PART I

Issues and historical background

CHAPTER I

Issues and methodologies

> Countless lands and tribes of mankind without number raise crops that ripen under Zeus' beneficent rain, but no land is as fertile as the lowland of Egypt, where the Nile, overflowing, soaks and breaks up the clods. Nor is there a country with so many cities of men skilled in labor; three hundred cities have been established within it, three thousand and three times nine more, and Ptolemy rules as king over them all.
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> Theocritus, *Idyll* 17

> In the Near East and Egypt, irrigation gave the entire economy of these areas a very specific character in historical times.
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> Weber 1998 [1909]: 38

PTOLEMAIC EGYPT

This book is about land tenure and the structure of the Ptolemaic state (332 BCE–30 BCE). The taxation from agricultural production was an important element of Ptolemaic wealth – a common theme in Hellenistic literature – and the assignment and use of land was the primary method of establishing rents (i.e. income) for the bureaucratic, temple, and military hierarchy. The relationship of the ruler to the elite constituencies and to the local population is one of the key subjects in Hellenistic history, for which Ptolemaic Egypt provides important evidence. A study of the organization of land tenure, therefore, raises questions about the nature of social power in the state, and the economic structure of the land tenure regime.[1] Most models of the Ptolemaic state have assumed that it was a highly centralized, rational bureaucratic state imposed on a passive rural peasantry. This "strong state model," with its usual assumptions of ownership of all resources by

[1] The evidence from the Ptolemaic period has also been used in discussion of earlier Egyptian evidence, and understanding the Ptolemaic state has important implications for the earlier history of the state, but that subject is strictly not germane to this study. See most recently on the New Kingdom state Warburton 1997.

the ruler, has been extended in some analyses of the Ptolemaic state to a point where it was "the most thoroughgoing system of state nationalisation known prior to the twentieth century."[2] The economic system was so efficient (not defined in economic terms but relative to previous regimes), the taxation system so confiscatory, it has been suggested recently, that it caused a social "explosion" in the 240s BCE.[3] Another important element of this model is the generally accepted view that concomitant with the increasing weakness of the rulers, there was an erosion of central control of land and a growth in private property.

I shall argue against these views in this book. The Ptolemaic takeover of Egypt kept the underlying economic structure intact. One of the features of this economic structure was the private holding and conveying of land. The decline in the power of the ruler merely separated him from this local economic structure. As long ago as Claire Préaux's classic study of the Ptolemaic economy, which served to popularize the concept of the "économie royale," it has been recognized that in terms of power over land, the Ptolemaic state did not assert uniform control, the economy was not centrally planned, and the countryside was not passive.[4] More recent opinion, based on closer reading of the Greek documentary evidence, has questioned the basic assumption of strong centralization, and has stressed the ad hoc and adaptive character of the regime. But a model of the structure of the state must be reconciled with all of the documentary evidence, both Egyptian and Greek, and must take into account the complexities of the economic institutions within the state. My aim in this book is to examine the evidence in terms of the social power and the institutions of the period, to examine a wide range of documentation from two contrasting regions, and to bring the state "back in."[5]

The Ptolemaic takeover of Egypt, initiated in the wake of Alexander's conquest of the East, was, at the beginning, an imposition of military power on an ancient agrarian economy that had previously been a part of the Persian empire. It eventually imposed a new bureaucratic structure, and a revenue economy characterized by an emphasis on the production of wheat, more efficient methods of taxation, the use of coinage, and the

[2] Tarn and Griffith 1952: 178. The absence of private property has been a hallmark of Marxist analysis. See e.g. Kiernan 1976: 381–82. Cf. Powelson 1988: 20–21, essentially following this strong state model. The strong state hypothesis is still supported by some scholars by appeal to the sovereign power of the king as the basis for property rights. See inter alia Mélèze-Modrzejewski 1979b; Anagnostou-Canas 1994, and further below, Chapters five and six.

[3] Turner 1984: 159. Cf. Green 1990: 191–94.

[4] Préaux 1939: 460–63. Previous views of this economy are discussed below, pp. 21–24, and Chapter five, pp. 140–46.

