*rationem carceris*], which is carefully kept so as to show the dates on which prisoners are received, and on which they die, or are put to death” (Rea 1983, 100; Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.5.147, L203 [70 BCE]). Given that such records were intended to be provisional, it is likely that many were kept on wax tablets rather than more permanent media like papyrus or parchment. If so, this would account for their relative absence in the documentary record.

A law of 380 CE specifies what information such prisoner lists were intended to include, assessing a fine of twenty pounds of gold if a prison *commentariensis* failed to record and report “the number of persons, the types of offenses, the form of incarceration, and the ages of the imprisoned” at least every thirty days (CI 9.4.5, L63 [380 CE]). In their capacity as filing clerks, *commentarienses* would have been peculiarly situated to receive bribes in exchange for inserting or deleting names from records, accusations that we saw above in P. Mich. 1.36 and BGU 16.2639, and perhaps the type of chicanery that the scribe of P. Mich. Mchl. 5 attempted to head off with his line of X’s at the end of his cursory arrest warrant (fig. 21; P. Mich. 1.36, D214 [254 BCE]; BGU 16.2639, D212 [10–9 BCE]). Likewise, the Jewish philosopher Philo recounted precisely this type of administrative duplicity in Alexandria during the third decade of the first century CE, painting a vivid picture of record tampering by a certain man named Lampo.

For [Lampo] stood alongside the governors as they issued judgments and he took down notes [*hypemnēmatizeto*] on the cases and introduced an organization [to the notes; *eisagōn hōs echōn taxin*]. Then, in some cases, he erased certain parts or purposefully omitted other things. Sometimes he interpolated some things that were not said. And other times he changed by remodeling, inverting, and turning the notes upside down, making money by the syllable, or rather by every letter stroke, the paper-porer. (*Against Flaccus* 131, L64)

Philo reports that this court registrar was so ruthlessly effective in documentary subterfuge that the populace regularly condemned him as a “pen-murderer” (*kalamosfaktēs*), but that the “perpetual flood of new cases private and public” prevented governors from properly scrutinizing the work of their staffs (132–33). He vehemently disapproved of the registrar’s performance and aimed with his

treatise to expose these abuses of the prison and the bureaucracy that (sometimes) underlies carceral practices. Nevertheless, his attempt to expose abuse betrays a broader cultural assumption that court documents were fluid and contested, and that record keepers were hardly immune from temptation to capitalize on their unique position within the bureaucracy.

Together, these sources situate the record keeper as a figure wielding surprising amounts of power in Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine Egyptian carceral systems, and they speak further to the prison cell as an extension of the registrar's chambers. The prefect's order in the case before Quintus Maecius Laetus about the 650 rioters, discussed above, further underscores the power of the *commentariensis*. In a sense, it was prison registrars who were tasked with holding people in custody: "[Laetus] said to the *commentarienses*, 'Let the *duplicarius* be held in custody . . .'" (SB 16.12949, D62 [207–68 CE]). Unless we are to assume that *commentarienses* performed double duty as registrar and bailiff, then in the logic of this Roman court proceeding, the physical sequestering of a prisoner is a secondary operation, with the primary force of incarceration accomplished through the bonds of bureaucracy. This vast sea of legal protocols, checks and balances, and paperwork took time to work. In this case, it was bureaucracy's slow clockwork that held these rioters lingering in prison.

Sometimes notices about captives moved between prisons, as we see in P. Sorb. 3.135, from 224 BCE, in which a prison guard from the village of Mouchis wrote to the local governor (*stratēgos*) about a man arrested in Crocodilopolis for a debt owed to a man from Cyrene (D60). The short notice explicitly references three further documents that do not survive, letters of various sorts, along with a registration of a triflingly minor debt—on the order of a few obols—and a report moving between the prison in the regional center of Crocodilopolis and its the outlying village of Mouchis, roughly thirty kilometers away (Winkler 2018). The fragmentary nature of the papyrus precludes a full picture of the situation, but it nevertheless speaks to the intricately bureaucratized nature of the Ptolemaic carceral apparatus.

Prisoners, too, moved between carceral spaces, often with an escort carrying documentation, as we show below in the section on prisoner transport. More numerous than orders to move large numbers of prisoners between carceral facilities are orders for single prisoners or small groups to appear before government officials. P. Tebt. 2.290 is a paradigmatic record in an exemplary state of preservation (fig. 22). In it we find a short note, written in the late first or early second century CE from the governor (*stratēgos*) to the head administrator (*epistatēs*) of Tebtunis, summoning a man named Galates and his wife to appear before the governor. It also records the name of their accuser, Semele, the daughter of Akousilaos. It is possible that Galates and his wife were free, but it is just as likely that they had already been arrested, and the administrator was simply being asked to send prisoners for trial. The possibility is stronger still in cases where authorities



FIGURE 22. P. Tebt. 2.290, D78 (75–125 CE). “[To the chi]ef [*epistatei*] of Tebtunis. Send up Galates and his wife, [bo]th children of Kronion, who are accused by Semele daughter of Akousilaos [Seal]. The governor summons you.” Order for arrest with attached clay seal showing the bust of an emperor. Note that the papyrus is mounted between thick glass, with a hole cut to accommodate the seal. Photo courtesy of the Center for the Tebtunis Papyri, University of California, Berkeley.

order that people be sent “with a guard,” as is the case in SB 24.16005 and P. Mich. Mchl. 5, above, indicating that they are to arrive under carceral control (D67 [second century CE]). As we saw above in a Ptolemaic example, P. Tebt. 2.290 from the Roman period uses a seal to authenticate the document: a small clay disk remains on the surface of this papyrus to this day, bearing the bust of an emperor, a partial fingerprint of the official who attached it, and an inscription reading “the governor summons you.”

Complaints are the most common type of document found among the surviving records of carceral bureaucracy, and they often double as petitions for release. In 177 BCE a man wrote a letter complaining of his false imprisonment at “Big Prison” in Crocodilopolis, to which he had been transferred three years earlier and where he feared that he would die if not released soon (P. Coll. Youtie. 1.12, D4). It seems that the man was initially arrested on account of a tax debt, along with his guarantors. The man claims that he was arrested without proper legal proceedings and should have not been subject to arrest in the first place given that he had a pardon from the governor, as well as from King Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra, extending down to 177 BCE. Interestingly, the surviving document doesn’t appear to be the official version dispatched from the prison, but rather a draft: numerous phrases are crossed out and rewritten above the line, implying that the text, once established, was transferred to a fair copy, with this version discarded to be excavated some two millennia later.

Changes in local prison oversight could also spell trouble for prisoners and necessitate further bureaucratic wrangling. Between the years 7 and 4 BCE a man named Satabous and his son were accused of murder by two men, both named Opis. The father and son had been thrown into prison after their trial before

Cordus, the chief of police in the town of Arsinoites. The prisoners dispatched a petition to the prefect of Egypt, written in beautiful handwriting more common in ancient books than petitions (P. Lond. 2.354, D80). CPR 15.15, on the other hand, appears to be a draft of this same petition, written in cursive script more common among documentary sources and recording extra details that were later edited out of the formal petition (D131 [7–4 BCE]; Jördens 2017, 272). Together, these papyri suggest that a scribe may have visited the men in prison to take notes and work up a draft, and sometime later produced another copy for dispatch. In their complaint, the two incarcerated men allege that they had been cleared for release by Cordus, “but before we were released from the prison, Cordus was transferred and Brison took his place.” The men request that the prefect write to the governor of Arsinoites and demand their release so that they can get back to their work as tenant farmers, along with an investigation into the situation. In this petition and its draft we see a common theme again, present across the sources and time period under discussion: incarceration often began and ended according to the whims of local officials, with prisoners’ only recourse being somehow to attract the attention of a yet more senior official, sometimes through petitions written by trained, professional writers resulting from multiple successive drafts. Quite opposed to the traditional notion of bureaucracy as the depersonalization of state power, these documents show just how personal the bureaucracy of incarceration could be. The changing political configuration, the transfer of a prison guard overseeing a carceral facility, the failure to deliver a prisoner’s petition to the relevant administrator: each was tied to a bureaucratic process that was entirely out of the hands of a prisoner yet could seal their fate.

Occasionally the same petitions were drafted and dispatched to different recipients, as is the case in PSI 4.419 from the mid-third century BCE, in which three men write to Zeno asking for release, “lest we be destroyed by hunger in prison, given that we are foreigners” and, one suspects, as a result not receiving visitors to help tend to their basic material needs (D57 [262–229 BCE]). They ask Zeno to approach Philiskon, the chief treasurer of Arsinoites, to effect their release, and they end their letter informing him that they have written another letter presenting their request to Philiskon directly.

Follow-up letters are common, as well. P. Petr. Kleon 58 is a relatively unremarkable request for release in which a man named Demetrios writes to Kleon, an engineer responsible for water infrastructure in Arsiniotes during the mid-third century BCE: “To Kleon, greetings from Demetrios. I have already written to you before about the arrest for which I have been arrested now . . . Think of me as your own son and get me out of prison. You will not suffer any harm. For I am in need of a lot of things in the prison. Respectfully” (D55 [255 BCE]). Demetrios’s letter does not speak to the reason for his imprisonment, but Demetrios claims to have already written to Kleon and sends this follow-up letter because he had already informed Kleon of the events leading to his arrest.

In this case, remarkably, the first letter that Demetrios sent to Kleon also survives, and it at least partially hints at why this prisoner writes to a water engineer for aid. Demetrios tells a complex story in his initial complaint: he was a regular at the mining camp he calls “the Works,” and on a recent visit, he had picked up a chisel and was accused of attempting to steal it (P. Petr. Kleon 54, D17 [255 BCE]). Five days later, while bringing bread to the prisoners in the camp, one of the foremen’s brothers came to Arsinoites and attacked Demetrios; the ensuing brawl was broken up by the city elders. Demetrios was responsible for provisioning the prison camp, and in his letter to Kleon he complains that the rift between him and the camp’s overseers was so serious that the mining itself may not be able to proceed for lack of food deliveries. In these two letters we glimpse a bit of the bureaucratic infrastructure supporting the prison labor system, the precarity of even the people tasked with provisioning the laborers, and their direct relationship with the industries benefiting from the extractive labor that runs on the input of incarcerated bodies. Demetrios was a mid-level staffer, shuffling between the office of a water engineer and a mining complex; it would not be surprising to learn that the mines, as well as its prison labor, were running to supply Kleon with raw material for his hydraulic projects. Demetrios exploits his position as middleman in his request for supplies in prison, claiming that “you know that we have been hard pressed during the works [ie. the mining activities], and now I am being utterly afflicted since I have been carried off to prison . . .” (P. Petr. Kleon 58, D55 [255 BCE]). Having served as a cog in the carceral system, Demetrios wrote as one who now had first-hand knowledge of its oppressive character.

Death notices of all types are common in the papyri, produced primarily to amend the tax record, including notices about people who died in prison. P. Oxy. 43.3104 is one such record, from Oxyrhynchus in 228 CE, recording the death of a tax farmer who contracted an illness in prison and died some eight weeks into his incarceration (D15). This notice comes from the Roman imperial period, but it speaks to the durability of carceral structures from the Ptolemaic period onward: this man was imprisoned for a fiscal debt and the notice explicitly states that he was incarcerated in the tax office prison (*logistērion*), as we see in numerous Ptolemaic era sources. One of the prison guards was illiterate, and signed the notice through another man named Aurelius Theon, while the other guard signed his own name.

