

**THE COUNCILLOR'S DILEMMA.
POLITICAL CULTURE IN THIRD-CENTURY ROMAN EGYPT¹**

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The emperor speaks

Shortly after the introduction of town councils in the Egyptian district capitals at the beginning of the third century A.D., the emperor Caracalla felt compelled to issue an edict about the behaviour of the town councillors:

Proclamation of the Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus Parthicus Maximus Britannicus Maximus Germanicus Maximus Pius Augustus.

If a councillor strike or censure [in the councils] the president or a councillor, the councillor shall be deprived of his rank and set in a position of dishonour.

Published at ...(?) in the public stoa, the magistrate in office being Aurelios Alexandros ... from Heliopolis.

Αὐτοκράτωρ Καῖσαρ Μ[άρκος Αὐρήλιος] | Σεουήρος Ἐντωνῖνος Παρθικὸς Μέγιστος | Βρετανικὸς Μέγιστος Γερμανικὸς | Μέγιστος Ἐ[ὕσ]εβ[ή]ς Σεβαστὸς | λέγει· ἰὲν βουλευτῆς τὸν [πρύτανιν ἢ βουλευ]τὴν τύψῃ ἢ μέμψ[η]τα! [.....] ὁ μὴν βουλ[ε]υτῆς τῆς βουλευσίας ἀ[παλλά]ξεται καὶ εἰς ἄτιμον χώραν [καταστή?] |¹⁰σεται. προετέθη ἐν Β[αβυλῶνι ?] | ὑπὸ στ[ο]ῶ δημοσίᾳ ἐν[άρχου ἄρ]χοντος Αὐρηλ(ίου) Ἀλεξάνδρου | ἀπὸ Ἡλίου [π]όλεως.²

The text, dating to A.D. 213-217,³ is in places damaged, and the clause about the publication of the edict contains some uncertain elements.⁴ But as the original editors already remarked, the general sense of the edict is clear: councillors who misbehaved during meetings of the councils were to be punished: they would lose their status as councillor.

¹ My thanks to staff and students of the Leiden Papyrological Institute for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² *P.Oxy.* 12 (1916) 1406, cf. *B.L.* for subsequent corrections and republications.

³ The text is dated by Oliver at the moment of Caracalla's visit to Egypt in 215 A.D.

⁴ It is unclear why the edict would be published in a village (where there would be no council and where a public stoa would not be expected). The dating by an eponymous archon of a nome capital is most unusual.

Fighting and misbehaviour are not something that should raise comments, were it not for the fact that the town councils were lofty institutions. Membership of the town council contained the same honorific connotations at the local level as senatorial membership did in Roman society at large. Councillorship formed the formal and institutional demarcation of the local elites. Membership of the council was for life; admission required wealth. Councils comprised the wealthiest and most respected adult males of the towns. We may therefore suppose that the behaviour of the councillors matched their status.

It therefore comes as a surprise that the edict of Caracalla refers to hitting and abuse during the meetings. Apparently the emperor felt compelled to issue a rule that this was intolerable behaviour. One would think that of all the persons in local society, councillors were the last to need such an admonishment. How can we explain its occurrence, then?

Some have suggested that this type of behaviour was due to the fact that the councils were a new creation.⁵ Councils had been instituted in Egypt only at the beginning of the third century. One may equally point to the fact that the institution that for the new councillors would be most similar to that of the council was that of the *collegium*. *Collegia* had a long history in Egypt and surviving rules of these societies suggest that physical violence could and did occur during its meetings.⁶

Be that as it may, such an explanation remains superficial. It is unsatisfactory because it does not put stress on structural factors. Instead I would argue that the violence was the product of the tensions created by the political system of the *metropoleis*. The answer should be sought in the political culture and the nature of elite competition.

Thus far, little has been written on the subject of the political culture of the local elites of Roman Egypt. Much has been written on the functioning of the councils, but always from a formal, technical perspective.⁷ In the historiography of the urban elites of Roman Egypt, office-holding is considered to be central, but strangely enough the character of local politics has hardly been analysed. Yet politics are crucial. Through politics, we get a sense of the structure of elite competition, its modes of debate, and its value systems. In fact, meetings of the council can be read as a symbolic dramatization of the fundamental tensions of elite life.