[5] Skocpol 1985.

use of intermediaries who guaranteed the collection of revenue. An examination of the extensive documentary record within the context of a theory of the state is crucial to understanding this new structure and how it evolved.

Ptolemaic control of Egypt raises issues about the nature of ancient colonialism, but the social dynamics have often been compared to more recent forms of colonialism. One of the more frequent invocations has been to the British Raj, but this comparison to a modern nation-state's experience is too imprecise for analyzing an ancient state.[6] Hellenistic "colonial power" was on a different order of magnitude, was much more about new state formation, and involved, consequently, a closer alliance between the old elite (and their institutions) and the new political power than did nineteenth-century nation-state colonialism.[7] This is a radically different view than those that regarded Greek imperial power and the spread of Greek culture as the only feature worth discussing in the Hellenistic world.[8]

The Ptolemaic regime has often been regarded as the first time that "European colonizers" intervened in the economic organization of Egypt.[9] A comparison with the reign of Mohammed Ali (1805–1848 CE) has been implicitly invoked.[10] But however we couch Ptolemaic history, it was, indeed, the most impressive intervention in the Egyptian agricultural economy until the introduction of perennial irrigation and the mercantilist policies of the nineteenth century. The two periods were times in which outside intervention in the land tenure regime altered the course of economic development.[11] In both cases, too, the central state had to contend with the diffused economic structure of Egypt centered on local control of irrigation networks. The scale of trade, however, the degree of monetization, and the amount of agricultural surplus produced for external markets differentiate the two cases. Irrigation technology, and the increase in perennial irrigation were also decisive factors in altering the structures of power under Mohammed Ali.

In the Ptolemaic case, the power of the monarch to effect organization was more limited. It was local state agents, not the monarch alone as the "Oriental despotism" model (or "strong state" model) implies, who also

[6] On the Raj parallels, see e.g. Green 1990: passim. Cf. Morony 1984: 12–13 and his cautious remarks. For insights into some of the differences between modern nation-state colonialism and ancient colonial power, see Mitchell 1988. On a critique of the Ptolemaic colonial model in general, see Bagnall 1997a.
[7] On colonialism in a Seleucid context, see Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993: 141–87.
[8] Cf. Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993: 141–42. [9] Anagnostou-Canas 1994: 355.
[10] For an excellent account of Mohammed Ali's reforms, see Marsot 1984; Cuno 1992: 103–97.
[11] For a long-term account of Egyptian agricultural history, see Bowman and Rogan 1999.

effected institutional change.[12] In other words, as I will argue in Chapter five, it was the power of local social networks organized around the diffused economic structures of the "customary" economy that was decisive in the development of the Ptolemaic state.[13] The ability of the local elite to adapt to the new conditions was an important factor in the development of the Ptolemaic state. These local elites were Egyptians as well as Greeks and others, they are well documented in the private archives, and they are an important reminder that we can no longer divide the Hellenistic world into Greek colonizers and "native" oppressed. Here is a clear contrast between an ancient state and a modern nation-state, and the main reason why theories coming from the nation-state experience should be used cautiously. New populations and new economic institutions were certainly introduced by the Ptolemies, but Egypt's ancient economic structure – the temples, their priesthoods and rituals, the right of private holding and conveyance of land, the Egyptian scribal and legal traditions – were all maintained.[14] This mixture of new Greek and ancient Egyptian institutions gave rise to a distinctive administrative culture that at the end of the period allowed local elites to emerge, and explains the evolution of the regime, as well as some of its decentralized tendencies. I shall explore both of these issues, and I shall question the appropriateness of the "colonial" model, which as usually specified is far too vague and does not describe the relationships of social power adequately enough, in part three of this book.

