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From the Ptolemies to the Romaris. Political and Economic Change in Egypt

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G. Thériault's brief survey of six cases where games were held in honor of Roman magistrates in Asia Minor addresses questions including the identification of the Roman honorands and the type of games involved (377).

Large, multi-authored and multilingual books present many editorial difficulties. In this Festschrift, editing errors are not rare. But the volume's richness compensates for these shortcomings. In addition to epigraphists and social and economic historians, a wide range of specialists including archaeologists and numismatists will find its contents rewarding. A general index and an index of sources add to the volume's usefulness.

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Andrew Monson, *From the Ptolemies to the Romans. Political and Economic Change in Egypt*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 2012, XVII, 343 S., 15 Abb., 1 Kte., ISBN 978-1-107-01441-1 (geb.) \$ 99,-

In an address at the Twelfth International Congress of Papyrology in 1968, the late Naphtali Lewis famously rejected the term „Greco-Roman“, specifically as used in studies of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. To support his position, one based, so he claimed, on substance not mere linguistic fussiness, he presented arguments against the then prevailing orthodoxy that the Roman replacement of the Ptolemies was characterized by „essential continuity“. Instead, according to Lewis, the changes wrought by the Romans were themselves „more fundamental and sweeping“ than previously thought. He returned to the same theme fifteen years later in Naples in his presidential address to the XVII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia, a specific complement to the earlier talk, with an express qualification that the issue was „not a simple (or simplistic) question of continuity or change; both are in evidence, and the problem is to evaluate the relative importance of each.“

Both talks are conveniently accessible among Lewis's collected papers *On Government and Law in Roman Egypt* (American Studies in Papyrology 33), Atlanta, GA 1995 (quotes from pp. 139, 140, 300). In a subsequent, important article (Cities and Administration in Roman Egypt, JRS 82, 1992, 107–127), Alan Bowman and Dominic Rathbone, working mainly from the Roman half of the Ptolemaic-Roman divide, stressed not only the fact of Roman innovation in the creation of an urban governing elite, but argued, significantly, that some of the

main changes in this direction occurred early under Roman rule; they were Augustan. The authors also expressed (108) the hope that their „paper“ would „stimulate more work in this field“. And surely this book by Andrew M(onson) may be read as a response to Lewis's program as quoted above (to evaluate continuity **and** change) and to the hope for future work expressed by Bowman and Rathbone. This he does, strongly, from the other, that is, the Ptolemaic, side of the divide, with closest attention to land tenure, taxation, economic development, and administration. The book is especially good on the different taxation systems and their social and economic consequences and on the shift from temple to urban landowning elites. That the latter were the intentional creation of Roman social policy is a main point made by Bowman and Rathbone, one change on which there is universal scholarly accord.

M. clearly describes the scope and limitations of his evidence. Like J. G. Manning before him (see especially Manning's *Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt. The Structure of Land Tenure*, Cambridge 2003, which should be read in tandem with M.), he uses the Greek and the mainly demotic Egyptian evidence in combination (the latter of course cannot take him very deep into the Roman period). He remarks, appositely, on the thinness of the papyrological evidence for the first centuries BCE and CE, critical for his investigation. He establishes early on a dichotomy that sets the Nile Valley, with its largely demotic evidence, as ecological foil to the Fayyum, with its predominantly Greek evidence. The former, according to M., was rich in its land, dense in its population; the latter (esp. 55–56, *contra* Bagnall) was more thinly populated, a marginal and therefore chronically vulnerable region.

This Valley vs. Fayyum dichotomy is often assessed against the models that drive the book's narrative. Principal among these is the Boserup-Demsetz model, according to which population growth does not lead into a hellish Malthusian trap, but rather, as one scholar has put it (D. Arnold, *Famine*, New York 1988, 41), serves as „the essential [and, I would add, salvific] goad to agrarian innovation.“

Population density associated with population growth and consequent scarcity of land leads, in M.'s discussion, to privatization of property rights. Thus the Valley's land became over time increasingly subject to private ownership while significant communal arrangements persisted in the Fayyum. Privatization, in its turn, and in accord with principles of the New Institutional Economics, leads to and is encouraged by securitization and exclusivity of property rights. Egypt under the Ptolemies had not after all been a „Königseigentum“ (an outdated scholarly creed). In fact, private ownership rights had existed (see again Manning's *Land and Power*) even in such traditional classes of land as „temple land“ and „royal land“ – these had become fiscal rather than legal de-

signations – but they were often *de facto* not *de iure*, and correspondingly uncertain. Such rights had initial but eventually evaporating restrictions based on time (rights could expire), status (who could own what land), and succession (rights might not include powers of transmission). It was increased certainty, then, not the institution of private property itself that the Romans introduced and fostered, with, for example, the creation of the office of property registers (*bibliothêkê enktêseôn*). This with an overall low tax rate, i.e., a low tax-high investment model, encouraged investment in land and in its improvement. Those who could take advantage of these incentives became the city-based, land-owning elite that through the liturgy system constituted the bedrock of Roman rule in Egypt.

If the Boserup-Demsetz model is a pervasive influence, another model only comes into full prominence in chapter 7 (The Impact of Empire, 249–274). This is M. Olson's „criminal metaphor“ of the „predatory state“ whose bandit rulers will coerce and tax their subjects as much as they practically can. Nevertheless, in stable times at least, they exhibit patience, extracting less for the moment in anticipation of consistent, and ultimately more valuable, gains over the long term. In times of instability, however, they become shortsighted, maximizing „bandits“. In other words, the state is least predatory when most stable, most predatory when least stable. According to the model, as time passed, the Ptolemaic state became externally and internally a less stable entity; its tax demands became correspondingly predatory. The Romans on arrival provided the kind of stability, with results as sketched above, that the later Ptolemies could not. They also replaced the Ptolemies' strongly redistributive economy with an economy that witnessed the development of an active market in land.