In as much as there is attention devoted to the subject, it tends to offer a view that is not necessarily wrong, but which is superficial and one-sided. Defined narrowly as 'office-

⁵ This seems implied by the comments of the editors of the text: 'Senates were first instituted in the nome-capitals by Septimius Severus ..., and their meetings ... are likely to have been turbulent, at any rate in the early days'.

⁶ I owe the observation to Brian Muhs.

⁷ The best of such studies is Bowman (1971), replacing earlier work.

holding', broadly as 'municipal life', local politics plays a central role in descriptions of the urban elites, even to such an extent that its history is often simply equated with it. But it is a sorry story; written largely in negative terms. The story is well known and need not to be repeated at great length: the willingness of members of the elites to participate dwindled, up to the point that a lack of suitable candidates to take up offices brought municipal life to an end.

There can be no doubt that the gradual disappearance of the willingness to participate in municipal life is the defining characteristic of the history of municipal life in the third and fourth centuries. One can argue about the pace of the process, and about the scale, but not about its occurrence. But it is as if we hear the result, without analysis of the process which led to it. No matter how negatively office-holding might have been perceived, it was still part of the process of decisions we define as local politics. As we will see, there was as much competition and decision-making involved in *not* participating in local politics as there was in participating.

The historiography also suffers from another problem. It does offer only part of the story. Throughout the third century there were and remained members of the elite who still were willing to participate in municipal life. This willingness may have consisted of volunteering for office, but more often will have taken the more neutral form of silently accepting an office, of simply not protesting against a nomination. For every councillor who raised a complaint we should envisage another one for whom office holding was not a problem. In a sense, this willingness poses considerable problems, for it complicates the story. How seriously are we to take the councillors' complaints? What was the balance between those members of the elite who did participate in municipal life, and those who did not; and how did the balance shift and for what reasons?

These are large issues. Luckily, there is no need to solve all of them immediately. More importantly, it points to something else. It points to a tension between competition for honour and something we should for the moment describe as the cost of honour. This tension forms a structural part of municipal life, not something uniquely late antique. It is this tension and its social implications that should be central to any analysis of local politics in Egypt.

In essence, then, local politics consisted of competition between members of the elite for status and honour. Status and honour were intimately linked with office-holding, but, quite interesting, they were not identical, because office-holding could be perceived both positively and negatively. Much competition was negative: in some cases it was as important to stay out of office as it was to obtain an office.

1. Competition for office

By way of introduction, we should first determine the character of local politics. What was politics about? What did people do when they engaged in politics?

We might as well start with what local politics in Roman Egypt was not. As will be obvious, the political system of Roman Egypt was not even remotely akin to Athenian democracy, or even to the other political systems of classical Greece. There were no discussions as found in the *ekklesia*, no motions put forward or adapted, there was no voting, there were no *probouleumata*.

The lack of similarity to the politics of the classical Greek period is obvious, unsurprising and would hardly need comment, were it not for the fact that it is still the yardstick to which the political systems of other, later, cities are held. Although it is widely accepted that Athens even in Classical Greece hardly constituted the norm *and* that polis-life of the post-Classical period was as vibrant as ever, when it comes to discuss the *quality* of political life in post-classical periods little room is left for something that is worthy the name political culture. Met by Athens' yardstick, the postclassical *poleis* fall short by a wide margin. This might incidentally also explain why so little work is done on the subject – there is little to be gained in studying something that can only be analysed in negative terms.

The proper context for Egyptian politics is not that of Athens but that of the city of the Hellenistic and Roman period. Politics Egyptian-style stood at the end of a long development of increased oligarchisation, by which councils became closed, with a membership for life, and only comprised the members of the local landowning elites. Politics, in these councils, had little to do with policies or decision-making processes in our sense of the word. In a context in which the *poleis* were subsumed in larger states the development is not really surprising. The councils occupied themselves rather with matters which were relevant to the councillors themselves. The councillors decided on honorific decrees, on embassies, on the distributions of magistracies. These were matters which probably were of little concern to the rest of the urban population, let alone to the rural population.

