

Roman Egypt

Egypt played a crucial role in the Roman Empire for seven centuries. It was wealthy and occupied a strategic position between the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds, while its uniquely fertile lands helped to feed the imperial capitals at Rome and then Constantinople. The cultural and religious landscape of Egypt today owes much to developments during the Roman period, including in particular the forms taken by Egyptian Christianity. Moreover, we have an abundance of sources for its history during this time, especially because of the recovery of vast numbers of written texts giving an almost uniquely detailed picture of its society, economy, government, and culture. This book, the work of six historians and archaeologists from Egypt, the US, and the UK, provides students and a general audience with a readable new introduction to the period and includes many illustrations of art, archaeological sites, and documents, and quotations from primary sources.

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Roman Egypt

A History

—

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Preface

Egypt has a long history. Even leaving aside the predynastic period, this history stretches for more than five thousand years, from the earliest pharaonic dynasties to the present. To both students and a wider public around the world, the period from the Old Kingdom to the end of the New Kingdom (about 2686 to 1080 BC) is certainly the best known. In Egypt itself, this pharaonic period as well as the history of Egypt from the arrival of Arab armies in the seventh century to the present are important parts of the school curriculum. Less often taught are the three-quarters of a millennium between the end of the New Kingdom and the arrival of Alexander the Great in 332 BC. Even less well known to a general public or an educational focus is the millennium from the conquest of Alexander to the arrival of Arab armies in 639–640. Tourists in Egypt are likely to have acquired at least some acquaintance with the superb monuments dating from the periods of Islamic rule. But apart from a perhaps brief exposure to Alexandria, there is little that a casual visitor will learn about the period when Greek was widely spoken and written in Egypt, and particularly the period when it was under Roman rule. And yet these centuries not only witnessed many of the most dramatic events of Egyptian history, they also created the essential foundations of the society that ‘Amr ibn el-As found in the seventh century and that still shape significant aspects of the Egyptian religious and cultural landscape. This book is intended to bring the history of these critical centuries of Egyptian history to a broad audience.

During these centuries Egypt played a central role in the Mediterranean world, serving for much of the period as a critical link between the Mediterranean and the sphere of the Indian Ocean. Control of Egypt’s wealth was a chief objective for successive empires over a long span of history: Kush, Assyria, Persia, Macedon, Rome, and Byzantium. Egypt was by most reckonings the wealthiest state of its time, with an enormous amount of productive land, watered by the Nile and refertilized each year with the silt brought by the Nile’s flood. With no more than one-twelfth of its present population at most – even at its peak – Egypt already had under cultivation most of the land that is farmed today and produced far more abundant crops than other regions. In the Roman period Egypt fed Rome

and then Constantinople, the largest cities of their time, and even then did not exhaust its surplus. Controlling Egypt was thus vital to the survival of successive Roman governments.

Egypt's importance was therefore closely tied to the particular geographical and ecological features of the country. Proverbially the "gift of the Nile," for most of the period covered in this book the country stretched the length of the Nile from just south of Aswan for some 840 km (520 miles) to the Mediterranean coast. The valley was generally narrow, bordered by desert on either side, until it reached Heliopolis (Cairo) at the head of the Nile delta c. 685 km (425 miles) downstream. Here the Nile branched out into a network of channels and canals (Map 1), making it difficult to cross the Delta; those who entered Egypt would come south along one of the branches of the Nile. Both these Delta channels and the mainstream of the Nile were subject to movement over time with the effect that ancient settlements that once stood on the banks of the river now lie some distance away. In the western desert a line of oases was linked both eastward to the valley and to Nubia in the south; across the Eastern Desert ran routes to ports on the Red Sea coast. The Fayyum basin, 100 km (around 60 miles) south of Cairo, provided a further area of agricultural land, especially after its reclamation under the early Ptolemies. Overall, there were some 60,000 square km (23,000 square miles) of fertile land in the country and the wealth of Egypt's agriculture, dependent on the annual flood of the Nile, will be a recurring theme in the following chapters.

This period is rich in evidence concerning many aspects of life. True, the monuments are perhaps less impressive than for earlier periods, and inscriptions far less numerous and informative than those of the pharaonic period, although the great temples of Edfu and Dendera do belong to the Ptolemaic period. Narrative sources are scanty, and statistics lacking. But in compensation we have far greater quantities of everyday textual evidence, mostly in Egyptian, Greek, Aramaic, Latin, and Arabic, from ancient authors preserved in medieval manuscripts but mostly in the hundreds of thousands of papyrus texts found in Egypt over the last two hundred years. Although only part of this immense treasure has so far been published, it is enough to enable us to examine everything from the workings of government to the private lives of ordinary people, often in great detail. Sometimes a group of texts – an archive – centers on one person or family. Although these sources are often fragmentary and difficult to understand, they enable us to see something of the economic, social, administrative, and cultural lives of the population to a degree impossible in most other places of the ancient world, with the partial exception of Mesopotamia (roughly,

modern Iraq). This evidence thus offers an exceptional opportunity to understand how a society with a deep-rooted and vigorous indigenous culture evolved over a long period of interaction with neighboring societies while retaining a distinctive identity.

