Tetragonos stoa. A commercial centre in Augustan Alexandria?

Excavations in Ephesos have brought to light a site called tetragonos agora, or ‘square agora’, which was created as a storehouse in the Hellenistic period and was rebuilt by Augustus in the late first century BC (probably between 20 and 10 BC) as a commercial storehouse and a market square for the city, or possibly by Tiberius after the earthquake of AD 23 (Figure 1). The complete renewal of the commercial area of Ephesos by Augustus was stimulated by the new needs of the empire, and possibly by the enhanced exchange of grain and other commodities with Alexandria and Rome. In the agora Claudius placed a statue of himself, and the whole space was renewed in the Flavian period. By then it was a quadrangular court measuring 154 metres per side, double storeyed and with a double-aisled stoa, so that the interior length of the stoa was 112 metres, with a width of 17 metres. Behind each row of columns lay 25 rooms, probably used as shops.¹

In Egypt, too, Augustus promoted a radical revision of the system of landholding and grain production. Soon after the conquest, he used the legions to clear up the canals in order to improve productivity, introduced new crops and renewed the system of grain supply so that the produce of Egypt would be almost entirely exportable to Rome.² Besides, Augustus entrusted the supervision of the grain supply – once a prerogative of the Ptolemaic kings – to the Roman prefect, appointed personally by the emperor. The prefect inherited from the Ptolemaic kings the power over the Alexandrian granaries and the distribution of Egyptian grain abroad.³ This change is reflected by a passage in Josephus, according to whom, as early as in 24 BC the prefect Petronius helped king Herod of Judaea during a famine by allowing him ‘to be the first to take the grain away’ from the Alexandrian granaries.⁴ Josephus also informs us that Augustus had removed from the Alexandrian citizens the administration of the grain supply, while letting the Jews maintain the potamophylakia, that is, the police patrolling the Nile.⁵ This change may have been due to the replacement of

¹ H. SCHLAGER, «Hauptstrasse und Hadrianstor», pp. 87-94 on the name tetragonos agora used for “commercial square” in Ephesos, Cyzicos and Phaselis (cf. for instance the inscription from Phaselis TAM II 1194 and that from Ephesos IvEphesos 3005). See also P. BARRESI, Province dell’Asia Minore, pp. 22, 287. P. SCHERRER, E. TRINKL, Tetragonos Agora in Ephesos, pp. 197-198.
³ For Epictetus, 1.10.10, one task of the prefect of Egypt was to ‘allow to take some grain away’.
⁴ Jewish Antiquities 15.307.
⁵ Against Apion 2.63-4.
Alexandrian officials with Roman officials, or may indicate that the Roman army now replaced the Ptolemaic forces as the guard of the Alexandrian storehouses.6

Research on the granaries of Karanis, a village in the Arsinoite nome (modern Fayum)7 has shown that, while in the Ptolemaic period much of the administration of the grain supply and storage remained in the hands of traditional Egyptian temples and priests, the reform of the land and production system under Augustus went hand in hand with the creation of new granaries, both in Alexandria and in the countryside. Egyptian granaries were now controlled by imperially-appointed officials, and presided over by the Roman army. Augustus probably also restructured some existing Hellenistic commercial spaces and some spaces for the grain storage in Alexandria, as he did with the aforementioned *tetragonos agora* of Ephesos.

At an unknown stage in the first century AD, two new figures of equestrian procurators, the *procurator ad Mercurium* (in Greek *epitropos Hermou*), ‘procurator of Hermes’, and the *procurator Neas Poleos et Mausolei Alexandiae*, ‘procurator of the New City and of the Mausoleum of Alexandria’, took over as the officials in charge of the organisation of the grain supply and storage in Alexandria.8 Their first secure attestation is in documents of the Flavian period, although naturally, they could have been in place from earlier times.9 Scholars debated whether these two procurators represented an existing division of labour between the supply of grain for the city of Alexandria and the exportation of grain to Rome and Italy, and most believed that their titles indicated the Alexandrian neighbourhoods where their sphere of competence was. The *procurator Neas Poleos*, close to the ‘new’ (that is, Roman) area of the granaries by the harbour and the ships directed to Italy, was in charge of the grain supply of Rome, while the *procurator ad Mercurium* supervised the Alexandrian markets only and was located in a quarter where a famous temple, or, more probably, a statue of Hermes was. The ‘Mercurius’ area was close to some libraries and possibly near the royal palace in the area called Bruchion.10 However, the most commonly accepted view on the function of the Alexandrian granaries is that the granaries in the *Mercurium* and in the

