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The census returns

1. The documents and the history of the census

This book is a study of the population of Egypt in the first three centuries of Roman rule. Its central questions concern the size and structure of Egyptian households, the population's age and sex distribution, and the patterns of mortality, marriage, fertility, and migration that are likely to have prevailed in Roman Egypt. The basis for all of this inquiry is a body of about 300 census declarations, of which the earliest dates to AD 12 and the latest to AD 259 (but survives only in a later copy, perhaps from around 266). These declarations are by no means the only evidence for the ages of the residents of Egypt in this period, but they are the only sizable corpus of evidence that at least purports to provide complete rosters of particular households, whatever the age, sex, or status of their members. The problems inherent in constructing statistics from any assemblage of ancient data are considerable. It has been our view that these problems could best be mitigated by a firm exclusion of all texts that could not with reasonable certainty be taken to be census declarations, copies of declarations, or full extracts of the lists of persons from declarations. That is not to say that all problems are thus removed. Chapter 2 is devoted to an assessment of the quality of these data from the point of view of demography.

Before we come to that assessment, however, the reader needs to understand the process by which these texts were created. To this end, Chapter 1 is given over to a description of the origins and end of the census, the geographical and chronological distribution of the surviving evidence, the process by which the census returns were drawn up and compiled into official registers, the form of the declarations, and the uses made of the census data by the Roman government of Egypt. For the most part, these questions were dealt with forty years ago by Marcel Hombert and Claire Préaux in their classic monograph on *Le recensement dans l'Égypte romaine*, and much of what follows is a summary of the still-valid conclu-

sions that they reached.¹ These are modified or extended to the extent that new evidence or reconsideration of old evidence dictates, but the scrupulous scholarship and sound judgment of Hombert and Préaux have stood up well in most matters of procedure and diplomatics.²

The origins of the census

There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that census declarations were submitted for the years 33/34, 47/48, 61/62, and all years at 14-year intervals thereafter through 257/258.³ Nor are there any surviving declarations attributable to any year outside the 14-year cycle later than 33/34. The small number of surviving declarations before 33/34, however, has meant that it is not possible to demonstrate that the cycle itself was intended as early as that year. The coincidence of the 14-year intervals makes it likely at the least that 61/62 was chosen because the interval since 47/48 was the same as that between 33/34 and 47/48. That, in turn, suggests that there were no full censuses between 33/34 and 47/48, or else the interval would not have been meaningful. That view conforms to the absence of intervening declarations. The registers of taxpayers were periodically updated during the interval between those two years, but there is no evidence that taxpayers were asked to submit new declarations during that interval.⁴ None of this, however, tells us anything about official intentions in the 30s and 40s. The coincidence of the interval of 14 years between censuses with the minimum age at which poll tax was paid may point to an early decision to use this interval in the census cycle (cf. below, p. 27).

When we come to look at the pre-33 evidence, there is great obscurity. The earliest Roman texts with any resemblance to census declarations are documents of 19 and 18 BC in which a royal farmer from Theadelphia, one Pnepheros son of Phanemius, reports himself in what he describes as a *ὑπόμνημα*.⁵ Pnepheros describes himself as 63 in the first declaration and

¹ Because the volume has been out of print for many years and may be unavailable to many readers, their conclusions are summarized in more detail than would otherwise be needed.

² Individual papyri are cited throughout this book by the household numbers they are given in the Catalogue, in which the first element is the first julian year of the Egyptian regnal year in which the census was announced, the second is a two-letter code for the nome, and the third is a sequence number within the year and nome. For example, 103-Ar-3 is the third household in the Arsinoite nome for the census proclaimed in 103/4. A list of the two-letter codes for the nomes may be found on p. 7.

³ The discussion of M. Hombert and C. Préaux, *Recherches* (1952) 47–53, is still the fundamental treatment of the 14-year cycle. They showed that there was no persuasive evidence for a 14-year cycle under the Ptolemies, and that none of the pre-33/4 Roman evidence was sufficient to demonstrate such a cycle either.