The core of the book is concerned with the land tenure regime in the two regions of the country that have left us the vast bulk of the documentary material from the period, the Fayyum and the Thebaid. I intend this book, in a sense, to serve as an introduction to the history of the Ptolemaic state, to its economic organization, and to the nature of its economic power. Like John W. Hall's study of Japan, it adopts first of all a regional approach to Egyptian history.[15] By surveying the two best-documented regions of Egypt, I seek, in the end, to provide a prolegomenon to the study of the Ptolemaic economy, the relationship of regions and villages to the Ptolemaic state, and to Ptolemaic institutions. It is this last point, the understanding of its institutions, that is the key to any assessment of the Ptolemaic economy. And it is against the backdrop of pre-Ptolemaic Egypt that one can best

[12] On Oriental despotism, see below, Chapter five, p. 158.
[13] On the concept of "customary" economy, see below, Chapter two, p. 49.
[14] Préaux 1984.
[15] John A. Hall 1966. For this approach for the Hellenistic world, see above all Reger 1994. The documents of course tend to force one to focus on one area of Egypt, the Fayyum, but there are sound reasons to study Egyptian agriculture regionally as Crawford suggested in the epigraph of Chapter two. On the emphasis on the Fayyum, see further below, p. 12.

understand socio-economic continuity, the evolution of state institutions concerned with land, and Ptolemaic state formation. My focus is on the structure of the state, and on the value of demotic Egyptian documentation for the study of the administration of land. There is much more work to be done to complete the picture of the Ptolemaic state's relationship to the land, and on economic performance, and I hope to return to this subject again.

Whereas most historical studies have focused on the Greek documentation from the Fayyum, I shall examine the period from the point of view of long-term Egyptian history, and primarily through the lens of the demotic Egyptian documentation from the Thebaid, that part of the Nile valley in Upper Egypt from Aswan down to about Abydos. This demotic evidence has not been fully brought to bear on general discussions of the Ptolemaic state or its economy, yet it is crucial in the reconstruction of land holding patterns, in analyzing local economies, and for the study of Egyptian families – the vast majority of the population – and their relationship to the land.[16] It is also vitally important documentation for the study of institutional change in the period. The combination of the Greek administrative papyri with the demotic documentation from Upper Egypt offers two different and complementary views on the structure of the Ptolemaic state and its evolution.

The central contrast that I will draw is between the Thebaid, a region that received considerable attention but in which the ancient land tenure arrangements continued even as new populations settled in the area, and the Fayyum depression, a new area developed by the Ptolemaic kings. The impression formed by a reading of the Greek or the demotic material alone tends to exaggerate the differences between the two regions, but the ancient institutional arrangements on the land in the Thebaid nevertheless distinguish it from the Fayyum, where the ruler asserted direct control over a large percentage of the land by establishing tenure conditions. The analysis of the two areas, of course, leaves important areas such as the Delta entirely out of the analysis, but the contrast will be enough, I think, to draw a completely new picture of the structure of the Ptolemaic state, its economy, and its historical development. I will also not discuss here Alexandria or Memphis. These two cities were the largest urban areas of the period, the former being the new capital of the regime, the latter being the ancient Egyptian capital and the home to the influential priesthood

[16] Admittedly most, but not all, of the private demotic evidence, especially the private legal instruments, document various classes of priests, while much of the rural population is undocumented.

of Ptah whose close connection to the Ptolemies formed one of the most important political links between the Greek rulers and the ancient Egyptian elite.[17] In both of these cases, however, we do not have much information about how land tenure was organized, although in the case of Memphis there was a clear connection between the city and the Fayyum.[18] I also leave out a detailed analysis of the important evidence for land tenure from the Herakleopolite and Oxyrhynchite nomes.[19] Both groups of texts show the great importance of military settlement, but there are considerable problems in the paleography and interpretation of the later documentation from these areas.[20] Leaving these gaps aside, a careful analysis of the documentation from the Fayyum and the Thebaid helps to explain the structure and the pace of the development of the state as well as the role of agency within it.

The analysis of the documentation within a regional framework is in part dictated by the survival of the documents, but such an approach yields a better, dynamic model of institutional change. A major challenge for the Ptolemies, as for other Hellenistic states, was their relationship to the ancient institutional structure with which they had to contend. The assertion of power was no "revolution from above."[21] Rather, the transition to Ptolemaic rule was slow, and the imposition of new economic institutions was marked by accommodation, and the use of ancient institutional structures, but also rural unrest and, in some places, outright resistance. But Ptolemaic administrative structure certainly altered the path of institutional development, at the same time as it used old institutional frameworks where they existed. As one historian has stressed, we are dealing not so much with a "radical change" in the economy as with "its partial improvement and its systematic organization."[22] Within the general context of institutional change, the transformation in Ptolemaic Egypt was "incremental" rather than "discontinuous,"[23] and in many ways was a continuation of earlier pharaonic development of irrigation and agriculture.

