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978-0-521-12483-6 - Counting the People in Hellenistic Egypt, Volume 2: Historical Studies

Willy Clarysse and Dorothy J. Thompson

Excerpt

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I

Ptolemies, taxes and papyri

Let the name of Ptolemy come first, and last and in between, for he is the foremost of men . . . In his rich home his wealth does not lie unused.

Theocritus, *Idyll* xvii 2–4, 106

What kingdom, my fellow-guests, was ever so rich in gold?

Athenaeus, *Deipn.* v 203b

It is not until the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus that the effects of the new Macedonian regime begin to show themselves. It had all started with Alexander's conquest of Egypt in 332 BC, but the establishment of a new ruling class takes time and it was a couple of generations before the results began to appear. The first striking feature of the new dynasty of Greek-speaking, immigrant pharaohs was the wealth that it speedily gathered. So when in 279/278 BC Ptolemy II decided to mount a large-scale celebration with games in honour of his father and mother – a new-style jubilee celebration for the new regime – Alexandria, with Ptolemaic wealth and power, was placed on view for all those Aegean states invited to send their delegates to participate in the show.¹ On occasions like this, the descendants of Ptolemy son of Lagos could present themselves as formidable, or at least well-endowed, contestants in the competitive world of Hellenistic kings. In its quantified form, the wealth of Ptolemy II Philadelphus – with an annual revenue of 14,800 silver talents and one and a half million artabas of wheat² – may owe more to legend than to reality, but contemporaries subscribed to the tale, and poets proclaimed the scope of Ptolemaic riches, the scale of Ptolemaic power.

The purpose of this work is to illuminate the means by which some of this wealth was acquired – the levy of personal taxes on the population of Egypt. It also engages with the nature of growing Ptolemaic control and the systems installed to organise that power, to run a new homeland for immigrant Greeks. The Greek and Egyptian documents presented in volume 1

¹ *Syll.*³ 390 (c. 280 BC), translated Austin (forthcoming 2006), no. 256 and Burstein (1985), 117–18, no. 92, the invitation; Kallixeinos of Rhodes according to Athenaeus v 196a–203b, the pavilion and procession; see further Thompson (2000), with earlier bibliography.

² Jerome, *Comm. in Dan.* 11.5; cf. Appian, *Praef.* 10, 740,000 'Egyptian talents' in his treasury. Earlier, besides feeding the occupying garrison, Egypt had paid 700 silver talents in annual tribute to Persia, Herodotus iii 91.

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form a unified group as evidence for Ptolemaic census, taxation and related operations. And in counting the people in order to tax them, the new rulers of Egypt produced detailed records that allow the historian to retrieve, analyse and even quantify a range of different aspects of Ptolemaic society.

To some degree in the following chapters our lines of enquiry arise directly from the texts in volume 1, but the questions we seek to answer are of wider historical interest. After this brief setting of the scene, the census operations that preceded the salt-tax levy are treated in Chapter 2. The salt-tax itself, the main personal tax of Ptolemaic Egypt at least in the third century BC, is the subject of Chapter 3. Almost all adults, both male and female, were subject to this charge. For Ptolemaic Egypt, therefore, through our data the women are known as much as the men. In Chapter 4, there follows a discussion of the administrative geography of the Arsinoite nome, the area from which most of our documents come. Here, as elsewhere, the wider picture – Egypt as a whole – and questions of typicality are constantly present. Next, in Chapter 5, comes the occupational breakdown of the population that we find in our tax registers. Then more specialised studies. In Chapter 6 we look at livestock, also subject to salt-tax, and in Chapter 7 we exploit the evidence of our texts to investigate a range of demographic questions. This allows us not just to document differences between the two main elements – Greek and Egyptian – of this mixed population at a particular point of time, but also to set Hellenistic Egypt in the wider demographic scene. In important ways the picture derived from our tax-registers can be compared not just with that gained from the census declarations of Roman Egypt but also with that from demographic studies of later periods.³ Finally, in Chapter 8, we analyse the nomenclature of our registers to consider differences in practice according to period, ethnicity, gender and geography.