How were all these documents created? In the case of official orders, prisoner lists, and the like, we should expect that the prison registrar, either as part of the tax office or as dedicated to the prison itself, produced and maintained bureaucratic papers. As we just saw in P. Oxy. 43.3104, sometimes even the prison staff members possessed enough functional literacy to sign documents, and it is possible that they were involved in production at times, as well. Prisoner petitions and letters present more of a puzzle, but the question is not intractable. Ancient prisons were porous spaces, allowing for the delivery of supplies to prisoners and communication between the inside and the outside, often through embrasures

or barred windows of the sort we explored in chapter 2. Perhaps prisoners were released to consult with legal agents and scribes at times, but archaeological evidence suggests that this was hardly necessary in many cases. In the case of civic prisons especially, where one could stand on a public street and communicate through a window, it was often possible to interact with prisoners without ever having to enter the prison.

How is it that so many letters emerged from the dark, feculent carceral facilities, seemingly packed with lower-social status offenders within a largely illiterate society? Here the evidence allows us only an educated guess. In at least a few instances it is possible that multiple prisoner letters were written by the same person on behalf of prisoners. It is notoriously difficult to identify writers based solely on the appearance of the handwriting, though as Trevor Evans (2005) notes, “documents written in informal hands, which have a greater tendency toward ‘individualistic’ features, are especially promising.” Four prisoner letters from Zeno’s archive display precisely such features, including remarkably similar handwriting, phrasing, and layout—enough to suggest that they were either written by the same person or that they were produced by writers with remarkably similar training (P. Cair. Zen. 3.59492, D37; P. Mich. 1.87, D50; PSI 4.419, D57; P. Lond. 7.2045, D81 [all 263–229 BCE]). Together, these papyri offer insight into the production of prisoner letters, an aspect of incarceration that remains invisible in the vast majority of cases, where we have access only to a single document, disconnected from any further context.

All four letters begin with “To Zeno, Greetings,” with a space between the words, followed by another space and the name of the sender (fig. 23). The letters have identical final greetings, as well, ending with “Good wishes” (*eutuchei*), written alone on a separate line, detached from the body. Both of these generic formatting features are common in letters from the Zeno archive, though they are by no means universally attested in the collection. Nevertheless, the cluster of coincidences is striking. If we add to this writing with the fibers in P. Cair. Zen. 3.59492 (D37), suggesting a new piece of papyrus used for a clean copy, compared with P. Mich. 1.87 (D50), which is written against the fibers, suggesting a reused scrap of papyrus, then we start to get a picture, perhaps, of a single writer who wrote a quick draft of a requested prisoner letter represented in P. Mich. 1.87, while P. Cair. Zen. 3.59492 is another prisoner’s request which has already gone through the drafting stage and been transferred to a clean copy on a fresh piece of papyrus. Different levels of refinement add to this impression: P. Mich. 1.87 is written across the fibers and riddled with small spelling mistakes and missing words, some of which are corrected above the line, suggesting that it was written more quickly, while P. Cair. Zen. 3.59492 is written along the fibers, perhaps a final product after editing; it even includes the name of its addressee written on the back.

To similarity of handwriting, greetings, and format, we can add similarity of phrasing: P. Cair. Zen. 3.59492, P. Mich. 1.87, and PSI 4.419 use a phrase in common,

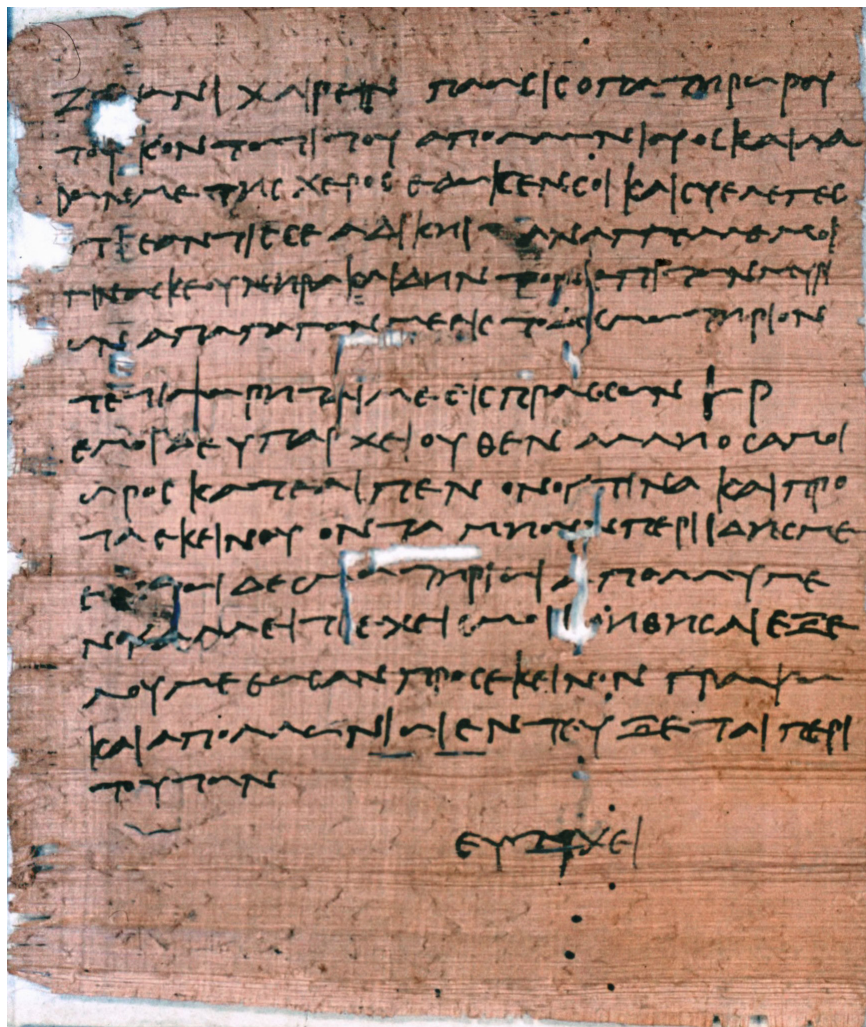
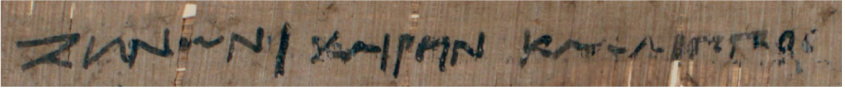


FIGURE 23. P. Cair. Zen. 3.59492, D37 (263–229 BCE).

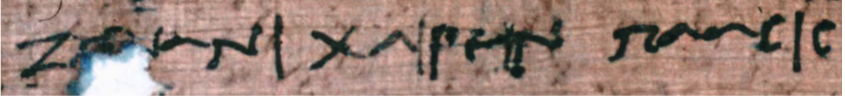
“in the prison [*en tōi desmōtēriōi*],” with only slight orthographic changes, and both P. Cair. Zen. 3.59492 and P. Mich. 1.87 use a peculiar construction with the verb “to overlook” (*perioran*), inflected in the aorist subjunctive, to render their plea. This phrasing is peculiar, found only in the third and second centuries BCE, and even then in an exiguously small number of examples—six, by our count, of which half are prisoner letters in the Zeno archive (D37, D50, D213). In P. Cair. Zen. 3.59492 we find “So, do not overlook me perishing in the prison [*mē oun periideīs me en tōi desmōtēriōi apollumenon*]”; and in P. Mich. 1.87 we have “I pray and beseech

Ζήνωνι χαίρειν Κάλλιππος

P. Mich. 1.87
D50, l. 1



P. Cair. Zen.
3.59492
D37, l. 1



Ζήνωνι χαίρειν Παῶσις

μὴ περιίδης με ἐν τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ

P. Mich. 1.87
D50, l. 5



P. Cair. Zen.
3.59492
D37, l. 10–11



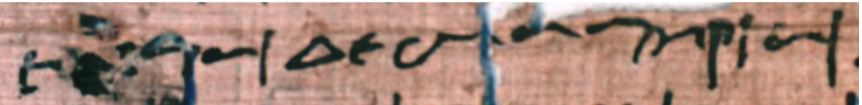
μὴ οὖν περιίδης με / ἐν τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ

ἐν / τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ

P. Mich. 1.87
D50, l. 8–9



P. Cair. Zen.
3.59492
D37, l. 11



ἐν τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ

FIGURE 24. Script comparison of P. Mich. 1.87 (D50) and P. Cair. Zen. 3.59492 (D37 [both 263–229 BCE]). Images courtesy of the Cairo Museum, University of Michigan Libraries, and Adam Bülow-Jacobsen.

you, do not overlook me in the prison [*deomai sou kai iketeō, mē periidēs mē en tōi dezmōtēriōi*]” (fig. 24). A number of other points of comparison are possible that needn’t detain us here, including the striking similarity of ligatures in these two letters. It is possible that these requests from prisoners to Zeno were all written by the same person. More certain is that they were produced by writers with remarkably similar training, analogous formats for such letters, and who even use identical stock phrases to render a prisoner’s pleas.

In either case, similarities among the corpus of prisoner letters in the Zeno archive suggest strongly that these letters are not written by prisoners themselves. (The only real contender for a letter written “from the inside” is P. Cair. Zen. 3.59519, where the thick strokes may indicate writing in low-light conditions [D134, 263–229 BCE].) Rather, this cluster of letters gives the impression that trained writers

periodically visited the local prison to record petitions. Given the often-discussed bureaucratic “thinness,” especially in rural Egypt, the list of candidates for *who* produced these documents is rather short, pointing to professional writers as the primary producers of petitions in both the Ptolemaic and Roman periods (Hengstl 1997, 286–87; Kelly 2011, 41–45). Maybe these petitions were taken by a scribe on Zeno’s staff or perhaps a staffer in the local writing office (*grapheion*), which was a regular institution in even small cities during the Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine periods. What is clear is that the writer or writers had a durable notion of what a prisoner letter should look like and sound like. It would be easy to read too much into this small grouping of papyri. Whether written by the same writer or a small group of writers, they demonstrate materially what we know, *a priori*, must have occurred: professional writers found a way to take letters from prisoners and dispatch them to local power brokers. The many surviving petitions, sometimes in multiple drafts, suggest that drafting prisoner petitions was a routine task of a local scribe in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, either officially or as a side job.

Prisoners were sometimes released outright, as we saw above. Often, however, they were released on bail, like we see in P. Oxy. 2.259 from 23 CE, creating yet another stream of paperwork (D72). This papyrus begins by noting that it is a “copy of a bond” written to the “overseer of the Zeus prison,” in which a Persian man named Theon swears by the name of the emperor Tiberius that he is responsible for a prisoner that he has bailed out, and that he will return him within thirty days of a formal request to do so. If Theon fails to return the prisoner, he will pay two minae of gold; further, he will be arrested himself. He agrees that “I have no authority to obtain a further period of time nor to transfer myself to another prison.” We have dozens of such receipts for cash bail from across the period under discussion, all of which together point to the ubiquity of bail as part of the institution of incarceration in antiquity, as well as to the attendant documentary burden: receipts were often produced in duplicate, with one held by the guarantor and another by the prison registrar. There are a handful of summons addressed to the accused or to another family member or close associate. (e.g., P. Oxy. 74.5004, D281 [third century CE]). These, again, seem not to be orders for arrest but summons to trial of the accused, who had been bailed out of prison in connection with their guarantor, who had given security.