The socio-economic structure of Ptolemaic Egypt must be understood in the light of the changes brought by the Saite restoration (664–525 BCE)

[17] For Ptolemaic Alexandria see Fraser 1972; and for Memphis, see the excellent study by Thompson 1988.

[18] It is certainly clear with the town of Philadelphia and the Zenon archive in the third century BCE. See Thompson 1988: 40–41; Clarysse 1980a. For the Zenon archive, see further below, Chapter four.

[19] Principally P. Hib. I and II, BGU XIV.

[20] See the important study of Bingen 1978 on leases from the Oxyrhynchite nome, and the general survey of texts from the Herakleopolite nome by Falivene 1998.

[21] Trimberger 1978. [22] Rostovtzeff 1941: 1197.

[23] North 1990: 6. Cf. Chaudhuri 1990: 256–57. On the pharaonic development and extension of Egyptian irrigation and agriculture, see Eyre 1994b.

and the Persian imperial administration (525–332 BCE). These incremental changes in the institutional framework can be clearly observed in the Egyptian papyri from Upper Egypt. Importantly, too, these local land tenure records do not suggest the slow, steady administrative decline after the reign of Ptolemy III that is the prevalent view of the period. Indeed the opposite is true. A careful examination of these documentary records of land tenure and taxation suggests that the central state and the bureaucratic structure should be carefully distinguished.[24]

ISSUES AND METHODOLOGIES

This study focuses in particular on the economic organization of land tenure, and the social relationships that formed around this organization. I ask two interrelated questions relevant to the larger issue of state structure: (1) what was the relationship between central and local economic institutions? (2) how did the power of the Ptolemaic state affect the organization of land tenure? Both questions center on the issue of state organization and power, and specifically on one aspect of power, what I, following Weber, will call economic power.[25]

In the examination of economic power (or "economic strength" to use Rostovzteff's phrase), and the social relationships that were centered around land holding, we can identify more precisely the effectiveness of the state in controlling local economic resources that is the basis of the economic power of any agrarian state. While Ptolemaic power has been discussed in various studies, none have carefully distinguished the different sources of social power and the social networks created by each type of power source.[26] The analysis of economic power can be clarified by examining Michael Mann's *IEMP* model, which is in its essence a summation of much general thinking in historical sociology beginning with the important work of Max Weber. Mann identified four distinct but overlapping "organized power networks" in human societies: ideological, economic, military, and political.[27] One problem with this approach, of course, is the degree of

[24] Cf. Samuel 1989.
[25] Translating Weber's term "Verfügungsgewalt." See Granovetter and Swedberg 1992: 8.
[26] On cultural power under the Ptolemies, see Erskine 1995.
[27] Mann 1986. Totman 1993: 15 assumes the same basic structure: "the superordinate few in any society can be viewed as a tripartite elite: those whose privileges are sustained by the force of their ideas, those who rely on politico-military might, and those who use economic power." Like Totman, John A. Hall 1986: 19 distinguished three sources of power, placing military power under the heading of political power, and using the comparative case of gunpowder in Europe and China to account for the fact that political power was the determining factor in the impact of the new military technology

overlap between these power sources. Be that as it may, though, the distinction is useful in thinking about the important differences between the ideology or display of power, the use of military power to hold territory, and the use of local social networks bound to state structures to extract surplus.