The documents

The challenge to the historian of the Hellenistic world is to make sense of a wide-flung series of kingdoms, most including Greek cities, where, as a supplement to ancient historical works and literary texts, many forms of data in different languages and scripts provide an opportunity for exploitation. From the Seleucid kingdom come the cuneiform ration texts and the astronomical diaries of Babylon, from Greece, the Aegean islands and Asia Minor there are coins and inscriptions (in Greek, Carian, Phoenician or Aramaic), and from Egypt ostraka and papyri, primarily in Greek and

³ Wrigley and Schofield (1981); Bagnall and Frier (1994).

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Egyptian demotic.⁴ This was a multi-lingual world in which existing cultures were affected to a greater or lesser degree by the arrival of the Macedonians and Greeks who came with Alexander.

The documents that form the subject of this study owe their survival to the fact that papyrus formed a valued commodity, even in its discarded form. In the Hellenistic period, waste documents from government offices were regularly recycled as papier mâché casing for human and animal mummies. Waste papyrus was collected from government offices and probably sold on to the mummifiers.⁵ As a result, at the same time as preserving information on the patterns of disposal and reuse of scrap papyrus, most of our texts have at least two provenances: the office where each text was originally filed, and the cemetery where it was later used for mummy-casing – as what is now termed cartonage.⁶ For those documentary texts, however, which reached their current home in museum and other collections through the antiquities' market, the origin of the cartonage is rarely recorded; on comparative evidence, it is probably safe to assume that they come from the same general area as is treated in the texts themselves.

It is, then, from the cemeteries of Ptolemaic Egypt that the texts of volume I derive, preserved in the form of cartonage, as moulded heads and pectorals (with painted decoration still visible on the papyrus), or sometimes even as shoes.⁷ Some of our cartonage texts are from the Nile valley, from the Lykopolite, Oxyrhynchite and Herakleopolite nomes, but the greatest number by far come from the Fayum, the Arsinoite nome. Here the cultivated area was significantly expanded under the early Ptolemies. In the late Roman period, climatological changes resulted in a retraction of land under cultivation and in the number of villages inhabited in the area. Deserted village sites and cemeteries on the edge of this basin have been particularly rich in papyrus finds; it is as cartonage from Arsinoite cemeteries that most of our texts survive. There is thus a substantial degree of local bias in the material that we use. Further, the damper climate of the coastal region means that no documents survive from the capital city itself, from Alexandria.

⁴ See Davies (1984), 257–64, introduction to problems; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt (1993), 48–51, on Seleucid sources; cf. Lewis (1994), on the earlier Persepolis tablets; Aperghis (2001), for an integrated approach to Seleucid sources.

⁵ See *P.Köln* VIII 347.15–17, 24–5 (193 BC?), on waste papyrus stored in the temple probably for crocodile mummification. Verhoogt (1998), 15, suggests such papyrus came in as votive offerings; how this might work is hard to imagine.

⁶ See, most recently, Salmenkivi (2002), 28, 45, 544, on the difference between origin ('Schreibort') and provenance ('Fundort'). Cartonage is Ptolemaic and early Roman; on the process of manufacture, see Lewis (1974), 34–69; (1989), 15–21.

⁷ See vol. I, plate I (2 cols vii–ix), for a decorated pectoral; **26** is from a shoe, cf. *P.Gurob*, plate II, for soles; other texts of *CPR* XIII (22–25 and 27–44 in *P.Count* 1) are from a single head, Harrauer (1987), 13.