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6 Cf. documents showing Roman soldiers in charge of the granaries at Alexandria: CPL 106 (R ii 5) and discussion in F. BEUTLER-KRÄNZL, «Procurator ad Mercurium», pp. 53-56.
8 On equestrian procurators in Roman Egypt see F. BEUTLER-KRÄNZL, «Procurator ad Mercurium», pp. 53-56 and her forthcoming monographic work on Roman procurators. Some earlier studies include A. CALDERINI, Thesauroi, pp. 26-27, and G. RICKMAN, Granaries, pp. 298-306.
9 The earliest attestation of the *procurator ad Mercurium* is an inscription from Syria, AE 1939, 60 where Sextus Attius Suburanus Aemilianus is the official in question in 83/4. In an inscription of AD 55, AE 1924, 78, Tiberius Claudius Balbillus is called *[ad Herm]en Alexandreon* This evidence has been rejected by both G. RICKMAN, Granaries and F. BEUTLER-KRÄNZL, «Procurator ad Mercurium», as unreliable. Cf. also CPL 106 R ii.5 documenting the *procurator Neas Poleos* around AD 81-96.
Neas Poleos neighbourhoods stored grain from throughout Egypt, which was destined to be consumed either in Egypt or in Italy, without a real distinction or specialisation between the two.\footnote{G. RICKMAN, *Granaries*, pp. 303-306.} It seems however that the procurator Neas Poleos had a larger control over the grain supply, encompassing the exportation of grain to Rome, while the procurator ad Mercurium supervised the Alexandrian markets as well as some further commercial monopolies in the city.

An old theory by Wilcken and Weingärtner,\footnote{U. WILCKEN, «Germanicus Papyrus», pp. 53 ff; F. WEINGÄRTNER, *Ägyptenreise*, pp. 95 ff.} in addition, suggested that there were special granaries in Alexandria that stored the grain produce from the *ousiai* or imperial estates, that is, the lands that belonged directly to the imperial family and *patrimonium*. These scholars argued that Germanicus, during his visit to Alexandria in AD 19, probably distributed grain from the produce of his own properties. However, this idea is to be rejected, as our main source on this point, Tacitus *Ann.* 2.59, states clearly that Germanicus *levavit apertis horreis horreis pretia frugum multaque in vulgus grata usurpavit*, ‘by opening the granaries he made the price of grain fall down and adopted many measures that pleased the population’, thus showing that Germanicus did not distribute grain ‘for free’ or out of his own properties, but just sold it at fixed (although lower) prices. Besides, the documentary evidence of the visit of Germanicus, namely the edict in which Germanicus set specific prices to commodities and prohibited illegal requisitions in his honour, does not mention any distributions of free grain.\footnote{SelPap 2.211.} The story of Germanicus in Alexandria, thus, cannot be taken as evidence that some granaries contained the produce from the imperial *ousiai*. On the contrary, the information in Josephus (*C.Ap.* 2. 63-4) that Germanicus allowed only the Alexandrian citizens to enjoy a lower rate in the grain distribution, while excluding both the Jews and the Egyptians, must be trustworthy, as it agrees with the system of grain distribution known in the Greek *poleis*, both in Egypt and outside.\footnote{An analogous Greek system of distribution in function at Hermopolis Magna, where you had to declare not to have grain and, in addition, that you belonged to the *ephebia*, that is, the Greek class: cf. *PHeid* 4.338-40 and N. KRAUT 1984.} Needless to say, this system was based on an aggressive and rigid class separation, and favoured the Greek colonial class against the native populations.

