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Andrew Monson

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PART I

Introduction

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CHAPTER I

The political economy of Egypt

INTRODUCTION

The year 30 BCE conveniently marks a double transformation. Egypt's annexation by Rome ends what historians label the Hellenistic period (323–30 BCE). It extinguished the last of the Macedonian dynasties that had established kingdoms after Alexander the Great died in 323 BCE. From Rome's perspective, it marks the end of its civil wars and the transition from a republic to a monarchy. There was finally peace in the competition between Rome's generals and across the Mediterranean, where warring kingdoms and fractious federations gave way to a single world empire. Against the background of Egypt's much older pharaonic traditions, Cleopatra's downfall represents an even bigger transformation. Egypt had been an imperial province before, under the Persians, but the stability and longevity of Roman rule would facilitate deep, irreversible changes in the social structure and the agrarian economy. Despite its innovations, Ptolemaic Egypt retained many characteristic Egyptian institutions that can be traced back for centuries and even millennia, from the organization of temple estates to royal ideology. Within a relatively short span of time, one or two centuries, these became almost unrecognizable under Roman rule.

One cannot, however, reduce such a fundamental transformation of the political and economic structure to a single year or a single reign, however long and influential Augustus' may have been. Egypt's transition has the potential to illuminate the gradual processes by which the population of the Hellenistic east adjusted to the realities of Roman rule, giving rise to a new provincial order. On the ruins of old hierarchies emerged new interregional networks that arguably linked the empire and enhanced its aggregate prosperity. But it did not happen all at once, nor did it benefit everyone. One of the principal aims of this book is to show the impact

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of empire on the structure and performance of the agrarian economy in Egypt.

The wealth of documentary evidence from Egypt holds out the potential for a finer-grained analysis than would be possible for virtually anywhere else in the ancient world. Although Egypt was not a unique province within the Roman empire, the very flexibility of the provincial administration – its propensity for adapting and building on existing institutions rather than replacing them outright – causes one to doubt whether any province was typical. The goal should not be to extrapolate from Egypt to fill in the gaps in our knowledge about the Hellenistic and Roman world. The Egyptian evidence can be put to better use. The transition from Ptolemaic to Roman Egypt furnishes a natural experiment with which to test models of economic development and political economy. If the logic of such models is consistent with historical evidence, a study of this kind may provide empirical support for theoretical approaches that appeal to scholars working in a variety of disciplines from political science and economics to anthropology and geography. For ancient historians, this approach can generate hypotheses that potentially explain independent phenomena in other parts of the Hellenistic and Roman world.

The scope of this study is fixed by the two political regimes that are the objects of comparison. The Ptolemaic period begins with Alexander's death in 323 BCE and ends with Cleopatra's in 30 BCE but the evidence is unevenly distributed with much of it coming from the third and second centuries BCE. Whereas the Ptolemaic dynasty ruled from Alexandria, after 30 BCE Egypt was an imperial province governed by a prefect sent by the emperor from Rome. This study extends through the early Roman period, down to roughly 200 CE, after which time the advent of self-governing metropolitan councils and the extension of Roman citizenship introduced further changes that need not be considered here. Instead of approaching this five-hundred-year period as a historical narrative, the book juxtaposes the two regimes, sketching their structures and characteristics even if it is often necessary to trace particular institutions over time. To understand the impact of political change on agrarian institutions one needs to recognize the relationships among multiple factors. Some factors that have shaped the institutions governing economic activity, including the hydrology of the Nile, demography, and legal institutions, are evident only from a long-term perspective.

Admittedly, the broad scope has its drawbacks too. It forces one to simplify issues that are not yet fully understood and that require further specialized study. The transitional period – the decades before and after

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30 BCE – is one of the worst-documented in the whole Greco-Roman period in Egypt. This poses a serious methodological problem.¹ The sources from these decades are vital to the arguments in this book but often defy easy interpretation. To concentrate solely on them risks losing sight of the larger structural changes that make this transitional period so important. The chronological scope has to be narrow enough to identify the changes from Ptolemaic to Roman rule but wide enough to draw in relevant information about the main features of the two regimes. Even these chronological bounds are occasionally breached in this book in order to consider sources from earlier and later Egyptian history for the sake of comparison or to illustrate long-term patterns.