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The cemeteries from which our tax material comes are primarily those that served the necklet of villages around the edge of the Fayum basin. Jouguet's excavations in 1901 and 1902 at Ghoran out on the south-western edge of the Fayum, at Medinet Nehas (Magdola) somewhat to the south and at Illahûn (Ptolemais Hormou) on the eastern entrance to the main Fayum basin, formed the basis of the Paris and Lille collections now in the Sorbonne. Among the present collection **1**, **2–3** and **6** are from Ghoran, **4** is from Medinet Nehas, and **7** and **49** from Illahûn. Which of the three cemeteries excavated by Jouguet was the origin of **5** is no longer clear. To the south of the Illahûn gap, the cemetery of Gurob is the source of Petrie's third-century documents (**9–21**),⁸ while the Greek and demotic papyri now in Berkeley, California (**51–52**) come from human mummies from one of the cemeteries of Tebtynis in the south. Documents in volume I which are not from the Arsinoite nome are **45** from the Herakleopolite nome, **46–48** from the Oxyrhynchite nome,⁹ and **53–54** from Petrie's excavations at Rifeh in the Lykopolite nome.¹⁰ Of the material that has reached museums through the antiquities market rather than official excavation, the source of the cartonnage of **8**, **22–44**, **46–48**, and **50** is no longer recorded. However, the contents of the texts themselves can indicate their origin, both where it was that they were actually written and where it was they were found. So, for instance, the registers of **22–44**, recording villages of the Themistos *meris* of the Arsinoite nome, are likely to come from a cemetery in that nome. On the whole, with a few striking exceptions like some Alexandrian material found up-country, documents tended to be recycled in the same general area as they were produced. But where they were actually written is a separate question, and that location is likely to differ from the cemetery where they were later used as cartonnage.¹¹

In part, therefore, the registers of *P.Count* I help to fill out a gazetteer of the burial grounds of Ptolemaic Egypt. More importantly, the information that they contain may serve to illustrate the administrative system which lay behind the levy of taxes and the provision of wealth for the king. Before reaching the hands of the mummifiers, our texts came from local offices; the location of these is important if we are truly to understand the bureaucratic system of the period. It is, however, often easier to recognise the ultimate origin – usually a village or a hamlet – of the information preserved in our texts than the location of the office where that information was filed. And whether the actual office is known from which a document comes depends always on the internal evidence of the text itself. The Petrie papyri, for instance, from the cemetery of Gurob in the Herakleides division

⁸ Petrie and Griffith (1890); cf. Mahaffy in *P.Petrie* I pp. 8–11, 62–3.

⁹ Cf. *P.Frankf.* 5 (242 BC), a census declaration from Tholthis, Oxyrhynchite nome.

¹⁰ Petrie (1907). ¹¹ So too van Minnen (1998), 106, on literary texts.

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or *meris* of the Arsinoite nome record communities in the Themistos (II or *P.Petrie* III 112) as well as the Herakleides division (I2, I5 or *P.Petrie* III 117 (i)). But where did those documents come from which record these different communities? Where should we look for the offices in which these reports were filed? Was it from local village, toparchy or divisional offices that these different texts were later discarded, or do they in fact derive from the capital city of the nome, where the royal administration was centred?

Some of our texts, like the later Kerkeosiris land-surveys from the Tebtynis crocodile burials, may derive from the office of a village scribe or else, possibly, from a tax-office or *telōnion* which functioned at the level of toparchy or *meris*.¹² The period to which many of our registers in fact belong, under Ptolemies II and III, was a time of change in the Arsinoite nome. Earlier administrative structures were now giving way to the system of toparchies found elsewhere, but above these was the unusual tripartite structure of divisions (*merides*) that is not found outside this nome.¹³ Some have suggested divisional centres for these three divisions, in the *merides* of Herakleides, Polemon and of Themistos.¹⁴ No good indication, however, exists of a central administrative village for any of the divisions of the Arsinoite nome. Regional officials may instead, as we shall argue further in Chapter 3, have worked out of the capital of the nome, from an administrative base and offices in the central town of Krokodilon polis. Whereas administratively there were certainly different levels, in the present state of evidence a subsidiary office between village and nome cannot be shown. Our different toparchic records may as well derive from an office in the capital as from the toparchy or *meris* to which they refer.

