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Joseph Grafton Milne

Excerpt

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A HISTORY OF EGYPT

ROMAN EGYPT

CHAPTER I

THE ORGANISATION OF EGYPT UNDER THE ROMANS

1. THE conquest of Egypt by the Romans produced little change in the internal organisation of the country. It was always the policy of Roman statesmen, when a country possessing a fully developed system of government was added to their empire, to interfere as little as possible with existing institutions; and there was a special reason in the case of Egypt for adopting this course. The country was, in a sense, the personal spoil of Augustus; while the older provinces of the Roman Empire had been won from foreign kings for the Republic by its generals and with its armies, Egypt was the fruit of his victory over a Roman rival, albeit a recreant to Roman ideas; and, as the personal property of that rival's wife, was confiscated for the private benefit of the victor.

2. The elaborate system of government which had gradually been developed by the native and Greek kings was therefore taken over bodily by the Roman emperors. In all probability the lower grades of officials were left to complete their terms of office: even in so high a position as that of epistrategos there

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is found a Greek, Ptolemaios, the son of Herakleides, thirteen years after the conquest;⁽¹⁾ and as in later times that post was always held by a Roman, it may be presumed that he had continued in his place undisturbed by the change of dynasty. For, indeed, the Roman conquest of Egypt was practically nothing more than a change of dynasty, and was attended by far less disturbance than had many times been caused by the transference of power in the time of the native kings.

3. In the course which Augustus chose to follow with regard to the government of Egypt, he was guided partly by his personal claim explained above, and partly by considerations of prudence:⁽²⁾ the country was rich, and could easily furnish the materials for supporting a revolt; while, at the same time, anyone who held Egypt could cause great inconvenience to the population of Rome without any further hostile measures than simply stopping the export of corn from Alexandria, and could thus practically starve Rome to his side, as Vespasian proposed to do.⁽³⁾ Moreover, Egypt was difficult of access, especially from Rome: there was only one harbour on the Mediterranean coast available for large vessels, at Alexandria;⁽⁴⁾ and the approaches by land across the deserts, either from east or west, were dangerous for a body of any large number of men. The Egyptians, too, were always ready for a disturbance; the most trivial question would raise faction-fights among the crowds of various nations and beliefs who inhabited Alexandria,⁽⁵⁾ while the inhabitants of the upper country from time to time took up arms to settle their local grievances;⁽⁶⁾ and from such small beginnings there might arise serious troubles, unless prompt and vigorous measures were taken. In all these reasons lay a great argument for autocratic rule, which could act on such an occasion without the danger of delay which might arise from the necessity of consulting the senate, purely formal as the consultation might be, to get consent to measures which seemed good to the emperor.

4. Egypt was therefore treated as the personal domain

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THE PREFECT

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of the Roman emperor; and from him, directly or indirectly, all the Egyptian officials held their posts. To guard against any possibility of senatorial interference, no member of the senate was allowed to take office, or even to set foot, without the special leave of the emperor, in the country.⁽⁷⁾ The highest position—that of prefect—was usually filled by a Roman of equestrian rank;⁽⁸⁾ on one occasion at least a freedman,⁽⁹⁾ and on one an Alexandrian,⁽¹⁰⁾ who had obtained the Roman citizenship, were placed in this office. The prefect, nominally a procurator of the emperor, was really a viceroy, taking almost the whole part played in the system of government by the Greek kings. His power was limited only by the right of appeal to the emperor; and he was head of every branch of the administration, financial, judicial, and military.⁽¹¹⁾ The sum-total that was to be raised by taxation was determined by the emperor; but the prefect was responsible to him for the collection and transmission of the money to Rome,⁽¹²⁾ and consequently was particularly concerned to supervise the collectors and other subordinate officials, with a view of keeping in check their exactions, which tended to diminish the revenues of the state;⁽¹³⁾ and also had to decide upon claims of exemption from taxation made by communities or individuals.⁽¹⁴⁾ The judicial duties of the prefect, which theoretically embraced all cases, both civil and criminal, were lightened by the delegation of authority to lower officials;⁽¹⁵⁾ but large numbers of legal questions came before him for settlement, as petitions for the redress of injuries could be addressed directly to him,⁽¹⁶⁾ and he received appeals or references from the inferior courts.⁽¹⁷⁾ He went on circuit throughout the country, probably every year, to try such causes.⁽¹⁸⁾ He was also specially concerned to inquire into the efficiency of the police of the various districts.⁽¹⁹⁾ The nominations to subordinate offices and liturgies, and appeals against them, also came before him;⁽²⁰⁾ and from him emanated the orders for official inquiries and returns, such as the census lists of persons and

