

Do Colleges and Universities Resemble Memphis Under the Ptolemies?

Nathan Dickmeyer
May 2025

The title's question is not frivolous¹. Memphis, Egypt from the late fourth century BCE until 30 BCE was ruled by the Greek dynasty begun by Alexander the Macedonian's general and companion, Ptolemy. During this time two parallel structures held sway: the Greek-speaking administration under Ptolemy and his descendants (down to Cleopatra VII) and the religious authorities under the high priest, speaking Egyptian and writing in demotic.

Colleges and universities have a similar two-tiered structure with a bureaucratic-speaking administration in charge of resources and an academic faculty who speak a passive-stilted disciplinary argot. Presidents head the administrations and are the pharaohs. Provosts are the high priests in charge of the mysteries. Department chairs are the temple embalmer-priests.

Thompson's book is a fascinating unraveling of the grudging cooperation between rule by a foreign invader's aristocratic bureaucracy and the functionaries in charge of an all-encompassing, much-beloved set of religious rituals, including the mumification of the dead and of sacred animals. Critical to the stability of the country was the ever-changing relationship between the hierarchies of the pharaoh and that of the high priest as maintained by those who understood both structures and could write documents in both Greek and demotic.

Thompson's Chapter 7 focuses on the remains of a papyrus archive, now scattered through many museums, including the Louvre, of a man whom I will call Mr. P. (Names in Thompson's book are particularly challenging.) Mr. P. was probably Greek, having a Greek name and writing in Greek, as well as demotic, as necessary. He was either confined to the main temple or had taken refuge there, Thompson is not certain. Because he was literate in Greek and had extensive connections, he wrote many petitions for himself and for those others who were also sequestered there, usually Egyptians. These petitions concerned payment for work (serving as dancers, for example, for various festivals) or to request interventions because of mistreatment.

Mr. P. was tireless in his writing of appeals. Once he had gained a letter endorsing his cause from the pharaoh, he still needed to work both administrative and temple hierarchies to win

¹ When the author of the best seller, *Budgets and Budgeting for College and University Department Chairs: How to Maximize Department Resources* (Dickmeyer, Nathan, Chelmsford Press, 2013, "best-selling," that is, compared to my other books), reads Dorothy J. Thompson, *Memphis Under the Ptolemies* (Princeton University Press, 2012) and sees similarities, an essay is born.

his objective. Often, he failed because one side or the other of the bureaucracies filed away his petitions without action. The administrative hierarchy might approve the necessary outlay for a request, but that didn't mean that the priestly hierarchy would bother allocating the grain or approve the training of a soldier.

Let us now look at a few position-by-position parallels.

President as Pharaoh

The college president is the symbolic head of the entire organization. He or she is the pharaoh. He or she is not anointed by the provost, as the pharaoh was anointed by the chief priest of the Temple of Ptah, but then again, when Alexander took Egypt from the ruling Persians (and then died) his general Ptolemy just installed himself (as the rest of the Macedonian empire fell apart). After that it was, I suppose, "anoint me or die."

The Ptolemaic pharaohs chose to avoid meddling with the rites of the priestly cult. Presidents do not deeply meddle in the academic work of teaching or research. Fund raising is a primary concern of presidents and their hierarchies through the cultivation of alumni, governments, and the recruitment of new converts, I mean students. Pharaohs owned a large amount of cultivable land around ancient Memphis, and the sale of grain and fruit supported the royal treasury as did taxes on temples and Nile shipping, as well as import and export duties.

Memphis was in competition with Thebes, much like The Ohio State and the University of Michigan football teams. Yes, there was violence.

At one point two brothers both became pharaohs. They cooperated, then they went to war with each other, then reconciled. You may not think that colleges have had a two-president problem, but I was on an accreditation team to a college where the board had split and elected two presidents. One had decided that a new campus in Latin America would save the institution. The other was in hiding. We recommended ending accreditation, which was quickly approved by the association.

Vice President for Finance and Administration as Dioikêtês (in charge of the syntaxis)

Mr. P.'s petitions attest to a vigorous and extensive Macedonian bureaucracy. Armies had to be commanded, dikes built, taxes collected, temples rebuilt, and orchards picked. The block grant to the temples (the syntaxis) also had to be administered. Nevertheless, Thompson presents scant evidence on the administrative hierarchy in Memphis under the pharaoh, compared with her presentation of the workings of the temple of Ptah in Memphis. Memphis and Thebes were the religious centers, while Alexandria was the first city and grew into the capital during Ptolemaic rule. The most likely appropriate top administrative title mentioned by Thompson within the pharaoh's Greek-speaking administrative hierarchy is dioikêtês.