A number of tax receipts record money paid for the maintenance of prisons and the payment of guards. P. Princ. 2.44, from 141 CE, is one of many such receipts from the second century CE that detail taxes levied specifically in support of both the local police and the guards of public prisons. It reads:

In the fifth year of the emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius, the fifth of Choiak, Heron son of Phaseis . . . whose mother is Tha[. . .] paid through Didymos and the assistants of the tax collectors on account of the poll-tax for the same year twelve drachmas and a half-obol[?] in silver and two chalki, totals

twelve drachmae, 1/2 obol two chalki; on account of the pig tax, one drachma one obol, on account of the tax concerning manning the watch-tower and guarding tax [*fulakias*], one drachma three obols, on account of the prison tax [*desmofulakias*] and the river guard tax [*potamofulakias*], 2 1/2 obols. (D123)

This papyrus records three taxes that are relevant for our analysis, and it is important to distinguish carefully between them. The “guarding” tax and the “river guard tax” seem to be levied in support of local police and, as the excavators and editors Grenfell and Hunt note, they are likely the Roman equivalent of the generalized *fulaktikon* tax known from the Ptolemaic period (P. Fayyum 178). The earliest Roman era evidence that we have for this type of tax is from 68 CE, in a receipt that raises funds specifically “for guard/police provisions” (O. Wilcken 2.422, D149 [68 CE]). Tax registers from the second century abbreviated the “prison guard tax” (*desmofulakia*) in a variety of ways, and this tax appears to have been levied specifically in support of the public prison (P. Mich. 6.383, D128 [106 CE]; P. Ryl. 2.191, D124 [117 CE]; P. Ryl. 2.193, D126 [135 CE]; P. Ryl. 2.194, D125 [136CE]; P. Princ. 2.44, D123 [141 CE]). The earliest securely dated attestation of this tax is from 110 CE, with the majority of receipts clustering in the middle decades of the second century and the latest attestation dating to the early 190s CE (O. Petr. Mus. 260, D151). It is hard to say whether taxes specifically earmarked for support of public prisons are new to Roman Egypt of the second century or if they are simply newly specified in documents from this period. An answer to this question is important for understanding changes in prison administration over time, but the fact of the tax, its apparent durability over the course of the Nerva-Antonine dynasty, and its prevalence in the documentary record all point to the notion that incarceration was a central public service in Roman-era Egypt and that the imperial bureaucracy had active structures in place to ensure that prisons were regularly staffed and maintained as a public good. Similar taxes apparently aimed at provisioning prison guards, phrased in slightly different ways, are found in receipts from a longer period of time, beginning with O. Wilcken 2.422, from 68 CE (D149), and continuing through P. Tebt. 2.354, from 186–90 CE (D66). They span that period, with regular attestation, for instance in: P. Fay. 53, D144 [111 CE]; P. Strasb. 5.415, D102 [128 CE]; and SB 24.16185, D68 [151 CE]. Such evidence raises the question of prison personnel, to which we turn momentarily.

A discussion of bureaucracy, by nature, may not promise the book’s most gripping moments. Even so, it is a key thread in understanding how incarceration was stitched into the fabric of broader societies. To attend to the documentary aspects of incarceration in Mediterranean antiquity is to see an intricate and banal system of bureaucratic control, in which physical restraints on captive humans are reflections of an institution whose operative materials were not primarily chains and cells but warrants and lists, orders and receipts, contracts and petitions, affidavits and expense sheets. In this sense it is not an overreach to refer to

the ancient carceral *system*—at times centralized and unified, and at other times a constellation of overlapping micro-institutions. The image reflects chiefly Egyptian documents, but the verisimilitude with literary and archaeological finds across the Mediterranean, as well as the durability of these structures across a period of nearly a thousand years, suggests that documentary productions, and the social systems that they record, were appreciably similar even in areas where such carceral ephemera do not remain naturally.

PERSONNEL

Bureaucracy requires bureaucrats, and carceral facilities do not run themselves. Prisons require a network of human resources that, when understood, shed light on the various ideologies of incarceration in the ancient Mediterranean and the people who enabled them daily. We find a variety of hierarchies among prison personnel across the immense stretch of time and space covered by this book, and we should not expect to see uniformity between different periods and locations. The current state of the evidence precludes us from providing a complete historical picture. Nevertheless, here we offer a general sketch.

At its most basic level, prison administration was a hierarchy presided over by a government official, who exercised a degree of ultimate responsibility and who delegated tasks to supervisors and lower-ranking assistants who attended to day-to-day operations. This varied across time and regions. As John Bauschatz (2013) showed, in Ptolemaic Egypt, the hierarchy descended from the regional governor (*stratēgos*) to the local police administrator (*epistatēs ton fylakitōn*), who, in turn, oversaw prison guards (*desmofulakes*) that worked as jailors and bailiffs, in conjunction with other police officials (138, 247). As discussed above, the Ptolemaic prison system, and municipal prisons themselves, were connected to the public treasury office in both formal and informal ways (p. 58–59).

Roman sources attest a broadly comparable model, though bureaucrats and staffers bore different titles and worked under a somewhat clearer hierarchy. In the city of Rome, prison supervision ultimately fell to the office of the prefect of the city, while in the provinces, governors deputized a head of the prison (*optio carceris*), or, in military contexts, a head of carceral facilities (*optio custodiarum*). The distinction in title appears to reflect different types of prison, with the head of the prison mostly serving in civic contexts while the head of carceral facilities served as part of a military legion, though soldiers could serve in either role, and some variation is visible, especially in documentary sources. For instance, a cinerary urn likely from Rome in the third century CE attests to a Pannonian man named Vitalis who served as both a centurion and as the *optio carceris*—presumably, the head of the civic prison of Rome (AE 1983, 48, D164 [third century CE, possibly 222–35]). Nevertheless, a soldier named Caesius Verus, who died at the rank of legionary centurion

in the middle of the second century CE, served both as the military band director (*ordinatus tubicem*) and as head of the prison (*optio carcerem*) in an explicitly military context (Mitford 1988, 176–78, D186 [161–69 CE]). As elsewhere, we must let these documentary sources disturb the neat categories that literary material offers. Soldiers serving as prison managers bear titles ranging from *optio custodiarum* (CIL 13.6739, D203 [70–86 CE]) to *praepositus carceris* (IGLSyr 13.1.9088, D178 [238–44 CE]; Augustine, *Commentary on John* 49.9, L2 [419 CE]) to *agens curam carceris* (CIL 3.433, D263 [ca. mid-second century CE]). As Pilar Pavón Torrejón (2003) has argued, by the fourth century CE, across the Roman world the prison registrar (*commentariensis*) seems to have taken on primary responsibility as the prison supervisor (127–29, 229–34).

Under the direct supervision of the prison head, we meet a host of attendants holding various titles; often, the exact hierarchy of their relationship is difficult to untangle. In Latin sources we hear of low-level “prison staff” (*carcerarii*, AE 1978, 730, D163 [late second century CE]), somewhat higher-ranking “registrars” (*commentariis custodiarum*, CIL 9.6343, D265 [48–51 CE]), “keyholders” (*clavicularii*, CIL 13.1780, D169 [first century CE]), “gatekeepers” (*cataractarii*, *Passion of Montanus and Lucius* 9.2, L263 [late third century CE]) or “assistants to the gatekeepers” (*cataractariorum ministri*, *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 15.4, L15 [third–fourth centuries CE]), and even simply “attendants” (*officialii*, IGLSyr 13.1.9088, D178 [238–44 CE]). The last three—keyholders, assistants, and attendants—seem to have been lower-ranking, and their duties were often assigned to military personnel holding other titles, such as *frumentarii*, *beneficiarii*, *applicarii*, *agentes in rebus*, and *chartularii*. For his part, Pliny the Elder, in his account of the Pero and Micon myth, calls the person guarding the gate a “doorkeeper” (*ianitor*) (*Natural History* 7.36, L150 [77 CE]). A prison staff position might have been one avenue for a nonelite member of society to work and secure a livelihood. It provided a possible yet still humble advancement opportunity for people of a certain status to rise above their station—for instance, from *carcerarius* to *optio carceris* (an advancement in name more than rank, as the *optio carceris* remained a junior staffer, while the *optio* was among the legion’s senior staff; Bruun 1988).

To this general and imprecise organizational chart we can add auxiliary officials detailed to the prison who had received specific training in torture tactics, as mentioned by a variety of sources across our time period (*Gospel according to Matthew* 18:34, L151 [late first–early second century CE]; Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* 3.4.26, L20 [334 CE]; O. Mon. Epiph. 177, D139 [sixth–seventh centuries CE]). A prisoner in Maresha during the Seleucid period appears to use a slang term, “dogs,” perhaps to refer to professional torturers detailed to his prison (CIIP 4.3.3689, D170). Other sources, such as P. Oxy. 2.259 from 23 CE, deploy only vague terms like “overseer [*tetagmenōs*] of the Zeus prison,” leaving us to wonder about the goings on inside (D72).

A handful of sources from the late Roman period offer insight into the quantity of personnel assigned to carceral facilities, though hardly enough survive to speak in any more than anecdotal terms. Nevertheless, numbers appear from time to time—for instance, in two inscriptions from Ostia (outside Rome) dedicated to the emperor Caracalla by soldiers of the night guard (*vigiles*) (CIL 6.1057 and 1058, D65 [198–217 CE]). Pavón Torrejón (2003) writes, “they had three *optiones carceris* [heads of the prison] in each cohort, assisted by three *carcerarii* [prison guards]. That is, there were 21 officers in charge of the prisons along with 21 other soldiers. This data indicates that there were 6 members in care of the prisons in each of the *vigiles* [night guard] cohorts” (128). In this instance, we see a relatively robust prison staff operating in rotating shifts. Other documentary and literary evidence cohere with this general scale of approximately five to ten guards per facility. For example, Modestinus, a jurist and a student of Ulpian, indicates in book four of his work on *Punishments* that prisoners should never be handed over to the care of a single guard, but instead to a minimum of two, and a late Roman imperial decree found in Ptolemais (Tolmeita, Libya) assigns “seven soldiers for the guards at the public prison” (*eis parafulakēn tou dēmosiou desmōtēriou*) (D 48.3.14, L113 [ca. 250 CE]; SEG 9.356, D176 [501 CE]). A fragmentary Egyptian papyrus of the first century CE may indicate a similar situation—it appears to be a daily legionary report legion in which a presiding officer calls roll and then assigns guards to various posts, including to the gate, ramparts, granaries, market, and possibly one soldier to aid in guard duties at the prison (PSI 13.1307; Fink 1971, 20013). This implies supplementary help from military personnel to aid otherwise nonmilitary guards. In sum, across our period, it appears rare that prison facilities had only a single guard, while a staff numbering more than ten is also unusual. So far, as we can tell from fragmentary evidence, a half-dozen guards is typical for the average facility, and soldiers were regularly detailed to public prisons as part of their policing duties.

A papyrus from the second century CE contains the names of people assigned to various offices, including the declaration “I give the office of guardian of the prisoners in the prisons [*tōn kata fulakēn desmiōn*] to the one written below,” followed by a rather telling clause, “who is rich and suitable . . .” (P. Oxy. 3.580, D84 [second century CE]). The papyrus does not clarify why wealth would be advantageous in prison administrators, but one suspects such people were harder to bribe, or at least more expensive. Less noble reasons are also possible, of course. In any case, the grant of guard duties further underlines the social stratification of carceral spaces; the overseer was appointed on account of his wealth while the inmates often came from more socially vulnerable segments of society, with a bevy of guards likely representing a lower social status than the overseer. By the mid-second century in Asia Minor it was common that police personnel in leadership positions were centrally appointed, judging precisely on the basis of the candidates’ wealth, integrity, and reputation (Bréaz 2020, 162). Here we see similar procedures in Egypt.