This book seeks to bring these richly documented millennia between the New Kingdom and the Arab conquest to a broad readership. Its focus is on the period of the Roman Empire, including the centuries in which Egypt was ruled from Constantinople after the center of power in the empire moved east in the fourth century AD. During this time Egyptian Christianity took form in ways that remain profoundly embedded in society today. But because Roman Egypt was shaped in part by the changes of the preceding intervals of both Egyptian and foreign rule, our introduction takes us back to the Third Intermediate Period and the Saite, Persian, and Ptolemaic kings.

Egypt's history before the coming of the Ptolemies is conventionally studied in "dynasties," series of rulers usually with a relationship to one another. Our idea of these dynasties goes back to ancient Egyptian temple records as reflected in the work of the Egyptian priest Manetho, who produced his history of the country for Ptolemy II in the third century BC (1.5). We use this dynastic framework to introduce Egypt's history before Alexander the Great. Modern scholars of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries sometimes jumped too quickly to the view that the Greeks brought immediate and radical change to Egypt, supposed to have been a closed and backward society until then. But more recent Egyptological work has shown that Egypt before Alexander was already deeply integrated into the Near Eastern world and exchanged ideas and technologies with its neighbors in all directions. Many immigrants from all over the Eastern Mediterranean lived in Egypt and became Egyptian to some degree. That is not to say that the three hundred years of Ptolemaic rule did not bring change – they did. But the story is much more complicated and the change more gradual than has been assumed.

The Romans from the start tried to make Egypt more like other parts of their large empire. But once again, there was much that did not change, and the changes that did take place have been made out to be greater than they were. Ultimately, some of the innovations of Roman rule transformed Egyptian society more profoundly than any Ptolemaic developments had done. It is not always easy, however, to discern why changes took place. Of particular relevance to this book, it is hard to tell just why the slow decline of the Egyptian temples accelerated in the third century and created the conditions that allowed Christianity to spread and become more

established in the country, leading to Egypt becoming almost entirely a Christian country in the centuries down to and beyond the arrival of the Arabs. We have tried to follow this development without going too deeply into the details of the theological controversies that split the Christian community in Late Antiquity. Our account continues after the Arab conquest in order to show how the changes that it brought, both directly and indirectly, helped to shape medieval, and even modern, Egypt, a world in which the consonant stem of the word “Egyptian” (in various ancient languages) came to be used to mean specifically “Copt,” i.e. Egyptian Orthodox Christian rather than Arab or Muslim Egyptian.

Because we lack ancient narrative sources for much of the period we cover, this book does not try to tell a continuous story. But where we can reconstruct the course of events we provide pieces of what such a narrative would be. By contrast, the wealth of documentary sources and archaeological evidence would allow many aspects of life in Roman Egypt to be covered in more detail than is possible in a book on this scale. Our work thus complements rather than replaces more thematic books about daily life such as Anna Boozer’s forthcoming *At Home in Roman Egypt* (Cambridge University Press).

The sources on which our account is based cannot be cited in detail in a book of this nature, but we give references to documents directly cited or quoted, and after each section we provide a selection of works in which the evidence is fully cited. The ancient sources and modern scholarship alike offer a rich vocabulary of technical terms in Greek, Egyptian, Latin, and Arabic, which can be overwhelming to most readers. We translate these terms and give the original word, wherever we think it useful, inside parentheses. A glossary at the end provides definitions of the ancient terms.

This book originated in a plea by Wassif Boutros Ghali, President of the Société d’Archéologie Copte (Society for Coptic Archaeology), to create an account of Roman and Byzantine Egypt, to be published in both English and Arabic, that would be accessible to a broad public, including students. He was particularly concerned that the book should give a sense of the development of Roman Egypt into its Late Antique form and of the organic formation of the Christian community of Egypt. We are grateful for this challenge and for his comments on a draft of the book. Sadek Wahba has also offered useful comments and ensured that funding was available to produce the book. Financial support has come from the Wahba Family Trust, Mohamed Adel El Gazzar, Teymour Boutros-Ghali, and Hamed El Chiaty. We are grateful to all of them for making this book possible.