Budget Director as Hypodioikêtês

The dioikêtês gave the orders and the hypodioikêtês tried to bring available resources in line with the orders. There's another parallel. The president or pharaoh says "yes" to some random request. The budget director or hypodioikêtês says, "No, it's not in your budget," and then, upon appeal, the VP Finance and Administration or dioikêtês says, "Well, let's see what we can do."

Provost as Chief Priest

The chief priest guided all cult activities, although each temple had its own god. The temple for the god Ptah had its bull. The temple for Isis had its ibises, perhaps as many as 60,000. The ceremonies and, indeed, the proper embalming of the bull and all those birds (there were hawks too) and animals (baboons, etc.), not to mention the mummification of people within each temple's purview, created a major expense.

The wealth of a temple depended on gifts from those wishing to gain future benefits in answer to prayers and from fees for embalming those within the regulated purview of the temple. The wealth of a temple was measured in future mummies. Nevertheless, a temple always requested more funding from the pharaoh in return for priestly pleading with the temple's primary god for the health of the pharaoh and the nation.

While there is much symbolism necessary in both provost and chief priest jobs, coordinating these large departmental and temple structures is/was challenging. You could not have a major Isis celebration just after the death of the Apis bull, for example. Nor can a provost allow a four-credit art class to meet for only two hours per week.

Department Chair as Temple Embalmer-Priest.

Each academic department oversees a particular area of (cultic?) knowledge and (cultic?) research practices. You've got faculty and you've got embalmers. Each has learned his or her profession through a lengthy apprenticeship: reading, writing, wrapping. Embalming a bull is a very different task than embalming an ibis.

Departmental Administrative Assistant as Scribe

Mr. P., while not an official scribe, was, in fact, a sort of Super Scribe. He was more like a young tenured faculty member who has such terrible course evaluations that he is put in charge of the department's internship program and other duties as necessary. These critical functions often serve to bridge the gap between the two hierarchies. Admin assistants know the academic rules and how to fill out requests for travel reimbursement, being reasonably fluent in both languages.

Summary

A college is not Ptolemaic Memphis. Our worship of knowledge is more advanced (to our minds) than their worship of animals. We have not fixated on the preservation of our skins for the afterlife, although we do track citations.

Nevertheless, a college does contain two rather distinct cultural organizations. A college's administration consists of a hierarchy with careful roles and many levels. Proper behavior is described in detailed job descriptions, dress codes, and signage. Discretion decreases as one descends the hierarchy. Cooperation between offices, and even hierarchies, is often limited to ad hoc task forces created to solve system problems that cross divisions.

A college's academic department on the other hand is more like a small village than a bureaucracy. The work of an instructor is not much different from that of a full professor. Each faculty member acts more or less like an independent contractor in the classroom and the research facility. Faculty may be supported by instructional technology folks and research teams, the same way that a village household is supported by the local plumber and the hardware store. While most departmental cultures are relaxed and friendly, there can be splits because of disagreements on appropriate cultic practices².

As in Memphis, cooperation between the two cultures is needed only to maintain the supply of resources to each. Neither seeks to impose its culture on the other. In colleges, the annual budget cycle along with regular bouts of strategic planning become the symbol space for the allocation of resources, although inertia is the primary determinant. Budgeting becomes a method for defusing expectations and controlling spending to reduce the annual deficit (and to fund contingencies so the pharaoh may grant a few wishes). Strategic planning also does little to bring about change and is merely a game where players compete for meager budget prizes.

Harvard has lasted much longer than the Ptolemies in Egypt. The pharaohs and their queens became increasingly weak and their decisions poor. Cleopatra VII chose the wrong side in a Roman civil war. The Romans had no use for animal worship (worshiping people as gods instead), nor did they see any need for a double hierarchy. One, all-powerful hierarchy was deemed more efficient.

Then, to Egypt came the Christians, then the Moslems as Memphis returned to the desert.

© Nathan Dickmeyer, 2025

² Although existing only in folk tales, the story of how Columbia University's "rat psychologists" banished the "clinicals" across 120th Street to Teachers College is an example.