⁴ This whole question will be treated by Ann Ellis Hanson in her forthcoming work on *The First-Century A.D. Tax Archive from Philadelphia*, where she will reedit *P.Mich.* X 578. See also preliminarily her remarks in *P.XV Congr.* 13.6n. (pp. 65–66).

⁵ *W.Chr.* 200 = *P.Greif.* I 45 and 46.

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64 in the second; he does not include any other members of his household in his report, and there is no external evidence to tell us if any existed. These apparently annual reports are of uncertain purpose and have neither predecessors nor successors.⁶ They may represent an early attempt at a generalized census, but the absence of other family members suggests that self-declaration as a royal farmer may have been the object (as S. L. Wallace thought).⁷ It is also possible that they were a form of annual updating of an existing register of taxpayers liable to the poll tax, something that must have existed in order to allow the introduction of that tax, which certainly was in place before 24 BC.⁸

Two texts have generally been invoked with reference to a supposed census of AD 19. One, *P.Oxy.* II 254 (19-Ox-1), preserves neither any reference to a year of the census nor a date for the declaration itself. Grenfell and Hunt, who supported an early introduction of the 14-year cycle, dated this declaration to the census of 19/20 on the basis of the fact that it is addressed to Eutychides and Theon, *topogrammateis* and *komogrammateis*, a pair known to them also from *P.Oxy.* II 252, dated to 19/20, a notice of the flight (*anachoresis*) without property of the declarant's brother. The same pair, but with the names in reverse order, are the addressees of *P.Mich.* X 580, a similar declaration of *anachoresis* in the [. . .]*rov* year of Tiberius. The editor refrained from restoring the numeral (3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 9th, and 10th are all possible), evidently on the grounds that these offices had a five-year term. The term is in fact unknown, but a minimum of six years is attested in one and perhaps both of the only other known pairs of officeholders, all Oxyrhynchite.⁹ Dating *P.Oxy.* II 254 to 19/20 is thus an economical, but not necessary, hypothesis, since a date within six or more years on either side of 19/20 would also be acceptable.¹⁰

⁶ See M. Hombert and C. Préaux, *Recherches* (1952) 51–52, on this matter.

⁷ S. L. Wallace, "Census and Poll-Tax under the Ptolemies," *AJP* 59 (1938) 432. Curiously enough, Wallace does not cite these papyri in his *Taxation* (1937).

⁸ See A. Bowman and D. Rathbone, "Cities and Administration" (1992) 113; D. Rathbone, "Egypt, Augustus and Roman Taxation" (1993) 86–88, who attributes the revolt of 26 BC to the introduction of the poll-tax.

⁹ Apollonios and Didymos are known in *P.Oxy.* XXXIII 2669 (41–54) and *P.Mich.* III 170 (49); if the Didymos and [] known in *P.Oxy.* II 251 (44) and 255 (48) are the same, a span of at least 44 through 49 would be attested. Apollophanes and Diogenes are attested at least from 62 (*SB* XII 10788B) through 63/4 (*P.Gen.* II 94) and 65 (*PSI* VIII 871) to a date that at earliest can be 66/7 and may well be as late as 72/3 (*P.Genov.* I 12, cf. H. C. Youtie, *ZPE* 24 [1977] 138–139 = *Scriptiunculae Posteriores* I 400–401), since it involves a royal scribe whose (apparent) predecessor is attested through 65/6 and who is himself attested in 72/3.

¹⁰ G. M. Browne, in the introduction to *P.Mich.* X 578, argued that the census list published there referred to a census in 19/20, thus strengthening the argument for dating *P.Oxy.* 254 to that year. A. E. Hanson's reedition (above, n. 4) will present an argument that the list in fact refers to the census of 47/48; but removing that prop to the argument does not help to establish any particular date for the Oxyrhynchos declaration.

