

Dominic Rathbone

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Dominic Rathbone

**THE ROMANITY OF ROMAN EGYPT:
A FALTERING CONSENSUS?**

IN 1968, WHILE STUDENTS TRIED TO CHANGE THE WORLD, Naphtali Lewis changed the way we study Roman Egypt in his paper to the 12th International Congress of Papyrology at Ann Arbor.¹ Drawing in strands from other scholars such as Tomsin and Braunert, he wove a new tapestry of an Egypt where Romanisation was more significant than Ptolemaic continuities. The term ‘Graeco-Roman Egypt’, Lewis concluded, was misleading, and implicitly Egypt could not be dismissed as a *Sonderstellung* (exception) in the Roman empire. In 1983, at the 17th Congress in Naples, Lewis reviewed research relevant to this issue over the intervening fifteen years, and judged that the Romanity of Roman Egypt was ‘a growing consensus’, if still a work in progress.² Indeed the thirty years since have seen important contributions, many extending the argument for fundamental change, and insisting that Egypt, despite some peculiarities, was essentially part of the Roman provincial system. However, some contributions

¹ N. LEWIS, “‘Graeco-Roman’ Egypt: fact or fiction?”, [in:] *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Congress of Papyrology*, Toronto 1970, pp. 3-14; [repr. in:] *On Government and Law in Roman Egypt*, Atlanta 1995, pp. 138-149.

² N. LEWIS, “The Romanity of Roman Egypt: a growing consensus’, [in:] *Atti del XVII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia*, Naples 1984, pp. 1077-1084; [repr. in:] *On Government and Law* (cit. n. 1), pp. 298-305. Lewis thought that agriculture and village life did not change, but this view of the ‘timelessness’ of rural Egypt is less accepted nowadays.

in recent years – in particular the books of Livia Capponi and Andrew Monson, and papers by Dieter Hagedorn, Rudolf Haensch and Andrea Jördens – have challenged the consensus and argued again for significant Ptolemaic continuities into the first and, to some extent, the second century AD.³ My aim here is to assess where the debate now stands, and to suggest some areas where new approaches and research might move it forward.⁴ This short paper has inevitable limitations. I cannot cover every topic nor acknowledge every contribution. I will say little about the equestrian administration, the status of Alexandria or the system of law and order.⁵ My focus will be on socio-economic and administrative developments at the level of the *nomes* and their capitals through to the mid-first century AD.

Unaccustomed as I am to methodological ruminations, we need to recognise the range of different perspectives which our scholarly community brings to the study of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. In varying combinations we are specialists in Egypt, with particular skills such as reading demotic, through to students of the wider Hellenistic and Roman worlds. I consider myself to be primarily a historian of Rome and its empire, obviously in the small group which believes that the documents of Egypt can and must be used to expand our understanding of

³ L. CAPPONI, *Augustan Egypt. The Creation of a Roman Province*, New York – London 2005; A. MONSON, *From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*, Cambridge 2012; D. HAGEDORN, ‘The emergence of municipal offices in the nome-capitals of Egypt’, [in:] A.K. BOWMAN et al. (eds), *Oxyrhynchus. A City and its Texts*, London 2007, pp. 194–204; R. HAENSCH, ‘Die Provinz Aegyptus: Kontinuitäten und Brüche zum ptolemäischen Ägypten. Das Beispiel des administrativen Personals’, [in:] I. PISO (ed.), *Die römischen Provinzen: Begriff und Gründung*, Cluj-Napoca 2008, pp. 81–105; A. JÖRDENS, ‘Das Verhältnis der römischen Amsträger in Ägypten zu den “Städten” in der Provinz’, [in:] W. ECK (ed.), *Lokale Autonomie und römische Ordnungsmacht*, Oldenbourg 1999, pp. 141–180. The old-style ‘exceptionality’ of Egypt still dies hard: e.g. P. EICH, ‘Die Administratoren des römischen Ägyptens’, [in:] R. HAENSCH & J. HEINRICHS (eds), *Herrschen und Verwalten. Der Alltag der römischen Administration in der Hoben Kaiserzeit*, Cologne 2007, pp. 378–399 (and my name is not David!).

⁴ I thank Jane ROWLANDSON and Andrew MONSON for discussions which have sharpened some of my arguments, even if they would still disagree.

⁵ On which see Andrea JÖRDENS in this volume.