Politics Egyptian-style stood at the end of this development. What was left of the Hellenistic-Roman model in third-century Roman Egypt was politics reduced to its bare essence. There is very little trace of a *demos*, through which the rest of the populace might have had a chance to participate. Nor is there much sign of a culture of euergetism, by which

local grandees showered benefactions on the rest of the populace. Politics were confined to the council, and the councillors debated subjects that were mostly relevant to themselves. Councillors spent most of their time debating the distribution of offices. Who should be appointed? Who absconded? Who could replace someone? In consequence, meetings of the council had little to do with what we would consider the conduct of administration. In the reports of meetings of the council, there are no discussions about policies, or issues of administration. There are hardly any other subjects considered than those of nomination, and even those that do address other subjects, are still held in the context of nominations.

Politics, then, was by and large confined to the world of the councillors. It took place in the council, and consisted of decisions by councillors about councillors. These decisions concerned to a large degree the distribution of offices among themselves. Politics in third-century Egypt consisted therefore of elite competition for office. Or, as we will see, of competition against office.

2. The Benefits and Costs of Office

If politics consisted of competition for office, the next question to address is why a councillor would want to hold office. As we will quickly see, this simple question is all too relevant. For councillors themselves the answer was never simple. They had to weigh carefully the costs and benefits.

First a point of definition: what was an office, in the context of the third-century Roman Egypt? The answer might as well be given by comparing magistracies with liturgies. A distinction was made in Egypt (and elsewhere in the Roman world similar distinctions existed) between liturgies and magistracies. Liturgies were compulsory, did imply real work, and were assigned on the basis of wealth. Some of these could be really burdensome. Some of these may have given power, or access to wealth, but they were never associated with honour.

By contrast, magistracies were – or were at least in principle – voluntarily assumed. In principal they were annual; they were held for one year, after which someone else would take over. They were primarily honorific: it was an honour to be appointed; it was an honour to hold a magistracy. The magistrate was inaugurated with a special ceremony, at which he was crowned; several invitations to such crowning ceremonies have survived on papyrus. Such magistracies would be held by members of the elite, who each year decided on the distribution among them.

The honorific character of magistracies also means that they were relatively devoid of content – especially when compared to liturgies. Specific magistrates had specific tasks, surely, but these tasks were as it were a by-product of the office or they were rather empty in character. Hence the difficulty of scholars to define exactly what for example a *kosmetes* would do.

What happened during the third century is that the honorific magistracies more and more became regarded as burdensome liturgies. Although the formal boundary separating liturgies from magistracies was still in existence, we see magistracies gradually crossing the invisible line. They became assigned instead of being subject to choice; they became compulsory. This also shows in the fact that they could be held by persons outside the group of councillors, and by the fact that they could be split up between multiple persons. In the titlature of councillors we see a number of offices disappearing – apparently it was not worth anymore to mention them. There is a large number of examples of councillors who tried to avoid such offices.

It is not entirely clear why this happened. The standard answer is that the cost of office became too high. The financial burdens involved in office-holding became too heavy. This can however be only a partial explanation, because it leaves unclear *why* the burden became so heavy. Pointing to the ‘crisis of the third century’ helps less than one would think, because the problems occurred both before and after the crisis. The crisis is too readily adduced: it provides a label, but hardly an explanation. Moreover, economic deterioration is certainly not an unproblematic concept. It need not be forgotten that the wealth of councillors was wealth in land; we may suppose that their property was relative safe against possible financial instability.

In an interpretation that puts stress on financial deterioration an estimate of the financial burdens involved in office-holding is important. It should however be realised that much less is known about the financial aspects of office-holding than one would expect in view of the abundance of sources about the third-century urban elites of Egypt. It is impossible to calculate in a single case the cost of an office. Nor is it clear what the relation was between the costs spent by the office-holder and the costs that were covered by local funds. On the assumption of office the office-holder had to pay crown-money,⁸ but what happened afterwards is uncertain.

⁸ For the *steptikon*, see e.g. *P.Oxy.* 12 (1916) 1413 (early 272/3) line 4f.

In fact, some have proposed that the costs of office were in reality relatively modest. The few sums that are mentioned are not very high compared to the income that councillors derived from their lands. From the councillor's perspective the cost of office may have been perceived differently, objectively there was however little to complain about. In this view, the complaints of councillors should be taken with a grain of salt.