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property of all kinds which were constantly required, and for the safe keeping of these and other records.⁽²¹⁾ All the troops in Egypt were under his control, and their complaints and disputes were specially referred to him for decision.⁽²²⁾ He held office at the will of the emperor, and was not, apparently, appointed for any definite period; ⁽²³⁾ the longest recorded tenure of the office being that of Vitrasius Pollio, who was in Egypt for upwards of sixteen years: ⁽²⁴⁾ and he was assisted by a council of Romans, who sat in the praetorium.⁽²⁵⁾

5. In judicial matters, the immediate subordinate of the prefect was the dikaiodotes,⁽²⁶⁾ who went on circuit with him, and in his absence acted for him.⁽²⁷⁾ His work lay chiefly in hearing and deciding cases which had already been investigated by lower magistrates, and referred by them to his jurisdiction.⁽²⁸⁾ The majority of the prefects of Egypt would not be acquainted with legal procedure, and would require an assessor to help them in their judicial work. And the dikaiodotes was such an assessor: he filled the place taken by *legati juridici* in other provinces. He was, like the prefect, appointed by the emperor himself, and was usually a Roman knight.

6. The only other purely judicial officer was the archidikastes,⁽²⁹⁾ who was, according to Strabo, a local Alexandrian judge.⁽³⁰⁾ His court usually sat at Alexandria; but he had competence in civil cases from all parts of the country,⁽³¹⁾ and on one occasion is recorded to have tried a case at Memphis.⁽³²⁾ He appears to have had special charge of the archives at Alexandria, and to have been the ordinary judge before whom civil cases were brought which involved reference to the documents preserved in those archives. He, too, was usually a Roman citizen.

7. Immediately subordinate to the prefect there were, ultimately, three epistrategoï,⁽³³⁾ appointed respectively for the Thebais, the Heptanomis and Arsinoite nome, and the Delta. In Upper Egypt such an official had existed in Ptolemaic times; but no evidence for the

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DIVISIONAL OFFICERS

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appointment of an epistrategos either in Middle or Lower Egypt is found before the second century of the Empire. With one exception, to which reference has already been made, under Augustus, the epistrategoi were always, so far as is known, Romans; they were the lowest of the imperial officials appointed from Rome, and as such were the usual delegates for the exercise of many of the powers nominally fulfilled by the prefect. They held no military authority, except in so far as the soldiers were employed for police duties; but they frequently appear as competent judges in cases arising in their dioceses, through which they went on circuit.⁽³⁴⁾ They were also charged with the task of choosing on behalf of the government, from names submitted to them by the local scribes, men to hold the unpaid offices, such as that of strategos or gymnasiarch.⁽³⁵⁾ A considerable part of their work, however, was that of intermediaries for the transmission to the authorities of the nomes of the orders of the prefect, and the obtaining for the central government of returns of taxation, population, and the like.⁽³⁶⁾

8. Below the epistrategos came the strategos,⁽³⁷⁾ who occupied the next step for the transmission to and fro of orders and returns. The unit of government for the strategoi was the nome; though occasionally two nomes were temporarily united under one strategos,⁽³⁸⁾ or one nome was divided between two strategoi.⁽³⁹⁾ In judicial affairs, they were the usual recipients of complaints, where proceedings were to be taken under the civil law:⁽⁴⁰⁾ and for the purpose of hearing such they made circuits of their nomes, probably every month;⁽⁴¹⁾ but, except when the power was specially delegated to them by the prefect, dikaiodotes, or archidikastes, they had no competence to deliver judgment:⁽⁴²⁾ complaints, when received, were filed to await the visit of the prefect on circuit. In such cases, however, it is probable that the strategos made a preliminary investigation, to satisfy himself that there was a *prima facie* grievance; and he certainly took evidence on oath, copies of which were filed like the complaints.⁽⁴³⁾