While some prison guards worked only for a time as specialized laborers on contract or assignment, some evidence suggests that other guards retained longer-term associations with particular carceral facilities. P. Hib. 1.73 is a draft complaint to a Ptolemaic governor from a man named Antigonos against a man named Patron. One piece of information, added subsequently by the scribe above the line, records that Patron works as head prison guard for a portion of the name of Oxyrhynchus and that he lives some eight kilometers away in the town of Takona, from where the complaint was issued (D49 [244–243 BCE]). The pattern holds in the late Roman period, as well. P. Wash. Univ. 1.57 is a sixth-century CE inventory of individuals, listed by name and including two who are noted as “prison guard” (*desmofulax*)—Pamouthis, a guard at “Big Prison,” and Kalamon, a guard at another facility (D61).

Often we hear the names of individual guards in complaints, but not all prison managers were uniformly disliked. IGLSyr 13.1.9088 is a dedicatory inscription from the low-level attendants to a centurion named Ulpius Philippus, who served as supervisor of the prison in the third legion. The inscription does not speak to exact numbers but gives the sense of a single man overseeing a staff of attendants, retaining Latin titles even in the Greek inscription. “To Ulpius Philippus, centurion of the third Cyrenic legion of Gordian, supervisor of the carceral facilities [*praipositon koustōdiōn*], an incomparable supervisor [*praipositon*]. The attendants of the prisoners [*officialii hoi tōn desmōtōn*], in memory” (D178 [238–44 CE]). This honorary inscription offers a glimpse at a sort of camaraderie developing within a cohort of guards working at a single facility over a long period, and their desire (or perhaps requirement) to honor their supervisor in one way or another.

Epigraphic and archaeological data suggest that guards sometimes worked in bespoke spaces—whether rooms attached to the prison, independent offices, or other quarters. One such space appears within Herod’s promontory palace in Caesarea Maritima (Caesarea, Israel), where we find a basilica for judicial hearings above a T-shaped cistern that was converted into a prison during the Herodian period (A8). About thirty meters from the facility we find a small room with a mosaic floor holding a Latin inscription that reads: “Good hope to the assistants of the office in charge of prison” (CIIP 2.1273, D206 [second century CE]). The mosaic offers well wishes to the attendants of the prison from their overseers and suggests strongly that this was their space: an office, breakroom, or something of the sort. In the civic prison of Cuicul, the archaeologist Louis Leschi proposed that the antechamber had a similar purpose, serving as a combination guard room and reserved space for prison officials (A5; Leschi 1953, 23). Such a room between the city’s main thoroughfare and the main carceral chamber, with a locking door between each, would have the dual effect of increasing security and providing dedicated space for the guards proximate and separate from the imprisoned population. The subterranean complex in the Julian Basilica of Corinth, recently discussed by Paul Scotton, may have had a similar function: an inner cell has

been interpreted as a possible civic prison, while the antechamber had both closer access to light and, unique among our archive, its own toilet (A14; Scotton 2022, 218). Finally, four intriguing stone altars were excavated in a small room inside the legionary base at Carnuntum (Petronell-Carnuntum, Austria; CIL 3.15190, D114; CIL 3.15191, D273; CIL 3.15192, D277 [all second century CE]). All four altars show signs of use—to this day white and black ash remain visible on their surfaces from sacrifices offered in them. Today one altar is blank, likely because its decoration was painted on, but three others were inscribed by *clavicularii* (key holders) with dedications to the goddess Nemesis—something of the patron deity of legionary jailers, to judge by the ubiquity of dedications to her (RIU 3.671, D275 [216 CE]; CIL 3.3484, D276 [219 CE]; CIL 3.15192, D277 [third century CE]). It is not possible to identify the precise function of this room in the legionary base with certainty, but the presence of three altars from key holders, one painted altar, and no other ritual material, suggests that it may have been the meeting room or office of Carnuntum's prison guards (Kremer 2012, 361–62).

Our evidence is spotty, but it appears that prison staff often held salaried positions funded by public tax dollars, and those running the prison system received both monetary remuneration as well as unofficial, fringe benefits. A Ptolemaic account of payments mentions a number of different types of guards and prison personnel, distinguishing them by place of origin—ten local guards from Philadelphia along with ten Arabs for general police activities, along with six watchmen to look after canal embankments during the yearly Nile inundation and six guards posted to the prison (*desmōterion*) (P. Cair. Zen. 2.59296, D33 [250 BCE]). Again, we find a single carceral facility with six guards, and we learn that guards posted to the prison and general police earn an identical salary of six drachmas per month, while people posted to watch over the embankment make only 2.5 drachmas over the same period. As the initial editor of this papyrus notes, it is possible that the estate from which the papyrus comes paid for the guards, but it is significantly more likely that the money came from the local municipality, as we see in parallel cases (Edgar 1926, 162; cf. PSI 4.344). As noted above, a similar conclusion is certain in the Roman period, as evidenced by a slew of second century CE receipts for taxes paid specifically in support of prison guards. John Bauschatz (2013) argues that during the Ptolemaic period, prison guards were the only members of the police force working “full-time” in the public prisons (247). In the Roman period visual and literary sources suggest that day-to-day operation of prisons was largely taken over by soldiers, though it is hard to say whether these are simply visual and literary tropes or evidence of a real change in staffing.

Prison staff received other work benefits like food and drink. Two Ptolemaic papyri, one from Memphis and another from Tebtunis, indicate customary delivery of wine to prison guards—a trend that continues into the late Roman period (UPZ 1.149, D54 [208–206 BCE]; PSI 13.1315, D83 [127 BCE]). As the party responsible for allowing visitors access to prisoners, guards were in a position of having

regular and often absolute power over their charges. In addition to official payments of money, food, and wine, guards were often suspected of abusing their position by accepting bribes. The issue is so common as to be something of a stock trope in early Christian and other late antique sources (*Acts of Paul and Thecla* 17–20, L28 [mid-second century CE]; *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, L15 [third–fourth centuries CE]; Libanius, *Oration* 45.10, L52 [386 CE]; Procopius, *History of the Wars* 1.5–6, L157 [ca. 550 CE]). In the early third century CE, the jurist Paul prescribed that “if the officer in charge of a prison [*carceri praepositus*] is bribed to keep someone in custody without chains or has allowed a weapon or poison to be brought into the prison, he must be punished by the court” (D 48.3.8, L108 [early third century CE]). In the early second century CE, Pliny the Younger addressed a question to the emperor Trajan about the proper makeup of a public prison staff in his province.

I am in doubt whether I should maintain guard over prisoners by employing the public slaves of the cities, which has hitherto been the practice, or whether I should employ soldiers; for my fear is that the use of public slaves may result in less reliable supervision, but on the other hand this duty may divert a not inconsiderable number of soldiers from military tasks. Meanwhile I have reinforced the public slaves with a few soldiers, but I see that there is a danger that this practice may lead to neglect of duty by both, as each side feels sure that they can pin the guilt they share on the other. (*Letters* 10.19–20, L24 [109–10 CE])

The emperor answered that Pliny was right to be concerned about the mixing of public slaves and soldiers, because they were likely to blame each other when something went wrong, concluding that public slaves should continue to be used as prison guards in the province. Trajan’s ultimate concern is clear: “We must rather abide by the practice that as few soldiers as possible should be called away from the Standards [of the legion, i.e. from active duty].” The emperor’s reply is complicated by another letter that he received from Pliny, perhaps later in the same year, expressing concern that people who had been condemned to various punishments were instead serving as public slaves in the city of Nicomedia (10.31, L40 [110 CE]). If prisoners served as public slaves and slaves sometimes watched over the prison and the prison was a publicly funded institution, then together these two letters, along with second-century documentary sources, leave open the real possibility that people condemned to prison, labor, or death, were instead serving as incarcerators themselves as menial prison labor. To put it delicately, such a situation would present a potential conflict of interest. As Noel Lenski points out, the use of public slaves to guard municipal prisons continued long into Late Antiquity, at least in the east: the mid-fifth century *Life of the Sleepless Alexander* notes that its eponymous monk was imprisoned in the public prison of Chalkis, and “guarded by the city’s municipal slaves, since the magistrates feared him” (41; Lenski 2006, 344–45).

Anxiety about the identity and commitments of prison guards was a particular concern in late ancient sources. In 438 CE, the emperor Theodosius II promulgated a law stipulating that Jews, Samaritans, pagans, and other heretics “shall not have command over custody in prisons, so that Christians, as it often happens, may not, at times, be locked up and suffer a second imprisonment because of the hatred of the guards . . .” (*NTh* 3.7, L101 [438 CE]). The opposite concern—that (Nicene) Christians might serve as guards for Jews, Samaritans, or “heretical” Christians—was apparently not pressing. The legislation addresses an inherent bias embedded in carceral practices, and especially in the policing and surveillance of minoritized prisoners by guards of the majority class. Today, such practices continue, though often through negligence; in the fifth century, majority supremacy in carceral implementation was a matter of explicit legislation.

What did prison staff do? First and foremost, of course, they kept prisoners inside and oversaw visitor interactions. As mentioned above, one of the frescoes of Pero and Micon from a house and shop complex on the Via Stabiae in Pompeii provides a rare example of the representation of a prison guard stationed outside, peering through a prison window to surveil inmates inside (fig. 16). It seems that lower-ranking prison guards often sat near the doors or windows to the prison and were responsible for distribution of rations. Calpurnius Flaccus’s fourth *Declamation*, discussed above, addressed prison guards’ delivery of food to prisoners: “Whip lashes crack, food is delivered in the foul hands of the executioner even to those who refuse it. The hard-hearted doorkeeper sits by, a man whose eyes would remain dry even when his mother weeps” (L46 [second century CE]). The rhetor imagines two types of prison staff: the callous doorkeeper and the executioner, both of whom are tasked with delivery of prison rations.

As Ryan Schellenberg has recently discussed, prison staff also occasionally had the responsibility of preventing prisoner suicide—a phenomenon in evidence at least from the early Roman republic, and painstakingly catalogued by Jens-Uwe Krause (Schellenberg 2021, 72–73; Krause 1996, 302–3). In keeping with Pavón Torrejón’s observation about the shift to prison registrars as ultimate authorities in the fourth century CE, legal sources suggest that thereafter, registrars were also responsible for distributing food. Honorius and Theodosius II issued a law in 409 CE demanding that prison registrars were to “make sure that food is supplied to those prisoners who do not have it” (*CTh* 9.3.7, L44).

Finally, as we showed in the preceding section, guards and registrars produced a flurry of documents for each case of incarceration. In the Ptolemaic period we have evidence of prison guards involved in writing petitions to higher-ranking government officials, and in the Roman period we see from documentary and legal sources that production of ongoing reports was also a part of daily duties of prison staff (P.Sorb. 3.135, D60 [225–224 BCE]; P. Oxy. 43.3104, D15 [228 CE]; *CTh* 9.3.6, L174 [380 CE]).

Considered together, literary, documentary, and visual sources speak to prison personnel as thoroughly integrated in the social and economic life of cities from the Ptolemaic period forward, even as aspects of hierarchy, identity, documentation, and duties evolved over time. They were important enough to the state that across our time period, we see facilities receiving around half a dozen dedicated staff, often paid with public funds. They help us consider how carceral facilities were viewed as a civic good, integrally related to numerous other societal systems. These staff were chiefly invested in keeping prisoners secure. Their charges, however, as well as their titles and hierarchical structures, were hardly static.

TRANSPORT

Incarceration is fundamentally a system of controlling movement, often taking the form of relative immobilization within a facility. Nevertheless, sources frequently dwell on prisoner movement, both within carceral facilities and across broader landscapes. Perhaps counterintuitively, transport of prisoners was an integral, everyday aspect of incarceration across the Mediterranean. Only in the most extreme cases of punitive incarceration do we hear of total immobilization. More often, prisoners moved within carceral spaces on a daily basis, and were regularly transported to and from legal proceedings, between carceral facilities like civic prisons and labor camps, and within such facilities—for instance, from the surface of mining camps down into the earth. Prisoners condemned to death were transported from prison facilities to places of execution; after death, their bodies were transported for disposal. When prisons are seen as temporary holding tanks, the movement of prisoners is not a critical or obvious area of analysis, beyond transport between jails and places of judgment and condemnation. And yet, prisoner transport is a central concern of a variety of ancient sources, both within the prison and outside of it. We turn now to each of these aspects of prisoner movement.