However, it should be realised that the cost of office only has meaning in relation to the wealth of the office-holder. Two remarks should be made about this wealth. Firstly, there was huge variation between the wealth of individual councillors.⁹ In theory there would have been a match between wealth and office, as this was the guiding principle in the distributions of offices. In reality it is unlikely that this was always observed. Especially in cases where there was a dearth of candidates, the selection of candidates will not have been made with much care. Secondly, we should also realise that personal wealth was not stable over time. Despite the fact that most wealth consisted of land, property holdings could and did change. A councillor may or may not have received his part of the inheritance at the moment his name came up for office. He would receive his inheritance in at least two different instalments: a paternal inheritance and a maternal inheritance, and the same would apply to his wife.¹⁰ Further, plots of land were bought and sold to an amazing degree. Even if an attempt was made to assign offices only to persons who could bear the burden, it would have been difficult to find always the perfect match. It is hence certainly possible that there would always be a number of mismatches of people who were forced to accept offices that were in reality far above their means.

Honour was in the eye of the office-holder. It was very much a fluid concept: it depended on the perception of the office-holder, who probably would balance it against the costs of the office in relation to his personal wealth. It also depended on the perception of the outside world, which in turn would be taken into account by the prospective office-holder. In evaluations of the costs of office it is therefore not useful to apply objective or formalised criteria. Even if we knew better what the actual costs of office were, we still could not make a correct assessment how an individual councillor would weigh such costs and benefits. What we can suppose is that in each round of office distributions, there would be councillors who perceived the burden as too heavy. They would try to escape their nomination. Others would not have real difficulty in taking up the responsibility of office. In each case, it was an

⁹ See my *Fragile Hierarchies* Part 1 Chapter 3.

¹⁰ *Fragile Hierarchies* Part 2 Chapter 3.

individual decision, in which actual costs and perceived honour would be weighted. Some would accept their office, others would try to avoid it.

3. Career patterns

If no councillor at all would have agreed to hold office, municipal life would have come quickly to an end. As we find throughout the third century magistrates in great number, it is clear that that did not happen. There were each year a number of councillors who took up magistracies – no matter with how much reluctance. In order to understand more about the structure of competition, it is well-worth to analyse their careers.

Titulature holds the key. It is titulature that forms the main source for patterns of office-holding. From the strings of offices attached to councillor's names it is possible to reconstruct some of the properties of the system of political competition.

Such an analysis is not free from problems. There is no need to enter into all technical peculiarities, but in order to understand the possibilities and limits of the observations some knowledge of naming patterns is necessary. As a member of the elite entered the council, he began to be styled *bouleutes*, 'councillor', or, longer, 'councillor of city X'. Every time he held an office, the name of the office was added to his title, and remained part of it. In this way, strings of offices were created, like medals on a chest. So 'Tiberius Claudius Diogenes, *ex-kosmetes*, *ex-agonothetes*, *bouleutes*' had been *kosmetes* and *agonothetes*, and was currently apparently without magistracy. The order in which these offices would be mentioned varied. Offices usually would be listed in ascending order with the oldest office mentioned first. However, a descending order could occur as well, with the most recent office first. Apparently it did not matter much, as both forms could be used by the same person interchangeably. We find a councillor who is styled in one text as 'prytanis, *ex-gymnasiarch*, *bouleutes*', and in another, of the same year, as '*ex-gymnasiarch*, prytanis, *bouleutes*'.¹¹ Sometimes care was taken to distinguish current offices from past offices. Different methods could be used, and there may perhaps have been some regional variation in its usage. More important is that the distinction between past and present offices was not always observed. One reason is that the distinction is often obscured through the use of abbreviations, but even when written out in full we often find no differentiation between past and present office.

¹¹ Aur. Pasion-Apollonios in *P.Erl.* 18 and *P.Oxy.* 38.2854 resp.

In consequence, it is almost impossible to reconstruct career patterns in the traditional sense of the word: we often do not know in individual cases which office led to the next office. This problem is aggravated by the fact that hardly ever ages of individuals are known, not even approximate ones. It is as if we are looking at a long series of photos of unknown individuals taken at unknown moments in their lives.