In the Roman period Alexandria was divided into five neighbourhoods, known as Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and Epsilon, of which we do not know the exact boundaries (Figure 2).\footnote{Phil, Against Flaccus 55, states that the Jews inhabited two out of five quarters, while Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.488, 495, mentions the Delta as the Jewish area. For a list of the surviving mentions of the Alexandrian quarters, see J. MCKENZIE, *Architecture*, pp. 180 and 400 n. 30.} An Alexandrian document of 18 BC, *BGU* 4.1127.8-9, preserves a lease of a goldsmith’s shop in the inner circle (*sc.* of columns) of a *tetragonos stoa*, that is, a ‘quadrangular portico’, in the Quarter...
Beta of the city. The document is conducted ‘through the account office (logisterion) of the stoa’. One may wonder whether also the bakery shop mentioned in another Augustan document of 13 BC, BGU 4.1117 (MChr 107), and located in Eudaimonos Street in the Beta quarter could have been by the tetragonos stoa. From Hipparchus (ca. 146 BC) we are informed that the tetragonos agora was a commercial area, close to a Ptolemaic agora, that was founded by Alexander the Great in the main road intersections in the centre of the city, near the Canopic Gate, and that it famously hosted a bronze ring, more precisely an equatorial armillary, that was used for astronomical observations. It was, in sum, a commercial market at the historical and monumental heart of the city.

In my view it is possible that the tetragonos stoa of Alexandria was refurbished in the time of Augustus as both a commercial space and a granary. The similarity in name and structure with the tetragonos agora of Ephesos suggests that both squares probably functioned both as markets and as storehouses. As Rickman showed in his analysis of the granaries of Rome, in the Augustan period the Horrea Agrippiana in Rome were quadrangular courtyards open in the middle, and surrounded on at least three sides by a portico, on which shops opened, while the upper floor served as a granary. At Sebasteia on the Pontus, too, there is evidence of a columnaded granary, while the agora of Thasos presents a Doric portico and a long and narrow warehouse on one of its sides. The Horrea Agrippiana, the tetragonos agora in Ephesos, Cyzicos and Phaselis, the agora of Thasos, and the tetragonos stoa in Alexandria, thus, are all likely to have been commercial centres that included both account offices and spaces for the storage of grain. The commercial purpose of these areas explains both their monumental structure and their location in the historical centre of the respective cities. The model, naturally, was a Hellenistic one.

That the Beta quarter of Alexandria, where the tetragonos stoa was located, was connected with the grain supply is further suggested by an inscription of AD 158, a dedication of a statue to Isis Plousia, which mentions a certain Tiberius Julius Alexander, of the cohors I Flavia, as the

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16 BGU 4.1127.7-9 [paraxw]rh?/sein h?Ô t?w?=i? a?u?;)t%= hÔ oiÔÔj e)a\n sunta/s<hi dia\ tou= th=j s?i?o?a=?i? l?o?j e)]=e)n xrousoxou=n ktl. No English translation of this document is available, although a project of translation of all documents from ancient Alexandria that survive on papyrus is being completed by P. VAN MINNEN on this website: http://classics.uc.edu/~vanminnen/Alexandria/Ancient_Alexandria.html.


18 G. RICKMAN, Granaries, pp. 89 ff and fig. 20 on the Horrea Agrippiana, pp. 93-95 on the structure of the Augustan granaries.

19 P. BARRESI, Province, p. 571 with reference to Studia Pontica III. 2 n. 350.

20 On Thasos see in particular F. E. WINTER, Studies, pp. 149ff, 154-156.
official in charge of the grain supply (εὐθενίας) of the Beta quarter. The association of this official with a deity such as Isis should not surprise, as excavations in Roman horrea have found frequent religious dedications, normally to the genius of the granary or to tutelary deities such as Fortuna, Silvanus Salutaris, Sol, Hercules Salutaris, all associated with trade, luck an health. It is probably not a coincidence that the Isis, to whom the prefect of the grain supply dedicates a statue, was the Egyptian equivalent of Fortuna. The epithet Plousia, ‘rich’, abundant’, is compatible with the hypothesis that the goddess was the tutelary deity of a granary in the quarter Beta.

One may wonder whether the tetragonos stoa in the quarter Beta was connected with one of the two Alexandrian areas that hosted the granaries, namely the ‘Mercury’ and the ‘Nea Polis’ areas. As has been said above, the Nea Polis or ‘new city’ was a relatively new quarter built for trade, near the Great Harbour. Among the buildings which were destroyed in the fire during the Bellum Alexandrinum of 48/47 BC, according to Dio (42.38.2), there were also the Neorion and some apothekai for the grain and the books in the area of the Great Harbour. These apothekai have been interpreted as the ‘accession rooms’ for the acquisition of books for the Alexandrian library, although these containers probably stored grain as well. This evidence suggests that the area called Neorion probably hosted some granaries.