Within the Prison

The multichambered prison is a staple of literary and archaeological evidence. So far as archaeological evidence survives, celled prisons typically included an ante-chamber (presumably for guards) along with at least two further spaces meant for holding prisoners—one closer to the entrance, with limited access to natural light, and another chamber further from the entrance, often oppressively dark and sometimes subdivided further. The darkness of the inner prison was one of the “torments of prison” deemed in a law of Constantine as “pitiable for the innocent but not severe enough for the guilty”; as a result, one common and ongoing task of prison guards was the transport of prisoners between facilities and perhaps even

between chambers within the facility, depending on the time of day (*CTh* 9.3.1, L133 [320/21 CE]).

Like many laws extant in late ancient codifications, this law appears to restate common practices in which prisoners moved daily between different parts of the prison. If there is an innovation here, it is perhaps Constantine's reserving the temporary, daily reprieve from darkness as a kindness offered only to those still awaiting trial, while convicted prisoners remained in the secure inner chamber. Discussion of the increased security of the "inner prison" predates Constantine's legislation by at least centuries, as we see for instance in the *Acts of the Apostles*, where Roman magistrates are depicted punishing itinerant preachers with flogging before "they threw them into prison and ordered the prison guard to keep them securely. Following these instructions, [the prison guard] put them in the inner prison [*eis tēn esōteran fulakēn*] and secured their feet in the stocks" (16:23–24, L67 [early second century CE]).

Archaeological evidence allows us to think spatially about movement between prison chambers and suggests that a number of different models were available. First, many prisons had a simple dual chamber architecture. The civic prison at Cuicul is a good example, with its three rooms built directly underneath the civic basilica (fig. 4). The first room is the smallest, comprising little more than an antechamber communicating directly with the public street through a small, locking door. The antechamber appears to be a space for guards to sit, between one gate opening from the street and another opening into the prison's first cell (A5, Chamber A; Leschi 1953, 23). Yet another secure door separates the outer cell from the larger inner cell, to the south (chamber B). In the case of Roman Cuicul, movement between the outer and inner part of the civic prison involved prison guards simply shuffling prisoners from chamber A to chamber B and securing the doors between. We find similar architecture in the prisons at Caesarea Maritima, Pompeii, and Corinth (Caesarea Maritima, A8; Pompeii, A9; Corinth, A15).

Other prisons comprised multiple cells connected by a single corridor, itself secured by a locking door leading outside, as exemplified by the military prison at Lambaesis (fig. 5; A7). This prison is situated underneath the legionary Sanctuary of the Standards, with a "stout locking device" securing a door to a narrow corridor that communicated with five small, gated cells (Rakob and Storz 1974, 276). In this case, movement of prisoners between cells was similarly simple, though in the facility's first phase no cell appears to have had more access to light than any other, suggesting that if prisoners were to be moved to lighter spaces during the day, they must have exited through the prison's only door into the open space at the center of the legionary headquarters. A later phase blocked windows to all of the cells. If the prison remained in use, the renovation rendered an even starker difference between the completely dark underground and the light available above. The workers' prison at Simitthus has a strikingly similar structure to that at Lambaesis, though at a significantly larger scale (Simitthus, A13; fig. 8).

Finally, some prisons had upper and lower chambers rather than parallel cells or inner and outer chambers. This is the structure of the most famous prison from the ancient world—the Tullian Prison at Rome—but the architecture is repeated across the Mediterranean, most clearly in the civic prison of Cosa and in the late Roman prison at Tiberias. In these cases, movement between cells was restricted not by a door but rather through a covered manhole, allowing access from above to the lower cells below. Such manholes have been discovered at Cosa, Messene, and Rome and are implied by the architectural structure remaining in Tiberias, and they are discussed in the late antique *Acts of Matthew*, which speaks of “sealing up the floor” of a prison to secure those within (Brown 1993, 40; *Acts and Martyrdom of Matthew* 14, L205 [late fourth century CE]). The *Revelation of John* also imagines the act of throwing a prisoner down into a prison called “the Abyss” and sealing it from above. (20:1–7, L13 [late first/early second century CE]). In these facilities, prisoners would enter and exit the darkest part of the prison with the aid of a ladder, rope, or in the case of the Prison for the Condemned in Carales, a wooden scaffold rising from the prison floor to the exit. The variety of archaeologically attested carceral spaces helps bring texture to sources like Constantine’s law calling for the movement of accused prisoners between the “darkness of the inner prison” (*sedis intimae tenebras*) the “entrances of the prison and healthful locales” (*vestibulis carcerum et salubribus locis*) still inside the facility, and the “common light” (*publicum lumen*) (CTh 9.3.1, L133 [320/21 CE]). Yann Rivière (2004b) suggests that the law is unclear as to whether the “common light” indicates another section of the prison, an adjacent, open-air but enclosed space, or the public square of the city (215). Attending to the archaeology suggests that all three of these possibilities were likely employed.

Across our period, prison guards directed the movement of prisoners within carceral spaces and mediated access to visitors from the outside, policing interactions by surveillance through secure prison windows or allowing bodily access to those inside, both of which are attested in various visual representations of the Pero and Micon myth from Pompeii and in numerous narrative accounts (V12–15). In the *Acts of Thomas*, a text reflecting Roman Syria of the early third century, visitors are imagined bribing guards with silver coins to gain access to the apostle locked inside. Later, when the apostle tells a young acolyte to leave and gather necessities for the group of imprisoned Christians, he complains that there is no one to open the doors for him “because the prison guards have locked them and gone to sleep” (151, 154, L149 [ca. 200–250 CE]). Together, our sources depict prison guards providing scheduled, ongoing, daily surveillance of prisoners and their movements and, occasionally, admittance of visitors during what we might anachronistically call “visitor’s hours.”

Finally, unsanctioned movements—prison breaks—were not uncommon, appearing in sources across the timespan of the book. The prison break is a common theme in ancient literature, with Dionysius’s escape in *The Bacchae* serving

as a sort of paradigm for subsequent literary portrayals (Weaver 2004, 29–63). We find a similar prison break scene poetically inscribed in stone at Mylasa (Turkey), where a stele was found with a Hellenistic poem of Hyssaldomos telling the dramatic prison escape, aided by a deity, of a certain Pytheas (Marek and Zingg 2018, 1–139, esp. 13–31; L139 [250 BCE–150 BCE]). But escape was not purely the realm of literary fantasy; SB 22.15767 is a letter informing the governor (*strategos*) of Memphis and a number of other officials that two tax collectors had escaped from the prison—one of a handful of notices of escape to survive in the documentary record (D6 [199–100 BCE]). From a few decades earlier, on January 9, 255 BCE, we have a document giving notice to a commissioner named Kleon from a certain Nikeratos about a need to repair a wall of a carceral facility in Arsinoites, lest prisoners escape:

Nikeratos to Kleon, greetings. The southern wall of the stronghold—a part of it has collapsed, and the rest is in such a state that if it falls there is a danger that some of the people [lit. bodies, *sōmata*] will be lost. So please draw up a contract for this and give it to Dionysios the building contractor so he can get to work. For we shall bring them straight out and shall have to use even more space for the prisoners [*desmōtai*] which the finance minister Apollonios has now handed over to us. Be well. (P. Petr. Kleon 52, D93 [255 BCE]; trans. Bauschatz 2013, 245–46)

In addition to the issue of bureaucratic record keeping discussed above, this notice uses the Greek word *diafōnēsai* to refer to “escape,” but this word could literally mean here to fail to answer roll call (LSJ, s.v. *diafōneō* 3). Especially when read alongside other documents that contain or refer to lists of prisoners’ names (including many female prisoners), we can imagine that this may refer to a literal roll call process in which names of prisoners are read out and they are required to present themselves in some way to a prison guard (SB 28.16854, D5 [255 CE]; SB 24.16117, D99 [601–50 CE]). If such a roll call is in fact implied here, the source would add another layer to our understanding of controlled and unsanctioned movements within the prison. A recently published papyrus from Roman Judaea or Arabia details the trial of a number of individuals accused of having forged documents in an elaborate tax fraud scheme during the reign of Hadrian. In the memorandum we hear of a man named Gadalias, including “his committing violence and sedition and banditry, and the money that he counterfeited, and how he escaped from prison [*hōs apo heirkētēs efugen*],” though the editors note that “it is unclear if Gadalias literally fled from incarceration or whether this is a figure of speech for one who managed to evade sentencing or punishment” (P. Cotton, D298 [129–32 CE]; Dolganov et al. 2023, 105).

The phenomenon of prison breaks shows up in more than a few literary sources, as well, including a letter from Pliny the Younger asking the emperor Trajan about the case of a philosopher who had been condemned to the mines for forgery only to break out and return to polite society—even exchanging letters

with the emperor Domitian and receiving an acclamation from the people of Prusa (*Letters* 10.58, L193 [109–10 CE]). Livy tells a story of Phileas of Tarentum bribing guards to break hostages from Tarentum and Thurii out of the Atrium Libertatis in Rome, where they were being detained; although initially successful, they were all caught shortly thereafter and executed (*From the Founding of the City* 25.7.12, L200 [27 BCE–17 CE]). Perhaps the most enticing, however, is Procopius's Orientalizing description of a Sasanian king serving a life sentence of incarceration in 496/498 CE at a facility called the "Prison of Oblivion," who manages a daring, cross-dressing escape (*History of the Wars* 1.5–6, L157 [ca. 550 CE]).

Outside the Prison

Legal Proceedings. Outside the prison, a guard's most visible duty was transportation between carceral facilities and judicial chambers, a task aided by architecture in many contexts. As discussed above, the architect Vitruvius prescribed that every Roman municipality had a forum with a prison and *curia* directly adjacent, and as we have seen a number of times already it was typical for civic prisons to be built near or underneath spaces of judicial proceedings. Even in later Syriac sources, the same typical collocation of facilities is common: the fourth-century CE *Acts of Shmona and Gurya* describe a trial on November 15, 310 CE in Edessa, in which "the governor rose and went down to the court of justice . . . and when he had sat down on his tribunal in the basilica by the winter baths, at the same time he had sent eight soldiers with the jailor for Gurya and Shmona. And he brought them both up from that hole" (41, L1). The shared assumption here is that, as Vitruvius might have us expect, the tribunal in the basilica and the public prison were proximate to each other.

This pattern repeats across the Mediterranean. In a city like Sarmizegetusa, guards would have simply marched prisoners out from the space underneath the tribunal for their hearings in front of it. Conveniently, the facility was already inside the civic basilica complex (fig. 3, A27). At Rome and Cosa, we should similarly imagine guards escorting prisoners from the facility just a few steps to the forum and into the courthouse, while at Cuicul prisoners exited through the ante-chamber and walked some five meters down the main city street to the civic basilica's back entrance (fig. 4). The prison in Herod's promontory palace at Caesarea Maritima shows a similar logic, with cells underneath the trial platform (*bema*) and the office of the prison guards located some thirty meters away from the entrance to the underground space, on the corner of the promontory palace (Eck 2007, 87–89, CIIP 2.1273, D206 [second century CE]). Common to each of these examples is a built environment designed to create a brief yet highly visible public route for prisoners brought to trial. Beyond making trips to the court, guards were occasionally responsible for chaining prisoners and escorting them to the city center so that they could beg for food, though in a letter to the governor of Syria in 363 CE, Libanius hinted that even these occasional outings could constitute a

form of torture. He begs for the end of his friend Eusebius's incarceration, which included "being brought out through the crowd, beaten, having been stripped, strangled [by a collar]" and begging for money, which, when bestowed, was immediately stolen by the guards (*Letter* 1414.3; Schouler 2006, 282).