Economic power is defined by Mann as the "social organization of the extraction, transformation, distribution, and consumption of the objects of nature."[28] It has two distinct components, one local, which is the social organization centered around these activities, groupings of which are termed classes, which in turn gives rise to the other component, a dominant group or class who are able to "monopolize control over production, distribution, exchange and consumption."[29] As formulated by Mann, economic power is by its nature diffuse and not easily controlled from the center. As in any agrarian economy, but particularly in Egypt in which production was organized in a diffuse irrigation network, the state economic organization was decentralized.[30] One crude but important measure of economic power of any state is its long-term ability to tax the countryside, what Totman called "durable methods of taxation."[31] Bringing this concept of economic power to the study of the Ptolemaic state, and emphasizing social networks and the local character of Egypt's economic organization, creates a richer context for the study of the documentation, and highlights the strategy that the rulers adopted to control Egypt.

But it was the links between the local and the central institutions that determined a state's economic power, and understanding how local economies were linked to the central state requires a model of the state. I adopt in this book North's neo-classical theory of the state.[32] This theory posits that there was a contract between the ruler and the constituencies within the state.[33] The ruler exchanges protection and justice for revenue in a system that maximizes revenue for the ruler. Property rights are specified to guarantee maximum revenue, or "monopoly rents," but the property rights structure tends to benefit local constituencies (in order to maintain stability for the ruler), creating inefficiencies that will add costs to the state.

on Europe and not on China. An extensive, Marxist critique of Mann's theory of the state may be found in Haldon 1993, and a critique on his "Eurocentric" approach may be found in Blaut 2000. My own interest here is in discussing social networks rather than Mann's "march of history."

[28] Mann 1986: 24. This definition tracks fairly closely Weber's "control over economic goods" discussed by Swedberg 1998: 220–21.

[29] Mann 1986: 24. [30] Cf. the comments by Ades and Glaeser 1995: 198. [31] Totman 1993: 15.

[32] See further North 1981: 20–32; Furubotn and Richter 2000: 254–57, with the literature cited there. On institutions and economic analysis, see also Cohen 1996.

[33] Good examples of this contract are found in the decrees that emanated from the priestly synods, on which see below, Chapter two, pp. 45–46.

Because revenue is collected by state agents, principal-agent problems arise, exacerbated by asymmetric flow of information to the center, which creates uncertainty and higher enforcement costs. The social and cultural isolation between the elite and the agricultural producers observed in all pre-modern agrarian states adds another dimension to the general problem of loyalty and compliance.[34]

A better understanding of social networks helps place into perspective how the Ptolemaic state extracted the surplus (i.e. taxes) from locally organized land tenure regimes. This required negotiation as well as coercion. The neo-classical theory of the state helps in understanding the relationships of power between the Ptolemies and the rights to land established by the state. The proper context in which to analyze the economic transactions of land sales and leases preserved in the papyri has not been addressed. Moses Finley, and those who followed him, argued that modern economic theory was inappropriate for the analysis of the ancient economy. Rather, Finley focused his Weberian analysis on what he considered the most crucial aspect of the economy of Graeco-Roman antiquity, social status.[35] Finley, of course, was correct in understanding what Granovetter and Swedberg later observed was the false dichotomy of the "separation between what is 'economic' and what is 'social'."[36] But Finley, in his generalizing arguments intending to contrast the ancient world with the medieval European and modern economic systems, excluded the economies of the Near East and Egypt for the wrong reasons. Their exclusion was defended on the basis that Egyptian and Near Eastern economies were oriented not around private property and markets but by a state-dominated redistributive economic system with virtual monopoly power by the state and its organs on production and trade.[37] Such views overestimate the capacity of state power and underestimate private property and the function of markets in Egypt.

The Greek and demotic papyri (and ostraca) present a challenge to Finley's model, providing as they do in far more detail than elsewhere in the ancient world evidence for private contracting, for property rights, for private gain, and for economic institutions. Whether there was real economic growth or not, the range and quality of this evidence calls for a more sophisticated analysis of institutions, which leads naturally to the new school of economic thought known as New Institutional Economics.[38]

[34] See below, Chapter five, p. 132.
[35] Finley 1999. See Morris 2002: 27–30.
[36] Granovetter and Swedberg 1992: 1.
[37] Finley 1999: 28.
[38] North 1990; Furubotn and Richter 2000. For a critique of New Institutional Economics, see Rutherford 1994.