The natural environment is integral to the formation and maintenance of agrarian institutions. Ecological history provides a complementary perspective to the intrinsically anthropocentric approaches of political and economic history. Geographies shape incentives and constrain economic development, though they are not deterministic. Land rights and water management are prime examples of how humanly devised political and legal institutions respond to natural scarcities. Conversely, however, human institutions create artificial scarcities or intensify environmental effects. Some people are able to redirect the flow of natural resources or monopolize them. Not even the environment itself is necessarily an exogenous force. It too is sensitive to human agency, for example, when resources are depleted through neglect or overuse and when degradation sets in such as the salinization of the soil.

Only after controlling for geography can one isolate and identify the political impact on the agrarian economy. The transition from Ptolemaic to Roman rule in Egypt provides a diachronic perspective with less interference from regional factors and local traditions, which may have altered the effects of Roman rule in other areas of the Mediterranean. This restricted geographical scope, however, also means that it can claim to be no more than a single case study. If the mechanisms of institutional change are well established, it should be possible to find at least indirect evidence for them even in quite different and thus independently observable cases. The more theoretical aspects of this book are meant to show the explanatory power of certain concepts for Egypt and to stimulate further comparative study. If one contrasts the anarchic interstate relations and internal pressures that prevailed in the time of the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman Republic, one begins to make out a fundamental political shift in Egypt and

¹ Haensch (2008: 82–3).

across the Mediterranean after 30 BCE. The Romans generated variations of a distinctive pattern of governance, which the Egyptian case seems to exemplify.

THE AGRARIAN ECONOMY

Agrarian institutions are the main emphasis in this book, above all property rights to arable land and the taxation of agricultural production. What prompted this study was a series of new discoveries about land tenure and taxation. Although Greek was the language of the Ptolemaic rulers and administration, Egyptian scribes continued to write in Demotic, a late phase of the Egyptian language written in a cursive script derived from hieroglyphic and hieratic. Recently edited land surveys in Greek and Demotic reveal vast amounts of private land in the Nile Valley as well as communal forms of land tenure in the Fayyum.² Both of these challenge established views about private ownership and tenancy on royal land in Ptolemaic Egypt. The bilingual study of Greek and Demotic receipts has illuminated a system of harvest-tax collection that was in operation since at least the New Kingdom and that was curtailed under Roman rule.³

All of this makes it possible to approach the better-known sources for land tenure and taxation in Roman Egypt from a new perspective. Some neglected texts of the Roman period have also repaid further study with greater attention to the Ptolemaic background.⁴ The analysis of land tenure and taxation yields insights into more profound changes in the Egyptian agrarian economy. It provides the key to understanding agricultural intensification, the decline of Egyptian temples, the emergence of a new landowning elite in the growing cities of the Egyptian countryside, and the gradual replacement of the traditional bureaucratic administration with compulsory public services.

Agriculture constituted the greatest share of production in antiquity, making agrarian institutions a good indicator of the overall structure of the economy. Modern historians often point to an agricultural revolution in the Netherlands and especially in England that generated real per capita growth, contributing to the later industrial revolution. Both countries underwent changes that produced a freer labor market, land privatization, and fiscal incentives for capital investment that created conditions

² Christensen (2002); Monson (2007a). ³ Vandorpe (2000b: 172–4; 2006: 167).

⁴ For example, P. Lond. III 604 (47 CE; Krokodilopolis, Panopolite?), discussed in Chapter 3, pp. 96–9.

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favorable for subsequent technological innovation.⁵ The potential for gains in agriculture to stimulate other types of activity, including urban industries and trade, means that agrarian institutions ought to lie at the heart of the debate over economic growth in the Roman empire. It was the expansion of agrarian land and labor markets in the Roman period that seems to have provided the stimulus for an expanding urban economy both in Egypt and across the Mediterranean. There is some evidence that urban economic activity in Egypt such as craft production flourished under Roman rule.⁶ Empire-wide integration may likewise have contributed to economic growth in the early Roman period.