The frequency with which civic prisons were built directly underneath places of judicial proceedings perhaps sheds light on some summons preserved on papyrus. Over a hundred examples are known from this category of bureaucratic document in Roman Egypt, and while they were originally categorized as "orders for arrest," they have been recategorized as a result of an important observation by Gagos and Sijpesteijn:

There is one linguistic element [of this category of document] that cannot be ignored: the complete absence of a verb or expression that would translate into the modern notion of "arrest." The documents consistently urge the local police authorities to "send" (*pempō* and a variety of compounds) the accused before the higher authority which issued the order, sometimes accompanied by a guard . . . There is a further element in these orders that does not support the theory that the local authorities are instructed to "arrest": the majority of the orders indicate that the person summoned has been "accused." (1996, 78; Bülow-Jacobsen 1986)

Their proposal, that these ought to be considered "summonses," has been broadly accepted, with further refinements on the Roman period documents and a general understanding that the language could be used widely, including as warrants and orders for arrest (Schubert 2018). We suggest here that some of these documents may in fact be summons for prisoners held in carceral facilities to appear in court, and add the corroborating evidence that common prison architecture seems to have inflected the language—explaining why not only "send" (*pempō*), but "send up" (*anapempō*), and "send out" (*ekpempō*) are the common operative verbs in these documents.

To offer two examples out of many: BGU 11.2083 comes from the second or early third century CE and uses language typical to the area around Arsinoites to order three weavers to be "sent up" (Hagedorn 1979, 63). It reads: "To the police chiefs [*archefodois*] and the area leaders of the village of Soknopaiou Nesos. Immediately send up [*anapempsetai*] Abous, a weaver, and Kaieus, a weaver, and the wife of Abous, the one-time area leader, a weaver, and her daughter, who is a weaver, accused by Ammonios" (D225 [second–third centuries CE]) Likewise P. Yale. 1.62 reads, in its entirety: "To the leaders and the chiefs of police of the village of Tebtunis: send out [*ekpempate*] Onnophris a[nd] . . . having been accused by . . ." (first century CE).

In these rather common judicial orders, it is possible that we see the effect of carceral architecture on the language used to describe prisoner movement—orders to appear before a judge often request that the prisoner literally be "sent up," from a prison that is conceptually—and sometimes physically—beneath places of

judgment. The language is not unique to the Roman world: P. Cair. Zen. 4.59626 is a request from a Ptolemaic man named Kallisthenes who appears to have already been in prison or was at least worried that he might be sent to prison if his trial is delayed. As a result, he requests that his case be heard swiftly, specifically using the language of being “called up” (*anakalesamenos*) to attend a hearing (D41 [263–229 BCE]). In this document, the language of “calling up” is explicitly not a warrant for arrest but a call to appear for trial. It is possible that the logic of the prison as underground and beneath the place of trial lurks behind these stock phrases. More certain is this: one essential, ongoing job of the prison staff would have been to transport prisoners under guard from the prisons to trials—often just a floor above.

Regional Movement. Both exploitation of labor and transferring jurisdiction required prisoners to move within and between regions, and traces of these movements appear frequently in bureaucratic paperwork and visual representations. A late second- or early third-century CE papyrus illuminates the practice of prisoner transfer and the importation of common bureaucratic language to documents ordering long-range transport. P. Bagnall 29 is a report written to the clerk of Thebes, containing a list of prisoners who should be handed over to the regional governor (*epistratēgos*) Julius Julianus. Although the papyrus is fragmentary, it appears to use the term “send up” (*anapempō*) to describe the transfer of prisoners out of a carceral facility under guard. It reads:

To Antoninus Minor, the royal clerk of Diospolites Thebes, who is acting for the governor, from Ze[. . .] [concerning the prisoners who have been s]ent [up?] to the most excellent regional governor [*epistratēgos*] Julius Julianus, with Dio [. . .] following [the matter] closely. It [i.e. the list of prisoners] in chains is (as follows): Peteësis, son of Tre[. . .], [. . .]psis, mother Aphrodite, [. . .]san[. . .]phis, son of Rhodon [. . .] and also Totoeus. These two are under free guard: Pouoris, son of Pouoris . . . (D101 [ca. 175–225 CE])

Presently, only five names remain on the papyrus, which likely included more when it was written. Interestingly, the five names are both male and female, and the list includes both indigenous Egyptian and Greek names which contrast distinctly with the typically Roman names of the men charged with oversight of these prisoners. The list offers not only the names of prisoners under transport, but also their mode of confinement: some were transported “in chains” (*en desmois*) while others were transported “under free guard” (*eleutherai tērēsei*). Visual sources frequently depict captives in transport, often in chains and led by a soldier or guard, as we discussed above (p. 141–143). This common visual trope might lead one to believe that prisoners were always transported in chains, but P. Bagnall 29 clarifies that stock depictions of prisoners should never be interpreted as direct evidence for uniform practices. There was not a one-size-fits-all approach: in visual sources,

chains are clues for viewers about the status of the person bound. In practice, prisoners were transported without chains, at least some of the time.

This raises the question: from where did guards retrieve prisoners, and to where did guards transport them? P. Oxy. 2.259, from 23 CE, is a copy of a bail bond from a Persian man named Theon, addressed to the man in charge of the Prison of Zeus. Theon promises to produce the man he has bailed out of “the public prison” (*politikēs fulakēs*) within thirty days of an official request, and if that he fails, “I shall pay the aforementioned two *minae* of gold immediately and I have no authority to obtain a further period of time nor to transfer myself to another prison [*eis heteran fulakēn*].” (D72). Here we see another avenue for local or regional prisoner transport—prisoners themselves requesting a transfer of facility. A late ancient source speaks to precisely such a request in a later period: in his *Letter to the Monks of Senoun*, the bishop Philoxenus of Mabbug (Manbij, Syria) complained that the conditions of his political exile in a small, guarded room above a kitchen were so awful that he and the men with whom he was imprisoned “repeatedly asked to be transferred to the public prison, where all the wrongdoers and criminals are held” (93–94, L136 [ca. 525 CE]). His request—to be transferred from what Julia Hillner (2013) has called “confined exile” to the public prison—was denied (420–21).

Transport was not solely the concern of prisoners and guards; it was also a concern of the wider public: an inscription from the coast south of Izmir (Turkey) contains an edict commemorating the emperor Hadrian’s visit in the spring of 129 CE, and includes a number of laws and a narrative section written in the voice of the emperor. The text begins with an acknowledgement that traveling soldiers were known to wreak havoc while traveling through small coastal towns, including soldiers transporting prisoners. In order to curb some of the army’s exploitation of local populations, the emperor directed that soldiers on private business shall not be granted free lodging, but that “if someone is passing through while on duty, or if they are bringing the ruling power’s money, or transporting prisoners or wild animals, public lodgings shall be given only to them and provisions at the market price which was effective ten days earlier” (SEG 59.1365, D175; trans. Hauken and Malay 2009, 233). This practice coheres with contemporaneous literary sources, such as a Christian martyr stories from the same period as this inscription confirm the practice—or at least the public impression of it—that soldiers regularly passed through Asia Minor with prisoners in tow (Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans* 5.1, L216 [early second century CE]; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 6–8, L209 [second century CE]). The edict has at least three key implications: first, the unremarkable nature of prisoner transport overland through Asia Minor over some distance; second, that civic prisoner transport was intended to be a state funded service that occasionally required support from the broader public; and third, that such long-range transports could present a significant burden to the local populations through which the prisoners and guards passed.

In addition to overland transport, visual and literary sources suggest that boats regularly ferried prisoners from place to place. The Roman satirist Petronius

imagined a transport ship so full of “guilty men” (*nocentes*) that it was at risk of becoming a kind of floating prison (*Satyricon* 105, L230 [40–66 CE]). A fresco that perhaps belonged to Marcus Agrippa (a close companion of Rome’s first emperor) represents naval transport of prisoners of war: a captive is represented as hunched over and hands tied behind the back as he is ushered onto a Roman warship (V41 [first century BCE]; De Souza 2011, 42). A similar story appears in *Third Maccabees*, an account of Jewish martyrs set in the mid-third century BCE, though likely composed in the first century CE (4:1–10, L39). The text describes with rhetorical flair the transport of the elderly, women, and men under the direction of the Ptolemaic king, with prisoners marched quickly and publicly to a ship waiting to transport them under guard. Some are bound in iron chains, others with ropes around the neck, and yet others with their feet in fetters as they descend to the ship’s dark lower hold. The *Acts of the Apostles* suggests transport by boat was not reserved solely for prisoners of war, but used also for civic prisoners routed to a different province for trial (27–28, L206 [early second century CE]). Here we find a remarkable story of a Roman centurion leading several prisoners from Caesarea Maritima in Israel to Italy for trial in Rome, paying a fee to travel on other outgoing nonmilitary ships and stopping for winter in Malta, along with the prisoners under his surveillance. All these sources are at least partially legendary and significantly embellished. Nevertheless, the stories were widely repeated and, best as we can tell, believed—both in their miraculous elements and in the more quotidian stage on which the legends play out. It is a matter of debate whether the apostle Paul would have been transported to Rome via commercial ship under military guard in the middle of the first century CE. What later sources about him reveal is clearer, however: in the Roman world of the second century CE, it was reasonable to think that a civic prisoner might have been transported between provinces by ship. And, as we shall see in just a moment, maritime prisoner transports also appear in documents.

Mines. Condemnation to forced labor in the mines was a typical sentence across the time period of our study—often in royally or imperially controlled facilities far from the cities where the accused became convicts. Overland transport was likely most common, but some evidence suggests that boat travel was also a possibility. For instance, SB 28.16854 is a letter from early May of 225 BCE, containing a report on prisoners transported along the Nile from the civic prison to a mining facility called “Upper Works”:

Amuntas, to Theodotos and Protarchos, greeting. After the letter written to you by Dositheos about the bodies being sent to Upper Works on the order of the king had been sealed, Leonides son of Diod[oros] of the town Asklepieus was left in the prison [*en tēi fulakēi*]. I have written to you in order that you may know and not ask this person from the escort Kyprothemis. (D5; trans. Clarysse)

As Willy Clarysse (2002) suggests, it is likely that this letter is preserved as part of a register of correspondence (99). In it we learn about an order from King

Ptolemy (likely III), directing that prisoners should be transported from a local prison—probably in Alexandria—to a royal mining facility in order to serve as labor for mineral extraction. As a result, an administrator named Dositheos wrote and sealed a letter with names of prisoners to be transported under the care of a military boatman with a Cypriot name: Kyprothemis. Sealed letters are a common technology in the Ptolemaic period and afterward, guarding against prying eyes and, importantly, against editorial changes made after the report was dispatched (fig. 22). In this case, the advantage of such technology is clear: it ensures that any prisoners who disappeared en route could be accounted for. As it turns out, however, the sealed list included a name of a prisoner who was not handed over for transport, rendering the feature a possible bug for the boat captain, should it appear that a prisoner was missing from his transport upon arrival. To deal with this eventuality, Amuntas (perhaps the prison warden or registrar) wrote the letter above: a follow-up to his counterparts in Upper Works informing them that one of the prisoners named in the sealed list was kept in prison and so should not be expected on Kyprothemis's boat. This short letter speaks, then, to a broader bureaucratic state in which prisoner transport was routine, incarcerated people—literally referred to as “bodies” (*sōmata*)—were ferried to and fro at the behest of the king to serve his economic interest, and where bureaucratic paperwork attended and attested to each step of the process.