What can we observe, then, from these snapshots? As a statistical analysis is impossible, we have to rely on impressions. The points that can be established may seem relatively trivial, but they gain importance later on.

The first thing to note is the flexibility in career patterns. There are, to be sure, recurring patterns, often found combinations, and there was clearly some sense of hierarchy in the offices. But there was more than one route to the top; and sometimes we find unexpected combinations of offices. It seems hopeless to impose too much system, or to expect too much system.

In this respect, Egyptian politics is in marked contrast with the western part of the empire, and in marked agreement with the Greek East. Western careers were fixed: a person had to go through a series of offices step by step. In consequence, office jumping did hardly occur. Competition for office was limited to the vacant places caused by early deaths. Much seems to have depended on seniority and patterns of mortality, much less on ambition and wealth. All a councillor had to do was to become old. By contrast, the situation in the Greek East was much more flexible. There was some sense of hierarchy with respect to the offices, but no fixed order.

One of the main reasons of the chaotic appearance of municipal politics was that there was relatively much choice. Some ten different offices are mentioned in the Oxyrhynchite titlature, half of them frequently enough to inspire confidence that they were available on a regular annual basis. These are the office of agoranomos, kosmetes, exegetes, gymnasiarch, and prytanis. Further, one encounters the occasional agonothetes, hiereus and archiereus, eirenarch, eutheniarch, and pompagogos. With so many offices to choose from, it was almost inevitable that there was more than one way to the top.

A further point of note is that actual careers appear to be rather short. Usually only two or three offices were held. It is not very likely that the titlature is misleading on this point. Admittedly, the theoretical possibility of omission cannot be completely excluded in all cases; furthermore, some of the councillors we encounter in the sources may have been half-way their career. However, also in the case of presidents, whose local careers we may assume to have been completed, we find relatively few offices mentioned. Similarly, in the case of

deceased councillors (who by definition had a completed career) there are only few offices mentioned. Rather remarkable in view of the large choice, it seems as if two to three offices could constitute a full career.

Lastly, seniority seems not to have played a large role. If there was congestion in one cue, one could switch to another without much problem. This is corroborated by the fact that minimum age is never an issue in the protests against nomination, suggesting that there was none.¹² The only case when age enters the discussions about nomination is when people excuse themselves on the grounds of old age.

These observations are in themselves of minor importance, but a number of implications follow. If careers were relatively short, and the number of available magistracies was relatively large, a relatively large proportion of councillors must have held office. If career patterns were flexible, choice, and with that, competition, entered politics. If the intervals between offices were short and the number of offices that were held was small, competition was limited to a short period of the councillor's life.

A crude calculation may demonstrate the principles. Suppose a town council consisted of 100 members, who would all have entered the council around their 25th birthday. A crude calculation based on their average life expectancy suggests that there were roughly 300 councillors in 100 years.¹³ Suppose also that there were each year 6 offices that had to be filled. This would mean that in 100 years there would be 600 vacancies. If those who entered on a career each held 3 offices, there were 200 councillors necessary to fill all vacancies. This leaves 100 councillors without office. We may envisage this group to consist either of socially excluded people, or as too poor, or, the reverse, as privileged.

100 councillors without office looks like a relatively wide margin, but the system was not fixed. Magistracies were created and disappeared again. We can play around with numbers and change the input. Although it is not the only property that is subject to change, it is easiest to show the possible variation by changing the number of offices.

Number of annual offices	Number of vacancies over a century	Number of candidates	Participation
4	400	900	44%

¹² For admission to the council itself there was almost certainly a minimum age, which was probably 25 or 30. Magistrates could however also be appointed as minors (well before admission to the council).

¹³ See *Fragile Hierarchies* Part 1 Chapter 4.