Roman imperial rule in general.⁶ In studying the transition from Ptolemaic to Roman Egypt, I therefore instinctively locate it in a general Roman context. First, I note that the annexation of Egypt coincided with the period, centred on the decade of 28 to 19 BC, of political revolution from Republic to Principate; that means we have to be wary about saying what is or is not typical of Roman rule because the very nature of that rule was changing dramatically. Second, I note that the concept of Romanisation, which Lewis could use in 1968 as self-explanatory, has been deconstructed. Scholars of the western provinces, not least Roman Britain, have rejected the old imperialist top-down model in favour of a more bottom-up explanation of local willingness to adapt to Roman norms, or rather to cherry-pick the features they liked, and to blend them with new local developments to create a distinct provincial culture in a process one scholar has called ‘creolisation’.⁷ Of course this is itself a debate in progress, but I think the changing historiography of, for instance, the Romanisation of Britain can enrich our studies of the transition from Ptolemaic to Roman Egypt. One last note: old-style Romanisation was a concept first deployed to explain the development of civic government and material culture in the western provinces; hence scholars assumed a Roman policy of minimal intervention in the Greek east because most of it was already urbanised and civilised.⁸ However, granted that from 167 BC, if not from 211 BC, Rome had become used to intervening in the socio-political and fiscal structures of Hellenistic kingdoms

⁶ Cf. my use of Egyptian evidence for Roman army logistics in D. W. RATHBONE, ‘Military finance and supply’, [in:] P. SABIN, H. VAN WEES & M. WHITBY (eds), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, Cambridge 2007, II pp. 158–176, and of the use of copper and silver coins in first-century AD Tebtunis to question monetary behaviour in the rest of the empire in D. W. RATHBONE, ‘Village markets in Roman Egypt. The case of first-century AD Tebtunis’, [in:] M. FRASS (ed.), *Kauf, Konsum und Märkte. Wirtschaftswelten im Fokus – Von der römischen Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 123–143.

⁷ J. WEBSTER, ‘Creolizing the Roman provinces’, *American Journal of Archaeology* 105 (2001), pp. 209–255. Background: e.g. J. WEBSTER & N. J. COOPER (eds), *Roman Imperialism: Post-Colonial Perspectives*, Leicester 1996. Debate: e.g. S. PALMIÉ, ‘Creolization and its discontents’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006), pp. 433–456.

⁸ An attitude followed, for example, by HAENSCH, ‘Die Provinz’ (cit. n. 3), cited as an authority for this view by MONSON, *From the Ptolemies* (cit. n. 3), pp. 282–283.

over which they had gained control, and that bottom-up aspirations are likely to have been an important part of the equation, we should be looking equally in the east for signs of new-style ‘Romanisation’ or ‘creolisation’.⁹

The essential normality of the Roman government of Egypt by the mid-first century AD has, in my view, been established beyond reasonable doubt in works from Giovanni Geraci’s ground-breaking study of the formation of the province through to Andrea Jördens’ thorough demonstration that the Prefect acted like any provincial governor and Rudolf Haensch’s review of the typicality of its military units.¹⁰ But Tacitus’ *domi retinere* (*Hist.* I.II.I), ‘to keep it in-house’, may reflect that Octavian had planned differently before his half-hearted climb-down from monarchic aspirations in 28/27 BC. Signs include the personal confiscation of the estates of Cleopatra and her supporters and retention of the Idioslogos, the dating by regnal years, the appointment by 27 BC, after a two-year gap, of a new High Priest at Memphis with the title ‘prophet of Caesar’, and the deployment of imperial slaves and freedmen as administrators, which is one of Capponi’s key points.¹¹ I suspect that Augustus may not have formally made Egypt a province through a *lex provinciae* until 27 or 26 BC

⁹ For instance, the interventions involved in the annexation of the Attalid kingdom as the province of Asia in the decade from 133 BC are increasingly well attested by inscriptions; see C. P. JONES, ‘Events surrounding the bequest of Pergamon to Rome and the revolt of Aristonicos: new inscriptions from Metropolis’, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 17 (2004), pp. 470–485. Pompey’s reorganisation of Bithynia and Pontus into civic units is summarised by C. MAREK, *Pontus et Bithynia. Die römischen Provinzen im Norden Kleinasien*, Mainz 2003, pp. 36–43. For a provocative general assessment of Roman political aims, see G. E. M. DE STE. CROIX, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, London 1981, pp. 300–326, 518–537.