Long-range prisoner movement continued in the Roman period. In the early third century CE, the jurist Ulpian wrote that “mines are numerous, some provinces possessing them and others not; those that have not [mines] send [their condemned prisoners] to those that have [mines]” (D 48.19.8.4, L120). In the early fourth century CE, the Christian historian Eusebius even reported on the practice of transferring prisoners from Egypt to Palestine and Cilicia, and further evidence suggests movement of prisoners between the provinces of Dalmatia, Upper Moesia, and Dacia (e.g., *Martyrs of Palestine* 8.1 (shorter recension), L207; Dušanić 1977, 74n137).

Convict laborers were transported regularly within mining complexes. Although this sort of movement has not left documentation of the sort that we find in papyrological and literary materials, archaeological evidence can help us think spatially about what such movement involved. The mining town of Simithus (modern Chemtou, Tunisia) is the single source of the ancient world's famed yellow marble, quarried under Roman imperial monopoly and overseen by the army. A river snakes through the landscape, supplying a small city built on the southwest slope of the marble outcropping, and to the northeast, the enslaved and incarcerated workers quarters discussed above (p. 61–64). A guard tower oversaw the workers' prison, and in its later phases a series of doors allowed secure access from the six cells to a bathing facility built directly adjacent. Nevertheless, it is nearly a half-kilometer walk from the gate of the workers' prison to the

mineshfts, necessitating some form of oversight as incarcerated laborers moved between their secure living quarters and the mix of open and closed mineshfts where they extracted marble. If the workers' quarters were operated at anywhere near capacity, the oversight must have been significant; each of the six chambers is capable of holding around 180 people (Rakob 1994, 100).

Likewise, the famous mines in the region of Wadi Faynan appear designed to contain and surveil a large population of laborers with as few guards as possible—in this case, distance and the inhospitable geography of the region aided the aim (Mattingly 2013; Friedman 2009). Unlike at Simitthus where the city and mine were directly adjacent, a still visible Roman road connects one of the main mines of the area at Umm al-Amad with its attendant city, some six kilometers distant (Umm al-Amad, A4). Upon arrival at the mining facility prisoners were further transported underground for labor—often where they were also housed. Transport, in this case, would have involved laborers descending from surface level into the mine shaft by a series of small footholds, perhaps aided by a rope. This mine is but one of dozens in the area that were exploited intermittently from the Chalcolithic period forward. The spatial layout of such mines and mining camps helps us to get a sense of the constant need for the controlled transport of captive bodies to, from, and within these facilities which sometimes comprise entire landscapes.

Transport to Death and Disposal

Many prisoners were released from custody after a time, including those who served limited-term penal sentences (p. 36–37). Many, however, were not so lucky as to leave the prison alive: some were transported under guard to their death, and the bodies of those who died in prison were transported as corpses to sites of disposal. A mass grave south of Athens illustrates the deep history of such acts of organized transportation to death; in the seventh century BCE, seventy-nine males were led to the coast in manacles and buried in three trenches; at least sixteen of them were executed on the spot (Ingvarsson et al. 2019; Chryssoulaki 2020). In this case, it is unclear who these men were, or precisely why they were executed en masse. During the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, on the other hand, much of our data concerning prisoner executions relates to mass entertainment. The scene is repeated most often in Jewish and Christian martyr acts, which themselves present the transportation, trial, and execution of dissidents as a form of popular entertainment, as we see represented in dozens of visual sources that depict convicted criminals transported in chains to their death in the arena.

The Prison for the Condemned in the amphitheater of Roman Carales provides one concrete example of the route traveled from the prison to the arena—through a hundred-meter-long aqueduct, repurposed to serve as a final entrance route for prisoners on their way to meet a gladiator or a *bestiarius*, who controlled their

movement while they were attacked and consumed by animal (A24). We may prefer to look away from such violence; ancient interior designers had no such qualms. The second century Mosaic of the Damnatī from El Jem, Tunisia, depicts a *bestiarius* holding the condemned man's hands behind his back while a leopard attacks his face, and a Zliten mosaic today housed at the Tripoli Archaeological Museum presents a victim bound to a wheeled platform, pushed by an attendant toward the animal tasked with killing him (Mosaic of the Damnatī, V28; Carucci 2018, 212–33; Zliten *damnatio ad bestias*, V46 [first—third centuries CE]; Parrish 1985, 137–58). Reliefs depicting prisoners under transport typically show them led by a guard, often with a placard advertising the crime of which they had been convicted (Vismara 2001, 216).

As a final act of transport, guards often had the duty of disposing of corpses, though this process is not often described in detail. Some literary materials indicate that the common practice at the Tullian Prison in Rome was purposefully spectacular: guards were known to drag the prisoner's body to the riverbank and throw it in the Tiber as an act of purgation, or alternatively to expose the corpse on the Gemonian stairs above the prison (Xiphilinus, *Epitome of Cassius Dio* 146.15–30, L145 [original ca. 230 CE]; Kyle 1998, 213–24). In the fourth century CE, on the other hand, Libanius claimed that many prisoners were dying in the Antiochene prison with comparatively little fanfare, escaping notice beyond the prison walls. “The jailor makes his report; the governor doesn't turn a hair, but merely orders the funeral” (*Oration* 45.11, L52 [386 CE]). It is not clear what such a funeral may have comprised, though one early Christian source suggests that it was customary for the corpses of prisoners to be consumed with fire and the bones disposed of with a studied irreverence—a practice that animates another central theme of many early Christian martyr acts: efforts to locate the remains of the executed Christians and provide them with a proper burial (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 13, L209 [ca. 200 CE or later]). Other Christian accounts imagine civic authorities combining corpse exposure, cremation, and disbursal in water precisely to preclude the veneration of executed criminals (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.62, L283 [account set 177 CE, excerpted early fourth century CE]). Bodily disposal was a pressing issue, especially in the case of condemned prisoners; sources from the Roman imperial period witness to an all-of-the-above approach, well discussed by Donald Kyle (1998, 160–71).

Across antiquity, then, a fundamental duty of prison guards and registrars was to control movement. Officials were tasked with containing prisoners within carceral spaces, to be sure, but the duties that leave the most significant and illuminating data concern prisoner transport, both within the prison and outside it. Some prisoners wasted away in dark cells, shuffled periodically between locations and ultimately to freedom, an alternative punishment, or disposal. As we have suggested, ancient Mediterranean prisons were porous spaces, where city residents could interact in limited ways with the people their society incarcerated. Yet

prisoners were most visible on the move, and it is no surprise that images of prisoners often depict them in transit.

SHIFTING PRISON POLICIES

After recovering their island in 322 BCE, the residents of Samos dedicated a statue to a Chalkidian man for his part in freeing Samians, “whom the Athenians, having shut them up in prison [*desmōterion*], sentenced to death” (IG 12.6.1.42, D174 [321–319 BCE]). The inscription dates from just before the temporal boundaries of this study, and gestures toward an important difference between Greek carceral practices immediately prior to the third century BCE and those that came afterward. The inscription provides rare documentary evidence from a previous period and a different location from the earliest sources engaged here, and it evokes the familiar, traditional model of ancient incarceration where prisons serve primarily as place of temporary confinement for public enemies en route to punishment. As we have argued, this is the ideal of the prison that modern historians have envisioned across the premodern world. To be clear: there are examples of such a model, and this inscription is certainly among them. The notion of a prison as a public jail for pretrial detention existed in antiquity, but it was not nearly as common or ubiquitous as has often been claimed.

Thus far we have employed evidence from across the Mediterranean basin to construct a synthetic account of the ideology and experience of ancient incarceration between 300 BCE and 600 CE. We have argued that many of the ideologies and experiences visible as early as the Ptolemaic Zeno papyri remained detectable or traceable, albeit in evolving forms, through the Roman and Byzantine periods, and that such documentary evidence can enlighten literary, visual, and archaeological data from across the Mediterranean. In his article, “Ptolemaic Prisons Reconsidered,” John Bauschatz (2007) showed that incarceration was used widely for public and private offenses in the Ptolemaic period, that prison complexes came in a variety of distinct styles, that carceral spaces pertained to different imprisoning authorities rather than distinct prison populations, and that a spectrum is visible in the length of incarceration, with shorter stays having been relatively more common (3–4). Our analysis has shown that each of these facets of Ptolemaic incarceration were in fact widely practiced across the Mediterranean basin through the early Byzantine period at least. They first appear in the documentary record during the Ptolemaic period, but they were not unique to that time and place, and we should not assume that these practices were innovations of the Ptolemies, either. Even so, there are some marked differences to be observed between places and periods within the broad frame of this book. We turn, finally, to some discontinuities visible among our sources.

To begin, a few distinctive patterns are visible in the Ptolemaic material that do not hold in later periods. Most salient perhaps is the location of incarceration:

while the Roman period saw public prisons typically located on the municipal forum, Ptolemaic sources often suggest that prisoners were often held in purpose-built spaces connected to the municipal tax office or the office of the regional governor (*stratēgos*). For instance, in the late third century BCE, a scribe from a village outside Oxyrhynchus complained to the treasurer (*oikonomos*) that he went to the treasury office (*logistērion*) to pay his bill but was interrupted by one of the governor's staffers. "The staffer gave directions to arrest me, and now I am in the lock-up room [*efēmereutērion*]" (P. Petr. 2.10(2), D110 [221–205 BCE]). We see such facilities in use for tax and private debts, and even for crimes that have no obvious connection to debt. As Bauschatz (2013) showed, "debtors were not the only offenders who sometimes found themselves wasting away in Ptolemaic holding cells. The papyri reveal that a broad array of offenses could lead to at least temporary stays in a holding facility: theft, assault, disturbing the peace, poor job performance, and flight (for slaves)" (240). While Cassius Dio is one of a few Roman sources to suggest the use of treasuries as ad hoc carceral spaces, Ptolemaic sources often cast the public carceral regime as part of the tax collection service in much the same way that, in the United States, the Secret Service is part of the Department of the Treasury and not the Department of Justice (quoted in Zonaras *Annales* 8.3 (D), L60 [ca. 230 CE]). One could imagine savings on fiscal outlays—a single set of guards surveilling both the tax office and prison—but the fact that a single royal agency is responsible for tax collection and general carceral implementation suggests, perhaps, a different underlying ideology of carceral oversight than is predominant in Roman sources.

Egyptian tax office prisons remained in use into the Roman period, though not as the central or default location for general public incarceration. In an edict from 68 CE, we see the Roman prefect of Egypt allowing the continued use of tax office prisons, though the source suggests that their use was perhaps marginal and at least distasteful. It reads,

Whereas some (officials) have had the debts of others transferred to them under cover of the public treasury and have imprisoned in the tax collector's prison [*praktoreion*] or held these debtors in another prison [*fulakas*], I have determined that this practice shall be abolished for this very reason, so that the extraction of debt may be from the property, rather than from the bodies. (OGIS 669, D185)

After a number of other prohibitions, the prefect's edict requires "no one should be confined in the tax collector's prison [*praktoreion*] except for a debtor to the public treasury." Similar to Ulpian's famous statement that governors commonly used prisons for punishment, but that the practice was distasteful, here we see Tiberius Julius Alexander, prefect of Egypt, stating that in the first century CE local administrators often used tax office facilities to hold civic prisoners, as we know was common in Ptolemaic practice, but that they ought not do so any longer. The prefect's logic for disallowing the use of public treasury prisons for

private debtors is interesting, as well: prisons, he reasons, extract debts “from the bodies” of the debtors rather than from their property. We cannot say whether the prefect’s prohibition was widely followed. But the legal ideal expressed is interesting in and of itself, and it suggests an ideological change between the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. In this Roman’s ideal, tax prisons should be solely reserved for public debtors; what is implied is that civic prisons were to be reserved for deviants of other sorts.