The other text is a declaration of the reign of Augustus, of which the upper part has long been known as *P.Mil.* 3 (11-Ar-1). It is only with the discovery of its lower part as *P.Col.inv.* 8, however, that the full usefulness of the text can be seen.¹¹ Giving a date to year 41 of Augustus, Tybi [?]6, or 22 January 12, the Columbia fragment justifies fully the views of Hombert-Préaux and Montevecchi that there was a census in the year 11/12.¹² Without having the exact date available to her, but pointing to the mention in *P.Oxy.* II 288.35 of an *ἐπίκρισις* (*epikrisis*) of the 41st year (11/12), which was the basis of a list of persons with their ages, and a succeeding mention *ἐξ ἀπογραφῆς κωμογραμμάτων μβ (ἔτους)*, Montevecchi had proposed that a census was held in 11/12, with declarations due in 12/13, and that the Milan declaration refers to this census.¹³ It is now clear, however, that the declarations were filed in year 41 itself.¹⁴

There are references elsewhere to an *epikrisis* in year 34,¹⁵ which therefore seem likely to signal a similar operation during that year, seven years earlier. A tantalizing clue to the earlier history of the census is now offered by the descriptions in the declaration of AD 12 of the two men listed there. The declarant is (before his age is given) listed as “20th year,” and the 9-year old son is similarly described as “6th year.” There is no indication whether inclusive or exclusive reckoning is meant. Since we know that a registration took place seven years before year 41, in year 34, it is an attractive hypothesis that in the case of the son we are to take 6th year as exclusive reckoning, meaning that he was first registered in year 34. It may follow, then, that these indications refer to registration in a periodic or occasional (rather than annual) census, since otherwise he would presumably have been registered at least a year earlier. Two points about the father’s registration year now demand attention. First, the interval between his figure and his son’s is 14. Secondly, his first registration would have been in year 20, when, according to the present declaration, he

¹¹ It is published in R. S. Bagnall, “Beginnings” (1991) with full commentary.

¹² And not at some earlier date. Cf. most recently the confused discussion in Nicolet, *Space* (1991) 135 (with 147 n. 55), where he propounds both AD 5/6 and 6/7, basing himself upon a long (and now demonstrably wrong) discussion by J. Modrzejewski, “Entre la cité et le fisc,” *Symposion 1982* (Valencia 1985) 241–280, reprinted in *Droit impérial et traditions locales dans l’Égypte romaine* (Aldershot 1990) chapter 1.

¹³ O. Montevecchi, “Censimento” (1976) 73–74.

¹⁴ Rathbone, “Egypt, Augustus and Roman Taxation” (1993) 89–90 argues that 12/13 should be regarded as the actual census year, but his arguments (cf. 90 n. 27) seem to us very weak. There is no other instance where declarations were collected in advance of a census, and the mention of *epikrisis* in both years 34 and 41 seems to us decisive; this term was not yet at this point specialized to refer to status checks but could refer to the entire census process.

¹⁵ A register compiled in the 34th year of Augustus (4/5) is mentioned in several Oxyrhynchite documents, cf. *Aegyptus* 54 (1974) 29 and see below.

would already have been 34 years old. Since it now seems probable that there was a 7-year interval between one census (in year 34) and the next (that of year 41), it is a reasonable guess that two such intervals explain the 14-year difference between father and son, and that there were also censuses in years 27 (4/3 BC) and 20 (11/10 BC), but not before that year (or else Harthotes would have been registered in an earlier one). By implication, then, there were four general censuses held under Augustus at 7-year intervals, for three of which (all except that of year 27) there is some direct evidence.