¹⁰ G. GERACI, *Genesi della provincia romana d’Egitto*, Bologna 1983; A. JÖRDENS, *Statthalterliche Verwaltung der römischen Kaiserzeit. Studien zum praefectus Aegypti*, Stuttgart 2009; R. HAENSCH, ‘Der *exercitus Aegyptiacus* – ein provinzieller Heeresverband wie andere auch?’, [in:] K. LEMBKE, M. MINAS-NERPEL, & S. PFEIFFER (eds), *Tradition and Transformation: Egypt under Roman Rule*, Leiden 2010, pp. III–132.

¹¹ Estates and Idioslogos: D. W. RATHBONE, ‘Egypt, Augustus and Roman taxation’, *Cahiers du Centre Glotz* 4 (1993), pp. 81–112, at 99–110. High Priest: D. J. THOMPSON, *Memphis under the Ptolemies*, Cambridge 2012 (2nd ed.), p. 125. Imperial *familia*: CAPPONI, *Augustan Egypt* (cit. n. 3), pp. 129–132.

when his 'settlement' with the senate and the dramatic fall of Gallus made its status a pressing issue.¹² One peculiar legacy was the equestrian rank of the governor and hence of other Roman officials.¹³ More significant for the development of the Principate was the invention of the patrimonial rights of the princeps and the office of imperial procurator, which I have argued were modelled on the Ptolemaic *Idioslogos*, the growing employment of the imperial *familia* as staff in the capitals of all provinces, and also the Julio-Claudian use of gift-estates which started with the *ousiai* in Egypt but soon spread to other provinces, including Africa and Illyricum where evidence for grants by Augustus has recently emerged.¹⁴ Thus Ptolemaic Egypt contributed to a new definition of Roman provincial normality.

The Roman government of Egypt functioned in a very different style to the Ptolemaic government. There was no king or Pharaoh and no court; unless the emperor was in the province, you could not petition him without the governor's permission, which was the empire-wide rule, or a

¹² Dio 51.17.1-3 does not indicate 30 BC, which would be implausible; he says 'following that', looking ahead. JÖRDENS, *Statthalterliche Verwaltung* (cit. n. 10), p.48 n. 122, lists the references to an Augustan *lex*, presumably the *lex provinciae*, which regularised the position of the equestrian governor as equivalent to a proconsul. It is not clear either when the provinces of Gallia Comata were formalised, probably in a process beginning in late 27 BC (cf. Dio 53.22.5).

¹³ To my mind one of the most striking proofs of the normality of the equestrian governors of Egypt is the two known prosecutions of them for *res repetundae* (leaving aside Cornelius Gallus) – of Avillius Flaccus (AD 38) and Vibius Maximus (c. AD 107): see P. A. BRUNT, 'Charges of provincial maladministration under the early Principate', *Historia* 10 (1961), pp. 189-227; [repr. in:] *Roman Imperial Themes*, Oxford 1990, pp. 53-95, with 487-506.

¹⁴ See references in n. 11. Provincial staff: Strabo 17.1.12 (Egypt), despite R. HAENSCH, *Capita Provinciarum. Statthaltersitze und Provinzialverwaltung in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Mainz 1997, p. 215 n. 48; for other provinces see his pp. 710-726. Gift-estates: in Africa to T. Statilius Taurus and perhaps L. Passienus Rufus: M. DE VOS, 'The rural landscape of Thugga: farms, presses, mills, and transport', [in:] A. BOWMAN & A. WILSON (eds), *The Roman Agricultural Economy. Organization, Investment, and Production*, Oxford 2013, pp. 143-218, at 193-200; in Illyricum to C. Calpurnius Piso: *SC de Pisone patre*, ll. 84-90; cf. D. J. CRAWFORD [THOMPSON], 'Imperial estates', [in:] M. I. FINLEY (ed.), *Studies in Roman Property*, Cambridge 1976, pp. 35-70.