5	500	900	55%
6	600	900	67%
7	700	900	78%
8	800	900	89%
9	900	900	100%
10	1000	900	111%

A number of observations can be made. What becomes quickly apparent is that the degree of participation has to increase quickly to adapt to an increase in the number of offices. The limits of participation were quickly reached. It was certainly not an academic possibility that the number of annual vacancies rose to more than six. Hence, situations where more than two-thirds of the councillors would have to engage in office-holding are no to be excluded. Secondly, even with a relatively low number of offices, the degree of participation was already high. Magistracies are often perceived as the preserve of the top of the elite. It is however likely that even under normal circumstances half of all councillors would have to hold office. Given the large variety in elite wealth, this implies almost automatically that also councillors with relatively modest property would have to participate.

Competition, then, was both open and enforced. For many councillors, there would be little choice but to participate and assume offices. Given the lack of structure in career patterns, they would however have a choice: they could opt for one office and avoid another. But this does not imply that competition was also egalitarian, with the same chances for everyone. Within the councils, there were substantial differences in wealth, and, we may suppose, differences in status and power. The fact that each year a relatively high number of offices had to be filled created a high pressure system which was susceptible to manipulation and domination.

4. The Social Dynamics of Nomination

Councillors competed for or against offices. Ultimately, it is not so much wealth as such but procedures of nomination which form the key to understand this competition. The social dynamics are best analysed by looking at the formal principles which were underlying appointment to office.

Officially, the appointment to an office was not made by the council, but by the *strategos*, the supervisor of the nome. In practice, the *strategos* was provided with a name of the candidate by the local council and his only task was to confirm the nomination – which he normally did. As these appointments were a matter of routine, it was the nomination by the council that was crucial. Hence, nomination by the council became tantamount to appointment to office. It was therefore nomination that was most contested.

There was one principle which governed such nominations by the council: someone or some group had to guarantee that the person who was nominated would carry out the tasks to which he would be appointed. This guarantee would be provided by the nominator, the person who nominated. If his candidate failed, he would have to carry the consequences.

It is interesting to explore the consequences of such a principle. In theory there were three possible scenarios: one in which multiple candidates would be competing for the same office, one in which there was one willing candidate for an office, and one for which there was none. However, it is clear that the first scenario is irrelevant to Egyptian politics. There are no cases of competition in the classical sense known. The situation that will have prevailed will have hovered between the second and the third scenario: either there was a willing candidate, or there was none. In reality, the boundary between the two will have been vague. We should imagine that willingness was not so much open enthusiasm, but more neutral behavior, or acceptance of the inevitable combined with reluctance.

As a nomination was guaranteed, it was essentially irrelevant to the state or to others whether it was accepted or not by the prospective candidate. If the person nominated somehow failed to perform, there was his guarantor who would have to do the job. One way or another, the office was filled.

Acceptance did of course matter for the nominator. The principle of a nomination that was guaranteed by the nominator meant that nomination could entail real risks. If the appointment somehow failed, the nominator had to take his place, or finance his place.

To be sure, the person who was nominated usually had little choice but to accept. There were escapes, however. One could make a claim for exemption – although these could only be made on formal grounds, the papyri show that such attempts could be successful. Prospective candidates also had recourse to a more radical measure: through a procedure of *cessio bonorum* they could hand over their property to their nominator, who had to perform instead. As a last resort, the person could simply turn to flight - a time-honored strategy in the case of liturgies among the general population of Egypt.

Nomination was therefore a risky venture. The process of nominating someone was not something to think lightly of. It is therefore not surprising that nominators were always persons with an interest in the nomination. Sometimes it was the current magistrate who nominated his successor. Sometimes it was a group of former-magistrates. Sometimes it was the council collectively. Or it was its president.

The social dynamics that such a nomination-procedure generated in cases where there was a shortage of candidates must have been considerable. We can only use empathetic imagination to try to recapture the complex situations that arose. It should also be taken into account that the councils were composed of tightly knit groups: councillors might be relatives, there might be marriage ties, they might be business-partners. It would be tempting to nominate an enemy, but the chances that such a nomination would backfire were considerable. Nominating a friend might increase the chances of success, but might not have helped the friendship. Nominating a member of one's own family might have direct repercussions on the family wealth. How would one calculate such risks? There were a great number of games that could be played, obviously.

5. Council meetings

It is interesting that at least part of the game was acted out openly, during council meetings. Especially in cases where no willing candidate came forward, decisions would have to be taken in the council. We do not know how much negotiation (or plotting) went on before or afterwards; the reports however suggest that many of the decisions were taken during the meetings themselves.