There is a continuity of authority in early Roman rule in Alexandria, as seen in BGU 4.1138 from 19 BCE where a scribe of the supraregional governor (*epistratēgos*) approaches a low-level prison guard to request the release of a prisoner, similar to cases in the Ptolemaic Zeno papyri (D107). In Roman sources, however, the location where that guard sat in oversight is consistently inconsistent, and people whom he guarded, too, were likely different from a demographic standpoint: while Romans typically inflicted incarceration primarily on those belonging to a social underclass, while exile and other forms of sanction were reserved for those of noble birth, such class distinctions are harder to glimpse in Ptolemaic practice.

Prison provisioning changed over time as well, so far as we can see. Roman-era sources regularly indicate taxes raised for the support of local police, a continuation of the Ptolemaic *fulaktikon* tax (O. Wilcken 2.422, D149 [68 CE]). It is not until the Roman period, however, that the documentary record indicates taxes levied particularly for the support of prison guards, as discussed above in the section on prison bureaucracy (p. 168–170).

Julia Hillner (2015) argued a decade ago that late Roman legal sources produced a comprehensive legal theory of punishment for the first time, while earlier sources point to a less systematic, more scattered collection of penal ideologies (16). It is hard to say to what extent this insight is dictated by the nature of the sources available from each period: systematic legal compilations only survive from the late Roman period. It is certainly the case that in these late Roman legal codifications we see a comprehensive legal theory of punishment which is not *visible* before—perhaps because the earlier sources are no longer extant, or perhaps because they never were produced in the first place. And, as Andrea Lovato (1994) has argued, late antique legislation witnesses a slow but substantive trajectory in which emperors attempt to wrestle punitive discretion away from judges and even private people, implementing fixed penalties instead (186–93).

What is clearly the case, as Krause (1996) has shown, is that the total number of prisons likely increased in Late Antiquity, even as municipal prisons themselves were increasingly under the direct control of far off, overworked, and often capricious governors rather than local authorities (264–68). More likely, the alleged appearance of a thoroughgoing penology suggested by Hillner is an artifact of increasing prevalence and centralization along with a new form of legal consciousness that found value in producing the great legal codifications of Late Antiquity that survive, while earlier materials, frequently, do not. A similar issue shrouds our

view of another major facet of late Roman prisons: reform efforts. Beginning in the fourth century CE, we see sustained social and legal attempts to mitigate some of the worst excesses of the prison, though again the fact that the *Theodosian Code's* coverage begins with laws of 312 has likely occluded previous reform efforts. But, beginning in the early fourth century and growing through the middle of the fifth, we see a collocation of sources that seem to point to both localized and institutional efforts at reform that are not visible at such scale at any point previously.

A Constantinian law of 320/21 CE presents a comprehensive slate of minimum standards for the treatment of prisoners, though at least some of these are not likely to be reforms, but rather restatements of laws already in force. This law targeted the treatment of prisoners awaiting trial, and it details explicitly the rationale for minimum standards: "the point is to avoid torment, while safeguarding custody" (*CTh* 9.3.1, L133 [320/21 CE]). To that end, the law stipulates, for instance, that defendants "should not be placed in iron fetters that fit close to the bone, but looser chains." Such "shackle poisoning" is well-attested as a cause of convict deaths even in the modern period, and recent archaeological findings suggest that such a concern was not without merit in antiquity—the skeleton of a crucified man discovered in the Roman settlement at Fenstanton, in England, shows abnormal bone growth apparently resulting from long-term shackling (A38; Ingham and Duhig 2022; Oshinsky 1997, 45). The constitution orders, further, that prisoners should generally be allowed access to some sunlight during the day, and that guards who allow prisoners to die of starvation should themselves be subject to capital punishment. As a whole, the law paints prisons as inherently dangerous places, and attempts to deal with some of the eventualities of prison architecture and culture of carceral oversight. Some thirty years later, Libanius praised Constantine's prison legislation in an oration celebrating his sons, reflecting "what seemed to him an improvement in the conditions of incarceration," noting battles won, disbursements made, and the "long-suffering offender in the prisons, set free by the mercy of the ruler" (Pavón Torrejón 2004, 113; Libanius, *Oration* 59.29 [349 CE]). Perhaps their father's example convinced Constantine's sons to attempt further restrictions on the list of offenses for which incarceration was used as punishment. Writing to the governor of Sardinia, they decreed that "provincials must not suffer lashes of leaded whips or the custody of prison on account of unpaid taxes due, since it is recognized that such tortures have not been established for the innocent but for the guilty" (*CTh* 11.7.7, L97 [353 CE?]). A generation later, the emperors Gratian, Valentinian II, and Theodosius I decreed that prisoners should be released on the day of Easter, with the exception of "those person who we know would rather defile the joy and happiness of the community, should they be released"—that is, adulterers and rapists, people who disturb the dead or counterfeit money, murderers, and the like (*CTh* 9.38.8, L29 [385 CE]). Earlier sources, and especially the Severan jurist Ulpian, consider something like the "public good" as dispositive

rationale for legal strictures, but this is the first time that we see a law explicitly name the prison as a tool for ensuring general social cohesion.

As discussed in the section on food, a fairly uniform idea of what might constitute prison food rations existed at least as early as the first part of the third century BCE and continued through the Roman imperial period. Nevertheless, the surviving legal corpus suggests that distribution of food to prisoners first became an issue for legislation during the late Roman period. CIL 8.17897 is a fragmentary decree from the *curia* of the Roman colony of Thamugadi from 361 to 363 CE, that seems to give a directive that the local citizenry was responsible for providing food and other provisions for incarcerated people, as well as for prison guards (D171; p. 117–118). The decree in Thamugadi mirrors concerns in a law given decades later at Ravenna by Emperors Honorius and Theodosius II, demanding that judges inspect prisoners each Sunday and that a modest amount of food should be provided to prisoners who have none because Christians are instructed to care for the poor (*CTh* 9.3.7, L44 [409 CE]).

The rhetorician Libanius was so disturbed by the treatment of incarcerated people in Antioch that he declaimed a long list of complaints to the emperor Theodosius I late in 386 CE, complaining that the affluent had hijacked the carceral system, wrongfully accusing people and sending them to rot in prison without trial or access to bail. “In consequence, the prison is packed with bodies. No one comes out—or precious few, at least—though many go in” (*Oration* 45.8, L52). Prisoners of both sexes do not have enough to eat, he complains, and prison wardens hold a monopoly on light, charging inmates exorbitant prices for lamps and oil. Thousands are dying, Libanius reports, and the text of his oration records the emperor’s reply: weeping, the emperor expresses an acute concern for the injustice of the carceral system as practiced. At issue were both the material aspects of Antiochene prisons and the legal apparatus that kept people in squalid and exploitative conditions long enough to deny them justice. Responding to an objection that a delay in justice does not render an innocent man guilty, Libanius retorts: “If they are dead, they cannot [clear their name in court]!” (19) Legal reform was impotent without executive action. He complains to the emperor: “I know that you have enacted a law to help people under arrest as regards the length of detention, and that this does serve to protect them. But I also know that the same sort of practices have been current after the passing of the law as would have occurred if it was not in force. When magistrates willing to enforce them are non-existent, laws are mere words, and do not provide assistance to victims . . .” (32). Libanius inveighs against a system in which many are falsely accused, and even those who are guilty are punished by virtue of their incarceration rather than as recompense for their crime; even the laws that are intended to fix the problem are toothless without active enforcement. Libanius’s speech points to something like grassroots organizing in the fourth century—attempting to hold the powerful to account for the injustice

of the carceral system. It reminds us, too, that laws prescribe an ideal world rather than describing practices on the ground. Previous reform efforts may have existed, but none are as thoroughly documented as those visible in the mid- and late fourth century CE, extending from small peripheral cities like Thamugadi even to the imperial court.

Legislative impotence was not unique to Rome, however. Across the period under discussion private prisons were outlawed variously, and apparently to little effect: P. Tebt. 1.5 is a Ptolemaic royal decree outlawing the use of private prisons in 118 BCE, remarkably similar to a law of Zeno from over half a millennium later attempting to bring about the same result (D7; *CI* 9.5.1, L134 [486 CE]). Even while the reasons and means of outlawing private incarceration differed, the attestation of such private facilities across and beyond that time frame suggests, again, the gap between prescriptive law and penal practice—perhaps as much as does the central position that private prisons took as a public good in Byzantine Egypt (Fikhman 1970; Torallas Tovar 2003, 221–23; Berkes 2015).

Substitutionary incarceration is a peculiar facet of Byzantine Egyptian carceral practice, especially gendered forms thereof. Sources like PSI 7.824, a Greek letter on papyrus from the late sixth or early seventh century, announce a previously unknown practice, and apparently at scale: the use of women as collateral for men's debts, with wives left to endure the torments of incarceration while husbands remain free to work and earn freedom for their wives (D13 [575–625 CE]; cf. O. Mon. Epiph. 177, D139 [sixth–seventh centuries CE]; Torallas Tovar 2006, 105). While earlier sources like BGU 16.2618, from Herakleopolis in 7 BCE, show incarceration of slaves as debt collateral, it is only in the late antique period that we see wives used as such (D146; Torallas Tovar 2003, 216–17; Krause 1996, 175–76).

One final point of discontinuity warrants mention, though it perhaps speaks equally to the general trend of continuity: prisoner releases are in evidence across our period of analysis, often during a festival or special occasion. The specifics of what occasion, which prisoners, and the process of amnesty differs across our archive and even between locations during the same period. For instance, Ptolemaic amnesties are most common on the occasion of a royal birthday (PSI 4.347, D116 [255–254 BCE]), while late Roman practice tends to prefer religious holidays for the same (*CTh* 9.38.3, L45 [367 CE?]).

We are historians, and when we began this project, our training primed us with an expectation bordering on dogma: we ought to find radical differences in ideology and experiences of incarceration over the roughly nine centuries covered by this book. To be sure, developments are visible, along with a few trajectories and a handful of stark discontinuities. But, by and large, carceral practices remained remarkably, unsettlingly durable across the ancient Mediterranean.

Considered from this broad perspective, we find that remarkably few aspects of even the contemporary US carceral state are truly unique. More often than

not, what comes through from a contemporary comparative perspective are resonances or precursors, visible already in various ancient Mediterranean societies. The modern prison is not a new construction but an old and haunted house, full of apparitions of terror and subjugation that linger, whether we choose to recognize them, or whether we hold to the insuperable peculiarity of the pre-modern world. The explanation of difference is one of the historian's core tasks, but just as important is openness to aspects of human society that have remained surprisingly, disturbingly stable over the *longue durée*. We follow our colleagues in carceral studies in seeing that carceral practices underwent a significant shift in the early modern period. But in most cases those changes were not fundamental; even seemingly novel practices were not generated out of whole cloth. Penal incarceration, limited-term sentencing, solitary confinement, economic drivers behind mass incarceration, the connection between violence, prisoner bodies, and popular entertainment—each of these have clear precursors in the ancient Mediterranean.

The far distant past is beyond the remit of this book, and a global history of incarceration remains unwritten. Nevertheless, so far as we can tell, some aspects of incarceration have appeared in every Mediterranean society for which we have historical data; perhaps incarceration is a facet of every hierarchical, complex society. This may be demoralizing to those committed to abolition of the contemporary prison system and to the end of mass incarceration. Yet it need not be so. A world without prisons is a world we've yet to discover. It is a new, fresh future that could await us, but it is up to us to build it.