There are as yet too few points of evidence to make this reconstruction more than suggestive. But it has a reasonable claim to explain the scanty evidence and does not contradict any of it. It is equally evident, however, that some significance must be attached to the year following 41, mentioned as that of the “declarations of the *komogrammateis*” in *P.Oxy.* II 288.42–43. Even if this is not, as Montevecchi proposed, the year when the individuals’ declarations were filed, it must have some significance. It is possible that the officials proceeded in the following year to draw up their registers on the basis of the declarations. That hypothesis would help explain *P.Köln* V 227, an official journal recording transfers of katoikic land, which in line B.1 appears to be dated to year 42 of Augustus. Moreover, in B.5 there is a reference to the volume and *selis* in the records of year 35 of Augustus where a particular parcel was recorded. That would suggest that the same procedure was followed in 4/5 and 5/6 as in 11/12 and 12/13: declarations in the first year, official registers compiled in the second and then used for reference until the next register. There is no evidence for any such general collection of data before year 34 on the basis of the previous censuses we have hypothesized, and it is possible that these compilations did not begin until 5/6. But evidence may yet turn up to show that the process antedates that year. *If* there was a census in 19/20 (which remains to be demonstrated), the choice of that year (if not purely fortuitous) may have depended on the interval since the last compilation of registers. But nothing at this point entitles us to claim that any such census was held, let alone that it followed any regular pattern.

We append a table of what we suppose to have been the major instances of registration under Augustus:

Regnal year	Julian years	Event
20	11/10 BC	Declarations
27	4/3 BC	Declarations
34	4/5	Declarations (ἐπίκρισις)
35	5/6	Establishment of registers
41	11/12	Declarations
42	12/13	Establishment of registers

Distribution of the finds

The hazard of discovery confronts us with a body of declarations very unevenly distributed over the years between the early first century and the middle of the third. The entire first century, in particular, is poorly represented, with the result that many key aspects of the census in that period are unclear. The incomplete preservation of most of the surviving first-century declarations makes matters still more obscure. Generalizations useful in the second century may not be valid in the first. For example, the mention of the edict of the prefect ordering the census appears for the first time in 89-Hm-1 and 89-At-1. That does not mean that there was no such order before the census of 89, but there is no surviving reference to it.

Another interesting example is the absence of regularity before 89 in the date of filing of returns.¹⁶ All three of those for 89 were filed in 90/91, but for earlier censuses no such pattern is found. For the previous census, 75-Ox-1 was apparently filed in 76/7, but the year number in the date is uncertain. For 75-Ar-1, 75-Ar-2, and 75-Ar-3, there is no indication that the census year is past, nor is the exact date preserved. Both declarations for 61 were filed during 61/2 itself. The only declaration for 47 was filed early in 48/9. 33-Ox-2 was filed during 33/4 itself, as were 33-Ar-1 and 33-Ar-2. The earliest declaration was filed in the census year itself. The other early declarations, discussed above, preserve no dates of filing. These scattered data do not offer any obvious pattern, but filing during the census year itself seems prevalent at least through 61/2 and perhaps through 75/6, after which filing in the following year becomes standard (cf. also below).

The general contours of the distribution can be seen in Tables 1.1 and 1.2 (pp. 7–8). Geographically, the Arsinoite alone represents three-fifths of the returns, the Arsinoite and Oxyrhynchite together three-quarters. The only other substantial mass is the Brussels group of Prosopite declarations. The rest is a scatter. The declarations are proportionately more urban than the country, with 49 percent of them coming from nome metropoleis. Since all urban areas together are unlikely to have contained more than about 35–40 percent of the population,¹⁷ the cities are overrepresented. We have calculated many of our figures separately for the two and corrected the weighting in totals; see p. 57. On the other hand, there is no particular reason to believe that these Middle Egyptian nomes were on the whole significantly different from the rest of the country in demographic characteristics. There is certainly no evidence on the basis of which one could correct for any bias. But the possibility of such bias should be remembered.

¹⁶ Even the term *κατ' οἰκίαν ἀπογραφή* is not found before 60, cf. O. Montevecchi, "Censimento" (1976) 74 n. 8. On the general subject of the date of filing, see below, p. 16.

¹⁷ See D. W. Rathbone, "Villages" (1990); and below, p. 56.