The full title of the procurator Neas Poleos mentions the supervision of a Mausoleum, to be probably identified with either the tomb of Alexander the Great or the tomb of the Ptolemaic kings, both near the royal palace in the area called Bruchion, in the Beta quarter. We also know of a Mausoleum of Cleopatra, which was finished by Augustus and became a major touristic attraction in the late first century AD; the sources state that this monument was close to the sea, to a temple of Isis and to the agora founded by Alexander. On the basis of this evidence one could (provisionally) hypothesise that the Nea Polis and the Mausoleum were close to the New Harbour, in the quarter Beta of the city.

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21 According to P. A. FRASER, Ptolemaic Alexandria, II, p. 109 n. 268 the inscription was found in 1872 at the corner between Rue Nebi Daniel and Rue Istanbul, probably close to the original location of the Beta quarter.
22 G. RICKMAN, Granaries, pp. 312 ff on religious dedications found in Roman horrea.
23 A temple to Isis in Graeco-Egyptian style is documented on Alexandrian coins of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. Cf. J. McKENZIE, Architecture, pp. 39 Fig. 39 and 63 Fig. 87.
25 According to J. McKENZIE, Architecture, p. 175 the tomb of Alexander (Soma) was part of the Royal Palace and was close to the burial of the Ptolemaic kings and to the Museum. Cf. Suet. Aug. 18.1 where Augustus, after visiting the tomb of Alexander, refuses to go on and see the burial of the Ptolemies by saying that he wanted to see ‘a king, not corpses’.
located in a place attended by merchants. To this statue (described by the Alexandrian Arabic sources) all traders had to leave an offering proportioned to the value of the commodities that they were going to sell. According to an inscription of AD 55, Tiberius Claudius Balbillus, the prefect of Egypt under Nero, had been previously the procurator [ad Herm]en Alexandreon (that is, ad Mercurium) and was at the same time in charge of the Alexandrian libraries. The first library that comes to mind is the library of the Museum, in the Beta quarter. Interestingly, a document of the second century AD (POxy 11.1382.19-20) mentions a library in the Mercurius quarter, while a third-century one speaks of books in the ‘treasury of Hermes’. It is possible that a (hitherto unknown) temple of Hermes, or the area called ‘of Hermes-Mercurius’ had a library, which, in the reign of Nero, was directed by Balbillus. The tetragonos agora at Ephesos hosted on one side the famous library of Celsus, a sign that commercial centres could be endowed with a library.

To sum up. The evidence examined above suggests that, at Alexandria there was a tetragonos stoa or a ‘square portico’ which served as a commercial granary and was endowed with an account office or logisterion, and possibly also a library. Goods could be brought to the warehouse directly from the street and were then sold through the shops that opened in the stoa. The Alexandrian tetragonos stoa resembles other commercial granaries of the Hellenistic world, such as the tetragonos agora documented at Ephesos, Phaselis and Cyzicus, or the agora of Thasos, which were all refurbished and renewed by Augustus and by the following Julio-Claudian emperors. Most of these square porticoes had a plain, Doric columnade on four sides and a series of ground-floor rooms that were used as shops, while the warehouse proper could have been either on the upper floor or a long and narrow building on one side of the quadrangle. Possibly, the Hellenophile Germanicus issued his ‘price edict’ and measured out some grain to the Alexandrian citizens from this historical area in the Greek heart of the city.

One may also hypothesise that the tetragonos stoa in the Beta quarter was not far from the Mercurium area. It is tempting to look at the modern street called Sharia el-Horreya, the main street (decumanus) of the city running from West to East, whose name preserves the mention of Roman horrea, too. The Doric columnade which has been found in a central area by the Sharia el-Horreya could be part of the tetragonos stoa, a structure which was characterised by Doric columns in other cities of the empire.

28 AE 1924, 78, G. PFLAUM, Carrières, no. 15. A third-century document, POxy 6.886.2-5, mentions some sacred books with magical healing formulas that were stored ‘in the treasury of Hermes’ (ἐν τοῖς = τοὺς Ἁμου ταμιὸι).
29 F. E. WINTER, Studies, p. 156.
30 J. MCKENZIE, Architecture, p. 21 with Figg. 22 and 23.
Bibliography