The administrative organization that was responsible for monitoring land use, enforcing property rights, and collecting taxes is another component of the agrarian institutional structure that is treated in this book. How this administration redistributed agricultural production in Egypt reflects disparities of political influence as well as the rulers' demands. Continuing an ancient Egyptian tradition, the Ptolemies recognized the rights of temples to their estates and even made new donations to demonstrate their piety. These were above all fiscal estates, enabling temples to receive harvest taxes for the maintenance of the temple and its hereditary priestly elite just as the state received harvest taxes on royal land. It was a redistributive economy that ensured that royal and temple office-holders captured a large share of the cultivators' agricultural production and that the distribution of wealth mirrored social and political inequalities. The Roman conquest radically changed this relationship by confiscating temples' fiscal estates and abolishing redistributive harvest taxes except on public land.⁷

Wherever the temple or state administration was involved, there could also be opportunities for the officials themselves to profit from the activities that they supervised. In the Ptolemaic period, holding a state or temple administrative post appears to have been one of the primary means of enrichment, sometimes by illicit means. The changes in agrarian institutions under Roman rule can be linked with the development of a liturgical system of administration, where landowners were compelled to undertake the provision of public services at their own expense. It was a gradual process that led to the development of metropolitan urban centers, whose autonomy was established only in 200 CE with the right to have a governing council (*boulê*), typically composed of prominent landowners.⁸

⁵ De Vries (1974: 236–9); Overton (1996: 7–9, 203–7).

⁶ Van Minnen (1986; 1987); Bagnall (2005: 194–5, 198–9). ⁷ See Chapter 5.

⁸ Liturgies: see Chapter 6, pp. 236–45; town councils: Bowman (1971); Tacoma (2006).

Agrarian institutions shape the incentives for economic activity by structuring the relationships of tenants to their landlords and of peasants to state and temple hierarchies. In many villages of Ptolemaic Egypt a landowner's rights depended on contracts he or she made before local witnesses and a temple notary. One's relationship to the community and to the tenants who occasionally performed labor on the land was closer than it would be in a world like Roman Egypt, where property rights were recorded in central archives. These enabled landowners to live in a metropolis and to manage estates dispersed across many villages without fearing that their rights would go unrecognized if they did not maintain social ties to each place.⁹ To what extent the increasing importance of market mechanisms created tensions between propertyless peasants and landowners is unclear. On the face of it, social tensions were even higher under the Ptolemaic royal economy, where the redistribution of peasant surplus to status-based elites played a larger role.

Framing the transformation of the agrarian economy in terms of redistributive versus market mechanisms echoes the language of Polanyi. For him, the transition to the modern global society and economy is regarded negatively, as a cause of social disintegration.¹⁰ However, only by relativizing the concept can one hope to test this theory on independent cases. For example, Ober argues that at some periods and places in antiquity, specifically in classical Athens, social relations changed in ways that can best be described as modernization. To define this process he adopts Giddens' three criteria of modernity: "1. separation and zoning of time and space (which he calls 'distanciation'), 2. the development of 'disembedding mechanisms' that 'lift out' social activity from localized contexts (including government administration), and 3. the reflexive appropriation of expert knowledge."¹¹ If one defines modernity in such sociological terms, then one could perhaps also interpret the integration of the early Roman empire as a movement in that direction. Roman rule in Egypt arguably accelerated the growth of impersonal markets at the expense communal organization and state or temple redistribution. The social and political stability of Roman rule in Egypt compared with the Ptolemaic period lends little support to Polanyi's theory, though admittedly other factors were also at play.

Current scholarship tends to describe Roman land privatization as the decisive factor for breaking free from traditional constraints on agrarian markets in Egypt. Some go so far as to suppose that the very notion of

⁹ See Chapter 4, pp. 122–31. ¹⁰ Polanyi (2001 [1944]: 45–58).

¹¹ Ober (2006: 134–6) with reference to Giddens (1990), whom he criticizes (at 135 n. 12) for his binary view of modern and pre-modern history with medieval Europe as the model of pre-modernity.