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Table 1.1. *Source of returns with data on households*

Census	An	Ap	Ar	At	Be	He	Hm	Ly	Me	Oa	Ox	Pr	XX	Total
11			1											1
19										1				1
33			2							2				4
47										1				1
61			1											1
75			3							1				4
89			1				1							2
103			11											11
117		8	11								1			20
131			8		1	4			1		15	1		30
145			17			2		1	1	1	3	1		26
159			21				3		3					27
173			14						3			14		31
187	2		29				1		1		2			35
201			8								2			10
215	1		7			3	3							14
229			1				1	1						3
243			4								1			5
257			1											1
???			4						1		1			6
Total:	3	8	144	0	1	9	9	2	10	1	30	16	0	233

Key to abbreviations

An	Antinoite	Ly	Lykopolite
Ap	Apollonopolite	Me	Memphite
Ar	Arsinoite	Oa	Great Oasis
At	Antaiopolite	Ox	Oxyrhynchite
Be	Berenike (Red Sea)	Pr	Prosopite
He	Herakleopolite	XX	Unknown
Hm	Hermopolite	???	Year unknown

Table 1.2. *Source of all returns*

Census	An	Ap	Ar	At	Be	He	Hm	Ly	Me	Oa	Ox	Pr	XX	Total
11			1											1
19											1			1
33			2								2			4
47											1			1
61			1								1			2
75			3								1			4
89			1	1			1							3
103			14											14
117		9	11								2			22
131			11		1	5			1		16	1		35
145			25			2	1	1	1	1	3	1		35
159			27				3		3		1			33
173			20						3			18		41
187	2		37				1		1		6			47
201			12								3			15
215	1		8			3	3				1			16
229			2			1	2	1			2			8
243			4								3			7
257			1											1
???	1		5						1		2		1	10
Total	4	9	184	1	1	11	11	2	10	1	45	20	1	300

Chronologically, the distribution is—if not more even—at least less idiosyncratic. Figure 1.1 (p. 9) shows the numbers plotted by census year and adds as a control the average number of datable papyri for the fourteen-year period up to the filing year (i.e., the year after the census year).¹⁸ It can be seen that we have a somewhat exaggerated version of the same curve. If a few archival masses are subtracted from the census declaration totals, the peaks of the second century are significantly lowered, and the contours resemble the general shape of papyrus documentation even more closely.¹⁹

¹⁸The numbers were counted from the Heidelberg data base of datable documents, thanks to the courtesy of Dieter Hagedorn in making it available over the Internet. We have excluded from the count those papyri dated only to a decade or where the possible range exceeded the fourteen-year period in question.

¹⁹Those that could be so eliminated are the Tanyaithis declarations of 117, the Oxyrhynchite declarations of 131 in *PSI* I 53, the Brussels roll from the Prosopite (173), and the Berlin mass of Arsinoite declarations from 187.

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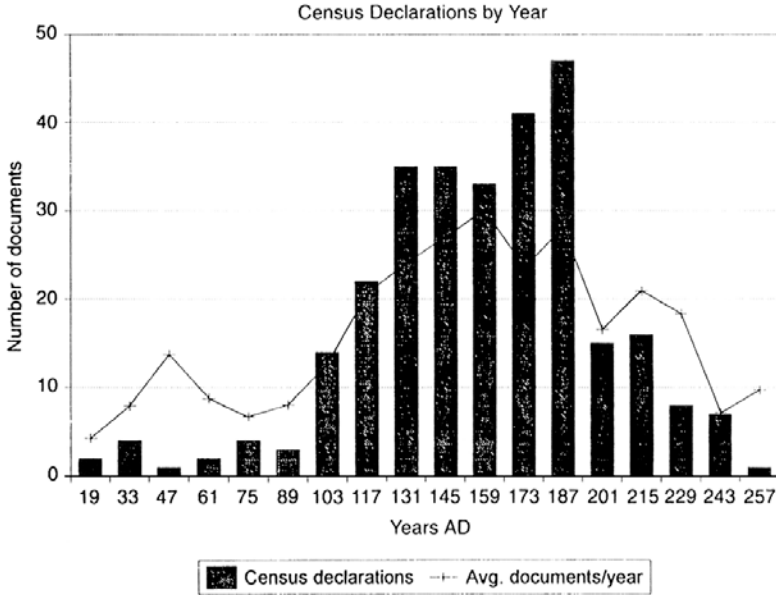


