Double names in the Graeco-Roman Near East: Identity and ambiguity

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Personal names are generally acknowledged as a valuable source for ancient history, but the applicability of individual cases of name-giving to historical questions remains debated. What roles as factors in naming should be assigned to personal choice and to context in broader traditions? This paper considers a specific aspect of onomastics in the Near East of Hellenistic and Roman times as a contribution to this discussion: self-identification by a double name, which suggests a heightened attention to semantic and other kinds of meanings in names. Starting from names collected for the forthcoming sixth volume of the Lexicon of Greek Personal Names, a geographical and typological overview of polyonymy in Syria, Arabia, and Judaea-Palestine is given. A comparative perspective is also offered on Egypt, where double names have been recognized as part of the self-presentation of urban elites. On that combined basis, the dynamics of the emergence of the double name in the Graeco-Roman Near East as a distinct onomastic type, against the background of other kinds of polyonymy, can be applied to the history of the urbanization, Hellenization, and Romanization of this region. Polyonymy opens up space for both specificity and ambiguity in self-identification—precision amid homonymous bearers of popular names, and simultaneous affiliations to Hellenic, Roman, and indigenous language traditions.