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private ownership was introduced to Egypt in the Roman period under the influence of Roman law.¹² This view rests on too narrow a conception of ownership and conflicts with a growing body of evidence from Ptolemaic Egypt for private land rights. Even contract registration and state archives for enforcing property rights in Roman Egypt had Ptolemaic precursors. The assimilation of Egyptian land rights with Roman legal categories may indeed reflect a Roman attitude that favored the protection of provincial property rights. It would be a mistake to dismiss entirely the impact of the Roman administration on Egyptian land tenure. On the other hand, one of the central claims of this book is that fiscal reforms proved to be a much more important break with Ptolemaic institutions and to underlie changes in temple organization, administration, and social structure.

Agrarian institutions are analyzed in this book from two complementary angles. One addresses the relationship between institutional structure and economic performance. The other concerns the relationship between politics and institutional change. The concept of an institution and its significance for understanding economic action are further discussed in this chapter. To use the economist Douglass North's simple metaphor of institutions as rules of the game, this book explores how different rules in Egypt affected landholding patterns, investment, and production. Likewise, it asks how certain institutions remained stable while others changed over time. The easy and obvious answer is that the government creates the institutional structure, especially when it comes to property rights, taxation schemes, and administrative controls, which shape economic incentives. The transition from Ptolemaic to Roman rule ought to highlight the role of politics in the formation of agrarian institutions that affected economic performance. However, government is not a completely external force that shapes society. Even monarchs must respond to endogenous pressures from the competing interests of their agents and their subjects. While the direct impact of Roman rule on Egyptian institutions can be detected, the government was reacting to changes as well as imposing them.

To grapple with the complexity of simultaneous governmental and social changes affecting institutions, the historian's basic tools – primary sources – cannot provide a full picture. This study employs models based on theoretical propositions that simplify reality and predict the relationship between various factors. Even traditional historians implicitly use models. Articulating the theoretical and conceptual basis for the models enables later

¹² Tomsin (1964); Lewis (1970a: 8–9).

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scholars to recognize the starting assumptions and overarching ideas, if only so that they can more easily refine or dismiss them when they are no longer consistent with the evidence. The book is unquestionably the product of its time, confronting historical issues that have been neglected or misunderstood in the past. The social scientific literature that has influenced its approach stems from other disciplines, whose methods and objectives are not always identical to the ones pursued here. It is therefore useful to set out the issues and methodology of this book against the backdrop of the intellectual currents from which it arose.

FROM PTOLEMAIC TO ROMAN RULE

The Roman administration in Egypt was no mere continuation of the Ptolemaic monarchy. Lewis has argued that the term Greco-Roman Egypt is a misnomer because Hellenistic and Roman Egypt were so different. There is now broad consensus for what he dubbed as “the Romanity of Roman Egypt.”¹³ The introduction of compulsory services broke with the older bureaucratic traditions of appointment to office. A new elite emerged with wealth based on land ownership and status privileges. They held the most important public offices in the nome capitals. Certainly for the period after 200 CE, after the emperor Septimius Severus granted an autonomous city council to each nome metropolis in Egypt, hardly anyone would deny the rupture with Ptolemaic political institutions, social structures, and economic organization. The prevailing consensus holds that changes in this direction were already underway by the early first century or gradually introduced thereafter. Lewis and others attribute them to Augustus himself, claiming that he laid the groundwork with a comprehensive set of administrative and legal reforms.¹⁴

This view tends to oversimplify institutional change by reducing all differences to the impact of the new regime. Abandoning the old idea that the Romans simply took over existing institutions without change, it introduces an equally radical position whereby the Romans transformed the administration, economy, society, and religion top-down in accordance with Roman cultural beliefs and legal principles. Lewis later moderates his statement by admitting some continuity, especially the domain of agricultural production and peasant customs.¹⁵ However, his views about the introduction of rigid class barriers and about the demise of the Demotic

¹³ Lewis (1970a); the quotation is from the title of Lewis (1984).

¹⁴ Lewis (1970a); Rathbone (1989); Bowman and Rathbone (1992); Thomas (2001).

¹⁵ Lewis (1984: 1079–80).