Figure 1.1. *Chronological distribution of returns*

The end of the cycle

The disappearance of periodic census declarations after the census of 257/8 certainly cannot be attributed simply to the chance of discovery. Although the middle of the third century is not a well-represented period, the latter decades of the century are heavily documented.²⁰ No further declarations even for 257/8 have been discovered since Hombert and Préaux wrote. They concluded their brief discussion of the end of the cycle²¹ by asking “s’il n’est pas vain d’imaginer que les opérations du recensement se soient déroulées régulièrement pendant la période si troublée de la fin du IIIe siècle.” More recently, Orsolina Montevecchi has put forth a candidate for the precise cause of the end of the censuses, namely the occupation of Egypt by the Palmyrenes just at the time when the edict would normally have gone out for the next census.²² She argues further that the troubles of the ensuing years would have made a resumption difficult.

Another suggestion, by S. L. Wallace, was to connect the end of the census cycle with the disappearance of requests for *epikrisis* after 250.²³

²⁰For the documentation of the late third century, see R. S. Bagnall and K. A. Worp, “Papyrus Documentation in the Period of Diocletian and Constantine,” *BES* 4 (1982) 25–33.

²¹M. Hombert and C. Préaux, *Recherches* (1952) 52–53.

²²O. Montevecchi, “Censimento” (1976) 77–84.

²³Cf. M. Hombert and C. Préaux, *Recherches* (1952) 53.

But this is certainly incorrect. In general, population lists were definitely maintained for purposes of examining status and entitlements after 250, even after 257/8. The entire Oxyrhynchite grain dole at the end of the 260s (*P. Oxy.* XL) rested on the existence of such records, and there is a request for *epikrisis* as late as 274/5 or 280/1.²⁴ The need to maintain records classifying the population into Romans and non-Romans, however, and to administer the many restrictions set forth in the *Gnomon of the Idios Logos*, had ended with the *Constitutio Antoniniana* in 212, which conferred Roman citizenship on most Egyptians and other provincials.

The continued maintenance of classified population lists into the 270s suggests that the administration was, even in these difficult times, able to maintain some level of normal operations. It may well be that disarray in Alexandria is in fact the culprit for the failure of the census for 271/2 to take place as anticipated. But in that case it is not obvious why the Roman government would not have taken a new census once its control was restored, perhaps in 274 with Claudius Firmus in office as *corrector*.²⁵ It is thus worth asking whether something else may be responsible, if not for the specific lapse in 271/2, at least for the failure to pick up later on. Specifically, it seems logical to ask whether a change in the taxation system may not have removed the *raison d'être* of the census still earlier.

Hombert and Préaux in fact invoke Diocletian's restructuring of the tax system at the end of the century as a possible occasion for drastic changes in the census, and they point to the two known early fourth-century census returns, very different in character from those studied here, as possible offspring of this reform. But, as they point out, these declarations (*P. Sakaon* 1 and *P. Cair. Isid.* 8, dated 309 and 310) do not seem to have any relationship to the quinquennial tax cycle that preceded the introduction of the 15-year indiction cycle (based on 312). Any connection is thus hypothetical.

It is commonly agreed that the census had a close connection with the system of capitation taxes, and there is considerable evidence in the first-century Philadelphia archive that accurate lists of men liable to the poll tax and other capitation levies were indeed at least one of the principal uses to which census data were put (cf. below, p. 27). One may naturally ask what the history of these taxes in the third century was. The last receipt for *laographia*, the poll tax, is dated to 248.²⁶ There is a reference to *laographia* in an Oxyrhynchite petition to a phylarch dated to 267, where it

²⁴ *P. Turner* 38; see O. Montevecchi's commentary there. *PSI* V 457, the next latest, dates to 269. P. Yale inv. 1360 (*ZPE* 96 [1993] 221–222) is assigned by its editor to the reign of

Probus on slender grounds, but the period must be approximately right.

²⁵ Cf. O. Montevecchi, "Censimento" (1976) 81–82.

²⁶ *Pap. Lugd. Bat.* XIX 14; cf. the commentary for other third-century receipts.