Nevertheless, an understanding of the regular workings of the administration is only to be gained from an understanding of the documents it produced, who it was who penned them, where, and at what level these texts were stored and how in time they came to be discarded and preserved.¹⁵ It is only through careful consideration of the details of the documents, their marginal markings and annotations, the instructions they contain and their relation one to another, that we may start to build up a picture of how the early Ptolemaic administration worked, and so to understand the bureaucratic system of the Ptolemaic state. The historical use of this material rests

¹² For the collection and transmission of data, see Table 3:3 below.

¹³ Clarysse (1997a) and Chapter 4 below ('Tax-areas or toparchies'); Van 't Dack (1951b), 39–59, remains a basic study.

¹⁴ Harrauer (1987), 17, on 22–44, suggests a divisional office of the *dioikētēs* or nomarch of the Themistos; de Cenival (1980), 194, makes a similar suggestion for *P.Lille dem.* 110 (229 BC), again from the Themistos, though the mention of the Polemon on the verso (col.iv.11) in fact provides a counter-argument.

¹⁵ As in the study of Verhoogt (1998), based on the documents of a village scribe.

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on both the texts themselves and what we know about the contexts in which they were produced, employed and discarded.

The texts of *P.Count* 1 lie at the base of the following chapters. In this volume, we exploit the information contained in these texts, as we investigate the system that gave rise to them and the ends to which they were put. And in what remains of this introductory chapter, we draw attention, in the broadest possible terms, to some of the more general features of the bureaucracy in which these texts were produced.

The first feature to note is the bilingual nature of the Ptolemaic administration and the language use that is demonstrated in our data. Ten of our texts are written in demotic,¹⁶ the remaining forty four in Greek. Some contain both Greek and demotic sections within the same record. **2 + 3** is the fullest example of this phenomenon, but there are other examples too.¹⁷ This linguistic mix together with the use of a rush for writing Greek in place of the more regular, sharpened reed-pen shows that bilingual offices were common throughout the period of our texts.¹⁸

As in the office of the village scribe, so at the district level of tax-collection both Greek and demotic lists were employed. A demotic original listing *Trs* must surely lie behind the alternative Greek renditions of the son of a certain Artemidoros from Trikomia as either Doros or Teres.¹⁹ The large Sorbonne register **2–3** (229 BC) shows well how a demotic record of village households might turn to Greek at district level and back again to demotic in its summary totals at the (higher) toparchic level.²⁰ This, we may guess, was the more familiar language for the scribes involved. There were, it seems, no hard-and-fast rules in how the two languages were employed; much depended on the personnel involved. It was only, we may safely assume, at the final nome level, when summary registers were prepared for Alexandria, that Greek became the norm.²¹ In the first generations of the new system the Ptolemies did what any incoming conqueror must do.²² They made use of existing expertise. Although in time it was their language that became the language of the administration, this change did not take place overnight. **53–54** (second century BC) from the Lykopolite nome to the south provide good examples of the continued use of demotic in the

¹⁶ **2** (229 BC), **4** (254–231 BC), **5** (243–217 BC), **8** (243–217 BC), **9** (after 251/250 BC), **10** (third century BC), **46** (230 BC), **48** (third century BC), **53–54** (second century BC).

¹⁷ **46 + 47** (230 BC), and the far less complete **19** (third century BC), **51** and **52** (181–180 or 157–156 BC). **20** has demotic traces on the back of a Greek household record.

¹⁸ **6** verso, **17** (243–217 BC), **22–44**; see Clarysse (1993a), with Chapter 3 below ('Documenting the salt-tax').

¹⁹ **26.62**, 189 and **23.98**, with note on **26.61–63**, cf. **26.158–159** n.

²⁰ For details, see the introduction to **2 + 3**. On the different levels, see further Chapter 4 below.

²¹ **1** (254–231 BC) is a draft of such a record.