All this has the appearance of great and persuasive coherence, but such structure- and model-driven history as this may give the reader occasional pause (see in general F. Boldizzoni's critique, *The Poverty of Clio. Resurrecting Economic History*, Princeton 2011). History, for example, has proven that the margins of the Fayyum indeed were, and still are, marginal; but the central Fayyum with its alluvial plain presents a somewhat different story (for which, see now B. J. Haug, *Watering the Desert. Environment, Irrigation, and Society in the Premodern Fayyûm, Egypt*, (diss.) Berkeley 2012, esp. 95–98, cf. 106 on population density). M. writes approvingly (167–169, cf. 91–92) of J. Shelton's gentler assessment, in demolition of Rostovtzeff's „more sinister view“, of the rent-and-lease system at late second-century BCE Kerkeosiris on the Fayyum's southern fringe. This required painstaking annual adjustments in land assignments and liability involving time-consuming field survey and massive paperwork (P Tebt. I and IV, see now P. Bagnall 46). As M. writes, „the amount of bureaucracy that this system implies is staggering, especially in view of the documen-

tation that the small Fayyum village of Kerkeosiris generated in just a few years“ (167–168). At first blush one might think that this runs against the model of the predatory state, since this meticulous work would have taken place in troublesome times, the second half of the second century BCE – unless we credit the famous amnesty of 118 BCE (P.Tebt. I 5) with recently having inaugurated a new if passing phase of Ptolemaic stability (cf. Manning, *Land and Power*, 2003, 23), in which case, “[t]his type of amnesty decree was predictable according to the model“ (M., 253).

At times, the leading model may not be backed by full statistical expectations. Although urban elites invested in Egyptian land in the Roman and late Roman periods, there is no village for which one can prove they were the majority landowners, just a significant minority. At other times, evidence on the ground sufficient to support the model may be hard to find. As evidence of Roman-period (private) investment in technology, scholars, M. included (192–193), only seem to be able to point to the spread in use of Archimedean waterwheels, a Ptolemaic-period invention. For these, there is plenty of evidence for (say) Byzantine Oxyrhynchus, rather less for Roman Egypt until the later third century with the Appianus estate at Theadelphia (recent graphic description in Haug, *Watering the Desert*, 2012, 90–92). Such machines, expensive to construct, maintain, and operate, would in any case have been most used on the margins, for gardens, vineyards, and orchards. It is questionable whether they alone would qualify Roman Egypt as more innovative than its Ptolemaic predecessor with, *inter alia*, the latter’s wholesale substitution of *Triticum durum* for emmer wheat as the leading cereal crop and its publicly inspired Fayyum reclamation project. As Manning writes (*Land and Power*, 2003, 5), the Ptolemaic regime was responsible for „the most impressive intervention in the Egyptian agricultural economy until the introduction of perennial irrigation and the mercantilist policies of the nineteenth century“.

M.’s pages (199–202, cf. 206) contrasting the trajectories of premodern France and England, with the able assistance of Adam Smith, are deftly done and provocatively („provocative“, 203) applied to Egypt. French (read, by analogy, Ptolemaic Egyptian) fiscal policy depended on a variable harvest tax (cf. 162–172) that discouraged improvement, fell disproportionately on the large class of peasant holders of small plots, and required costly annual surveying. English (read, by analogy, Roman Egyptian) policy, based on a low flat tax (cf. 172–191), encouraged investment, privatization, enclosure, and improvement, resulting, overall, in much better economic performance. Naturally, this worked well for some people; but if one stretches the model through yet one more stage (cf. M., in a brief sentence, 288: „Those without property [...] were the ones disadvantaged“), it should have caused serious social dislocation in depriving ma-

ny others of their traditional ways and communal safety nets, a major lament of scholars on the political left (e.g., J. C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven – London 1976; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, New York 1991). Bowman and Rathbone allude in passing to this problem when in the article cited above they write (114): „We shall later argue that the complement of this [sc. Roman social policy as discoverable in the Gnomon of the Idios Logos] is that the Romans aimed to demarcate a privileged urban-based ‚Hellenic, elite, through whom and with whom they could **rule and exploit the native population**“ (my stress). In the event, the remainder of the article concerns itself with the first part of that sentence, not with the compound prepositional phrase of its second half. It is the second half that may, even if unintentionally, send readers back to contemplate the largely discredited chapter XII of M. Rostovtzeff's *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, Oxford 1957.

As everyone will know, the whole topic of „regime change“ is of great interest these days; but despite a title and subtitle that may suggest a treatment leaning toward the popular, M.'s book will prove demanding even for those familiar with the issues and some of their details. As Lewis recommended, M. analyzes „multiple“ rather than „single“ factors of continuity and change, but I found it difficult to extract a clear balance sheet of the results. Part of what I have therefore attempted above is to lay out what seem to me to be some of the book's main lines of thought and, at the risk of gross oversimplification, to construct a narrative simpler even than the one M. provides in his own Conclusion (chapter 8, 275–289, cf. chapter 1, 29–32). I don't mean to imply that this is not a valuable, worthy book in its own right; it is, and in a sense it can even be considered a landmark work, especially for its bridging of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Papyrologists have traditionally worked on one (Ptolemaic) or the other (Roman), rarely both at once. This is immeasurably to M.'s credit. The book is also one, as suggested above, meant to provoke thought; that it should, and does. Its chapters are conveniently broken up into clearly identified and manageable subsections. It closes with an illuminating bibliography (290–329), an excellent Index of sources (330–335), and a General index (336–343) that is exceptionally useful for its inclusion of the names of the many scholars whose views and works are assessed in the text.