The reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527–65) stands out in late Roman and medieval history. Justinian reconquered far-flung territories from the barbarians, overhauled the Empire's administrative framework, and codified for posterity the inherited tradition of Roman law. This work represents the first modern study in English of the social and economic history of the Eastern Roman Empire in the reign of the Emperor Justinian. Drawing upon papyrological, numismatic, legal, literary, and archaeological evidence, the study seeks to reconstruct the emergent nature of relations between landowners and peasants, and aristocrats and emperors, in the late antique Eastern Empire. It provides a social and economic context in which to situate the Emperor Justinian's mid-sixth-century reform programme, and questions the implications of the Eastern Empire's pattern of social and economic development under Justinian for its subsequent, post-Justinianic history.

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Preface

This work is meant as a short contribution to the study of the political economy of the Eastern Roman Empire in the age of the Emperor Justinian, one of the most extraordinary yet enigmatic rulers to have reigned in Byzantine Constantinople. For reasons that will be explained in the Introduction, however, much of it is concerned with the history of late Roman Egypt. The modern historiography of Egypt from the fourth to the seventh centuries AD is an important topic, which, for reasons of argumentative structure, will not be addressed in detail until chapter eight. It is perhaps worth signalling at the outset, however, for the benefit of those familiar with the topic, where my approach and conclusions stand in relation to the broader field.

First, I am largely in agreement with Banaji in regarding the great estates of late Roman Egypt as highly commercialised, monetised, and sophisticated economic enterprises, although I place more emphasis than he does on the role played by coercion in the expansion and maintenance of these estates. I am also unconvinced by readings of the sources that present these great estates as 'semi-public institutions', or that are inclined to emphasise co-operative, symbiotic relations between the owners of these estates and the imperial authorities. For most of the period in question, the state only accommodated the interests of great landowners because it had to, and it invariably emerged weaker as a result. It is my contention that the degree of peasant autonomy in late Roman Egypt has been much exaggerated. My approach to the papyrological sources is a 'bottom up' one modelled on that of Rathbone, although my sources do not permit anything like the degree of analytical sophistication that has informed his work. In particular, along with others who have turned their attention to the material, I have found that the Apion archive is not really amenable to the sort of deep, structural analysis that has informed some of the best papyrological studies of recent years. Rather, the highly fragmentary nature of the archive (as it stands) invites a more straightforward, procedural technique.
During the course of writing this study, I have incurred many debts of gratitude. It began life as a doctoral thesis written under the supervision of James Howard-Johnston, who, both as undergraduate tutor and doctoral supervisor, was a source of constant encouragement and impeccable advice. John Rea guided me through the papyrological sources with remarkable patience. Both conceptually and substantively I owe a great deal to conversations and communications with Jairus Banaji, Peregrine Horden, John Ma, Cyril Mango, Marlia Mundell Mango, (the late) Geoffrey de Ste Croix, and Chris Wickham (without whose assistance this book really would not have been written), as also to my undergraduate formation at Balliol at the feet of Maurice Keen and (the again late, and much missed) Patrick Wormald. The doctoral dissertation on which this book is based was examined by Alan Bowman and John Haldon, who, along with Cambridge University Press’s ‘anonymous readers’, and my editor, Michael Sharp, I should like to thank. The research on which it is built owes a great deal to the forbearance of Norma Potter of the Codrington Library in Oxford, the staff of Trinity College Library in Cambridge, and the generosity and companionship of the Master and Fellows of Trinity. Turlough Stone provided invaluable support and read the whole in draft. Some older debts need to be repaid. I was first directed to the study of Byzantium as a schoolboy by two of my history masters: Geoffrey Brown and Nigel Williams. To them, and to Gerald Bevan (who taught me how to think) I owe much. Lastly, I thank my parents for encouraging my childhood interest in History and Hellenism in all its forms, and it is to the memory of my late father, Andreas Costas Sarris (1937–2002) that this work is dedicated.
Figure 1  \textit{P.Oxy.} LVII 4616 – receipt for part of an irrigation machine issued by the Apion household to an estate labourer in September 525. Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society
Figure 3  Map of Egypt