²² For the use of Greek by scribes in Syria and Egypt for some hundred years following the Arab conquest, see El-Abbadi (1990), 179–80.

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local administration. The change to Greek was a process that took time to come into effect. The lack of central compulsion in this area is a feature of the way in which the Ptolemies successfully established their rule.

Next, we may consider the nature of the systems developed under the early Ptolemies. Later, under the Romans, local features still continued – differences, for instance, in the formulae employed, particularly at the level of the nome – but overall a closer standardisation of both procedure and documentation was developed for the census and other central operations. In contrast, the documentation produced both for the census in the mid-third century BC and for the taxation system which depended on it seems to lack standard forms. There is consistency neither in terminology nor content; significant local differences are found in what is recorded, and how, depending on the local office from which the documents derive.

Overall, the Ptolemaic evidence carries the hallmarks of a developing system of registration, in which local initiative might play a significant part. In **9**, for example, the addition of ages alongside some of the names in a household listing may derive from census declarations,²³ but the form found here is unique, unparalleled in other such texts. Later, in Roman Egypt, when a cut-off age is known, such information was crucial for the regular revision of lists with the elimination of those no longer liable, but at this early stage the scribe of **9** (after 251/250 BC) stands out as idiosyncratic, ahead of his times in the level of detail he gave.

Some other differences in individual scribal practices, both by region and over time, are of less significance. In demotic household listings, different words may be used for ‘wife’,²⁴ and in Greek texts, where women are regularly termed ‘females’ (*thēlyka* (*sōmata*)), in one second-century text *gy(naikeia)* is used instead.²⁵ In Greek occupational registers, the name of an occupation is normally found in the nominative case, but the genitive also occurs.²⁶ No sign of alphabetisation or standard order of occupations listed appears in our registers. There are many variants, both within and between different records; more of these will emerge in the following chapters. Such lack of standardisation is a regular feature of a system still under formation.

Finally, two more general aspects illustrated in this material call for comment: the king himself and the wealth he enjoyed. Egypt’s economy was already in essence a royal economy, one in which the presence of the pharaoh permeated all aspects of life, from the religious to the more

²³ E.g. *W.Chrest.* 198 (240 BC), including ages for all immediate family members (but not other members of the household), including those not yet of taxable age.

²⁴ *rmt.t.* **4** (254–231 BC), **9** (after 251/250 BC), **53** (second century BC); *hm.t.* **46** (230 BC), **48** (third century BC); *s.hm.t* is used for ‘females’ in *P.Berl.Eleph.dem.* III 13537 verso.9 (217 BC), **2.451** (229 BC) and **8.3** (after 246 BC), where Greek would be *thēlyka*.

²⁵ **49.3**, 16ff.; see Chapter 3, n. 178. ²⁶ See Chapter 3, n. 171.

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mundane. The Ptolemies here took over the role of earlier kings. Yet just as the king, with his privileged access to the gods, was the source of well-being for his country, so too he was the main recipient of its wealth. When taxes were paid, it was to the king in person they were directed. The bald statement ‘for the king’ recorded more than once, in both official and unofficial documentation, serves as a reminder of the centralised nature of Egypt’s rule.²⁷ It also represents the ideology of the levies that went to form the royal wealth with which we opened this chapter.

Some things, however, were new. Not only did the new pharaohs themselves speak Greek, but they also came from a world where coinage and money played a part. This they brought with them. And so, with the new Macedonian regime, there came changes over time not only in the language of the administration but also in the method of wealth extraction and the ways the economy worked. More than anything it was through the imposition of dues in monetary form that Ptolemaic taxation differed from that of earlier times. And whereas on the agricultural land of the Nile valley both rents and taxes were still, on the whole, collected in kind, with the introduction of personal taxes paid in cash the new rulers of Egypt brought change, introducing Egypt into the world of the wider Mediterranean. A national Ptolemaic silver coinage, with smaller units in bronze, was introduced under Ptolemy I, and the spread of transactions in cash was encouraged through taxation, not just in the new capital of Alexandria and the towns of Egypt but also through the countryside. The monetisation of the economy and the almost universal levy of monetary taxes went hand in hand as the Ptolemaic system developed.²⁸ The combination of tradition and innovation in an economy that was increasingly monetarised forms a striking feature of the period.