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Copies of all census returns, whether of land, persons, or animals, were addressed to him, as well as to the census officers and scribes.⁽⁴⁴⁾ In financial matters, the strategos was responsible for the collection of the taxes in his nome, and consequently had to supervise the assessments of the districts into which it was divided, and to take steps to recover debts due for taxes;⁽⁴⁵⁾ he was also required to arrange the incidence of the various liturgies, such as the *corvée* for the maintenance of the dykes and canals.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Strategoi were appointed for a period of three years, presumably from the inhabitants or property-holders of the nomes for which they were to hold office, by the epistrategoi, the nominations being confirmed by the prefect.⁽⁴⁷⁾ They were chosen indifferently from Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians; and were required, upon entry into their office, to give up all other work, and to provide security for the proper observance of their duties, besides taking an oath to act according to law;⁽⁴⁸⁾ while, at the close of their term, their accounts were subjected to an official audit before the prefect.⁽⁴⁹⁾

9. With the strategos was habitually associated the royal scribe, who was his assistant in all departments of his work, especially in receiving returns⁽⁵⁰⁾ and collecting evidence for legal proceedings;⁽⁵¹⁾ and, on occasion, could act on his behalf.⁽⁵²⁾ The royal scribe, to judge from the records preserved, served for about the same period as the strategos, though, in one case at least, a scribe, Herakleides, was in office for over five years.⁽⁵³⁾ He was probably also appointed in the same manner. Instances of the appointment of Romans to this post are rarer than to that of strategos.

10. The nomarchs,⁽⁵⁴⁾ who had originally filled the chief positions in each nome, had been deposed from most of their functions by the strategoi; but they were still retained under the latter as financial officers, and also appear to have had some special duties in connection with the transport of goods.⁽⁵⁵⁾ They exercised some supervision over the collection of the taxes,⁽⁵⁶⁾

VILLAGE AUTHORITIES

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and the payment of the money to the local treasury.⁽⁵⁷⁾ They were responsible for the performance of these duties to the government, and were liable, in default of raising the due amount of revenue, to have their property confiscated.⁽⁵⁸⁾ In connection with their position of supervisors of taxation, they were apparently ranked as the financial authorities for the various trades and occupations of the nome.⁽⁵⁹⁾

11. The records of the nome were kept by the bibliophylakes, with whom copies of all official documents were deposited,⁽⁶⁰⁾ and who received notice of all changes in the ownership of land,⁽⁶¹⁾ together with periodical returns from the landholders of the nome describing their property.⁽⁶²⁾ They were divided into two departments, the one concerned with the work of land-registry,⁽⁶³⁾ the other with the financial statements of the district.⁽⁶⁴⁾ The staff of the former at Arsinoe numbered two.

12. The local government of the villages was in the hands of a number of officials, whose precise relationship to each other is hard to determine. The elders were probably responsible for the general management of affairs; they were a body of men known in one instance to have numbered about ten, and in another four, and to have been of no very substantial position, possessing, in the first case, incomes of four or five hundred drachmæ, and in the second eight hundred.⁽⁶⁵⁾ They acted as intermediaries for the payment of taxes on behalf of their village;⁽⁶⁶⁾ and were held liable to the authorities of the nome for the peace of its inhabitants; which liability carried with it the duty of assisting to present malefactors for trial, and of collecting evidence when required.⁽⁶⁷⁾

13. The elders probably formed the village council, which is only known from a single instance, in which its president appears as hiring two dancing-girls for the service of the village, doubtless to dance at a festival.⁽⁶⁸⁾

14. The village scribe was the person ultimately responsible for the supply of all the various items of

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information required by the central government: it was he who drew up lists of the inhabitants of the village, their several holdings of land, the extent to, and manner in, which each holding was cultivated; and generally gave all particulars necessary for the assessment of the taxes upon each individual. In connection with this duty, he had also to supply the names of men suitable to be appointed to the liturgies of the village.⁽⁶⁹⁾

15. In his work of cataloguing the inhabitants, the village scribe was assisted by the *laographoi*, who were appointed in each village for the sole purpose of collecting census returns.⁽⁷⁰⁾

16. The *agoranomoi*⁽⁷¹⁾ were village officials who were chiefly, if not entirely, occupied with the execution and registration of contracts, wills, and other legal documents. The parties to the contract attended before an *agoranomos*, and, after it was drawn up, probably by the clerk, and signed, it was registered, and a copy deposited in the local archives.⁽⁷²⁾ If the contract was not drawn up at the *agoranomeion*, notice had to be given there of its completion.⁽⁷³⁾ In the Arsinoite nome, contracts appear habitually to have been made at the *grapheion*;⁽⁷⁴⁾ or, if completed privately, to have been registered there:⁽⁷⁵⁾ but it does not seem clear whether the *grapheion* was under the control of the *agoranomos*.