We know about the debates through the reports that have survived on papyrus. These form unique material about municipal life - there are hardly any comparable sources from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. These reports are unlikely to be verbatim - the statements each person makes are too brief for that. But they were not summaries of the contents either - they contain too many personalised statements to believe that more than the vaguest formalisation took place in recording.

The reports start with a brief statement about the date of the council and some preliminary proceedings. Almost immediately afterwards the statements of the speakers were recorded. The president could open the debate with a statement, but we also find other persons opening the session. This would then be followed by statements of others. There was no fixed

order of speakers; rank does not seem to have been a consideration. The statements would be alternated by collective acclamations: the councillors would collectively shout their assent.

What is striking is that much of the language in the debates belongs to the traditional discourse of civic life. This applies first and foremost to the shouted acclamations. The notions they convey belong to the cherished ideals of city culture. But there are also other moments when speakers refer to the great honour that the magistracies will convey upon its holder, or to the love of the fatherland. Even the reluctance to accept appointments belongs to the same discourse. In the face of honorific appointments the appropriate stance was modesty.

What is interesting is that this language was used in a way for which it was not intended. Acclamations were almost by definition meant to praise a person, but now served the purpose to shout someone into office. The expressions of reluctance to take up office were formerly used as a means to express moderation – now the words were to be taken literally. The language of civic discourse was turned on its head.

Sometimes the tensions surfaced. There are moments in the meetings where honorific discourse turned into language of abuse. No actual fighting is reported, but some of the dialogues show that the discussion could run riot. In other meetings, consensus reigned – or at least was used to put pressure on the person nominated, or even on his nominator.

The council met once a month. During its sessions decisions were taken about the nomination of magistrates. There was much at stake in such decisions. All was not peace and quiet in the council. The hitting to which the edict of Caracalla refers becomes understandable – no matter how lofty the language that was normally used.

Conclusion

What was it like - to rephrase a famous question - to be a councillor?¹⁴ A formal analysis of careers, or a formal analysis of the possibilities for redress, is unlikely to make this clear. What emerges from an analysis of political culture is how large the tension was that was generated by local politics. Much was at stake in participating in politics.

Exact evaluation of individual decisions is difficult. Not so much because of a lack of sources – these survive in relative abundance. The difficulty lies much more in evaluating the delicate balance between cost and honour. Each prospective candidate made his own decision

¹⁴ Hopkins (1978), on the emperor.

about the possible benefits that a specific office would entail. The balance between the one and the other could easily shift; even during the process of nomination.

Politics Egyptian-style was competition for office. But much of elite competition was negative: it centred on office avoidance, not on office holding. Nomination played a central role in the process. As a nomination had to be guaranteed by the nominator, nominator and nominated kept each other in check. We can only vaguely imagine the difficult balancing act each had to perform. However, in some cases, it seems that the situation was akin to a classical prisoner's dilemma. Both could win by cooperating with each other, but as both parties could not be completely sure of each others intentions, it would be safer not to. It is quite possible that the outcome of the process was not beneficial to either of the parties. That tensions surfaced during council meetings is therefore hardly surprising.

That such tensions could lead to open violence is shown by the edict with which this lecture began. In fact, the text shows it even better than I suspected. When I presented a previous version of this paper at a papyrology class, my colleague Klaas Worp did what any good papyrologists would do: he took a look at the photograph of the text. One detail caught his attention. The original editors of the text thought that in-between the lines one letter of a word was corrected. However, on closer inspection it turned out that there was not a correction but an addition. Above the next line, just before the word 'hitting', a figure was inserted, the figure '3', or 'third'. Quite ironically, the edict turns out not to have referred to simply hitting, but to hitting three times:

If a councillor «for the third time» strike or censure [.....] the president or a councillor, the councillor shall be deprived of his rank and set in a position of dishonour.¹⁵

Draft 17/8/06

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¹⁵ For βουλευτῆς τὸν [πρῶτανιν ἢ βουλευ]τὴν τύψη with β of βουλευτῆς corr. read now βουλευτῆς τὸν [πρῶτανιν ἢ βουλευ]τὴν ‘ γ ’ τύψη.