Connected with this new use of cash for the payment of taxes and innovations in the way these taxes were levied,²⁹ we find an increase too in the uses of writing within the administration. Receipts, it seems, were now required to protect the taxpayer, written on pieces of broken pot or *ostraka*, or even sometimes on papyrus. Both languages are used in these receipts, as indeed more widely in the system; the increase, therefore, in literate activity seems more likely to be connected with innovations in the whole administrative system than simply to follow the introduction, with Greek, of an alphabetic script. And although the practice of recycling discarded documents is responsible for an increase in the survival of Ptolemaic papyri

²⁷ 3I.33, 44; *CPR* XIII 31.33 (254–231 BC); cf. *P.Cairo Zen.* 59297.13 (250 BC); *P.Hamb.* II 170.2, 9 (246 BC); *P.Tebt.* III 814.63 (227 BC); *P.Lond.* III (pp. 2–3) 1200.2 (209 BC); *P.Heid.* VI 373.2 (207 BC).

²⁸ See von Reden (2001), on Ptolemaic monetisation, especially under Ptolemy II, with Rowlandson (2001), 147, on its limits.

²⁹ On Ptolemaic tax-farming, see below Chapter 3 at n. 144.

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compared with earlier periods, the finds of contemporary ostraka suggest a real growth in the uses of writing under the new regime. Increased literacy appears to be a further feature of the period.

Prior to the levy of taxes, however, came the registration of those who would pay – the counting of the people. It is the system of census, on which this registration depended, that forms the subject of our next chapter.

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The census

No land has so many settlements of men skilled in crafts.

Theocritus, *Idyll* xvii 81

A knowledge of its citizens is required by any organised state. Information as to their number and distribution – by locality, sex and occupation, and so too by taxable status – is a prerequisite for the successful functioning of any developed administration. What information is collected and how will vary according to circumstance, and, most of all, according to the needs of the state concerned. Thus, in the non-monetarised economy of pre-Ptolemaic Egypt, it was the labour of its people that was exploited by the state. Through the use of *corvée* labour, irrigation might be performed, buildings constructed and other public works put into effect. The strength and location of this labour-force were thus of constant concern to the rulers of Egypt. Other states have primarily been interested in the strength of their citizens as a fighting force, yet others in their citizens' political role. A census might be held in particular circumstances, as in Megalopolis in 318 BC or Rhodes in 305 BC,¹ but in other states, the Roman republic, for instance, or the Helvetii in the first century BC, the operation was institutionalised.² The establishment of military classes and of citizen rights are thus important features of some censuses. Counting and classification are jointly involved. Social differentiation often formed part of the process, as in Egypt under Roman rule, where the census played an important role in maintaining the social structure and where different categories within the population – Roman citizens, citizens of Greek cities, metropolitans and other Egyptians – were rigidly fixed.³ The differential structure of Roman Egypt served further to define fiscal categories. Indeed, the fiscal potential of a given population has regularly been of concern to states both new and old and some form of national census often serves in the compilation of tax-registers.

¹ Diodorus Siculus xviii 70.1, Megalopolis facing Polyperchon (citizens, foreigners and slaves); xx 84.2–3, Rhodes facing Demetrius (citizens, resident aliens, foreigners and slaves).

² Livy I 42.4–5, for Rome, cf. Brunt (1971), 15–25; Nicolet (1980), 49–88, (1991), 126–47; Lintott (1999), 115–20. Caesar, *BG* I 29, Greek records of the Helvetii listing household numbers, fighting men and (separately) women, children and those past military age.

³ Bagnall and Frier (1994), 26–30.