17. The police administration of the nome⁽⁷⁶⁾ was under the general supervision of the two *eirenarchai*:⁽⁷⁷⁾ subordinate to them there were in each village one or two *archephodoi*, who were the officials responsible for the custody and production of offenders in court;⁽⁷⁸⁾ in which duty the elders or others were sometimes associated with them.⁽⁷⁹⁾ The *euschemones* and *eireno-phylakes* appear to have held about the same rank, and to have performed similar duties to those of the *archephodoi*.⁽⁸⁰⁾ The actual work of arrest was done by the *lestopiastai* or *phylakes*,⁽⁸¹⁾ the latter of whom were paid officers, and were divided into classes according to their work. In the maintenance of order, however,

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FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATION

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the assistance of the military was constantly summoned; and the centurions of the Roman army were empowered to receive complaints, in the same manner as the strategoi, with the addition that they could order the summary arrest of offenders.⁽⁸²⁾

18. There were also a number of officials in the towns and villages whose precise functions it is at present impossible to determine: the exegetai,⁽⁸³⁾ euschemones,⁽⁸⁴⁾ kosmetai,⁽⁸⁵⁾ and gymnasiarchs.⁽⁸⁶⁾ These were probably all offices which were imposed as liturgies upon the wealthier members of the community; and the holders of them shared with the elders the general management of the affairs of their town or village. In this capacity they could be called upon by the higher officials to give such assistance as might be required in the government of the district, by collecting taxes, arresting criminals, or supplying evidence with regard to the state of their local affairs. It is possible that the exegetai were introduced into the government of the towns when they were granted the privilege of electing senates; but in Alexandria, at any rate, the office of exegetes was not dependent on the existence of a senate.

19. The revenues of the country, in addition to the general authority exercised over them by the prefect, received the special supervision of the idiologos, who was appointed by the emperor, and who, in view of the position of Egypt in the imperial economy as the private property of the emperor, was virtually the steward of the country; he was nominally subordinate to the prefect, but, being independently appointed, would be likely to serve as a check on any attempt to vary the imperial orders with regard to the taxation of Egypt.⁽⁸⁷⁾ The directions as to the amount of revenue to be raised, its assessment, and the money when collected, passed along the usual channel of officials and subordinates, from prefect to strategos; but the actual collection was done by a special body of officers, the praktores, who were divided into classes according to the taxes with which they dealt—poll

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tax,⁽⁸⁸⁾ corn tax,⁽⁸⁹⁾ bath tax,⁽⁹⁰⁾ *stephanikon*,⁹¹ and so forth; and for this purpose a number of the inhabitants of each village of sufficient income—which in one case was 1000 drachmæ—were chosen by the strategos from nominations by the village scribe.⁽⁹²⁾ That the liturgy of collecting taxes was a burdensome one, in respect of the time and expense involved, is shown by a deed in which a man who had been named as *praktor* appointed a deputy, and paid him 252 drachmæ yearly to do the work.⁽⁹³⁾ The *praktores* were assisted by another body, the *epiteretai*;⁽⁹⁴⁾ and, in the case of the wheat and barley taxes, by the *paralemptai*.⁽⁹⁵⁾ The money taxes were usually paid into the public or other bank of the village,⁽⁹⁶⁾ while the taxes in kind went to the village granary, which was in charge of the *sitologoi*,⁽⁹⁷⁾ who had to make monthly returns as to the amount of corn stored therein.

20. In addition to the strategos of the nome, there was a second check upon the collection of corn in the *dekaprotoi*, who were appointed to hold office in the *toparchies*, into which the nomes were divided, and to supervise the storage of grain in the granaries.⁽⁹⁸⁾

21. The collection of customs-duties at the stations on the Nile and on the roads leading across the desert, was in the hands of companies of farmers;⁽⁹⁹⁾ and other indirect taxes, such as the fees on sales and on the registration of contracts, were likewise farmed.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ That the position of farmer of taxes was not a very profitable one, and, in fact, was probably little better than a liturgy, especially after Nero had reformed the system of collection by publishing tariffs, may be gathered from the reluctance to continue their work which is sometimes stated to have been shown by the farmers, and from the special orders which had to be issued by the prefects against compelling them to undertake the duties.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ The collection of some taxes, such as the poll tax, appears at some places to have been done indifferently by the farmers of the customs and the *praktores*:⁽¹⁰²⁾ it may be surmised that the latter, in places where a body of farmers existed, made