powerful patron.¹⁵ Every Roman official, from Prefect to junior military officers, served for a short term, almost never more than three years, and few held more than one appointment in the province; again, this was the empire-wide norm.¹⁶ After the imperial *familia* was pulled back to the government headquarters in Alexandria, seconded Roman soldiers, almost all – despite Capponi – recruited from other provinces, became the rural incarnation of the new order, supplementing the silent imperial portraits on statues and coins.¹⁷ I cannot help recalling Anwar al-Sadat's reference to the fear (and contempt) felt for 'the typical British constable on his motorcycle (...) looking like an idiot, with his huge head covered in a long crimson fez'.¹⁸ These honorary centurions or *regionarii* were an empire-wide phenomenon, but a novelty of the Principate; Republican Rome had no standing army and did not garrison provinces at peace. The nome-level local officials of the Roman administration, principally the *strategoï* and royal scribes, were in the first century AD mostly Alexandrians, whose tenure never exceeded three years and could not serve where they owned property.¹⁹ Instead of building relationships with powerful local families, the strategy needed for operating in this deliberately

¹⁵ Cf. B. KELLY, *Petitions, Litigation and Social Control in Roman Egypt*, Oxford 2011, p. 79.

¹⁶ P. A. BRUNT, 'The administrators of Roman Egypt', *Journal of Roman Studies* 65 (1975), pp. 124–147; [repr. in:] *Roman Imperial Themes*, Oxford 1990, pp. 215–254, with 514–515. The exceptions cluster under Claudius and Nero, who both had a special interest in Egypt (see further below).

¹⁷ Recruitment: CAPPONI, *Augustan Egypt* (cit. n. 3), pp. 17–22; contra HAENSCH, 'Der exercitus' (cit. n. 10). *Regionarii*: R. ALSTON, *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt. A Social History*, London – New York 1995, pp. 86–96: the earliest attested case is in 20 BC (*P. Oslo* 11 30); cf. C. J. FUHRMANN, *Policing the Roman Empire. Soldiers, Administration, and Public Order*, Oxford 2012, pp. 201–223 (but with some errors and misunderstandings).

¹⁸ ANWAR AL-SADAT, *In Search of Identity. An Autobiography*, London 1978, p. 20. Sadat claims this was a sight of Cairo, but there were rural police posts too.

¹⁹ N. HOHLWEIN, *Le Stratège du nome* [= *Papyrologica Bruxellensia* 9], Brussels 1969, pp. 15–24, 41–43; T. KRUSE, *Der königliche Schreiber und die Gauverwaltung. Untersuchungen zur Verwaltungsgeschichte Ägyptens in der Zeit von Augustus bis Philippus Arabs (30 v.Chr. – 245 n.Chr.)*, Munich – Leipzig 2002, pp. 44–59, 899–923. One exception was the long terms of the powerful but ill-attested *eklogistai*, discussed by HAENSCH, 'Die Provinz' (cit. n. 3), pp. 96–98, and by C. J. GRUBER at this Congress.

impersonal system was to learn and adapt the Roman ideology of government – concern for the *georgia* and *euthenia*, the agricultural prosperity and food supply of the province and empire, support of the property rights of hardworking taxpayers, protection of women who had no other helper, and so on.²⁰ The political morality of Roman provincial government, in Egypt just as in other provinces, did not originate from centrifugal monarchic benevolence, but was mostly the collective self-definition and regulation of generations of peripatetic Roman officials interacting with provincial complainants.

One aspect of Roman rule which was certainly top-down was taxation. Here the Principate brought fundamental changes. In modern sociological literature, drawn on by Monson in his recent book, these are optimistically presented as the ‘Augustan threshold’, a reduction in overall taxation and reduced corruption from the crushing levies and profiteering of the Republic.²¹ While superficially attractive, this picture is misleading if not wrong. There is no good evidence for a ‘policy’ of reducing pre-Roman taxes. The *tributum* imposed on the four federal states into which Macedon was split by the senate in 167 BC, described by Livy as half what they had paid to the Antigonids, was a war indemnity, not tax, for Macedon did not become a province until 146 BC; in effect Rome was confiscating half their fiscal revenues.²² The most oppressive feature of Republican

²⁰ KELLY, *Petitions* (cit. n. 15), pp. 195–243.

²¹ MONSON, *From the Ptolemies* (cit. n. 3), pp. 249–274. Whether or not provincial taxation in the Principate was relatively light in a broad pre-modern perspective is debatable and a separate issue.

²² Livy 45.18.7, 29.4, 30.1; cf. the indemnity imposed on Carthage in 202/1 BC, which Livy 30.37.5, 33.46.8–47.2 describes in the same terms (and see below on the Republican meaning of *tributum*). Cicero, *In Verrem* 2.3.14 asserts that Rome had introduced no new levy (*vectigal*) in Sicily (i.e. no reductions), but he ignores various changes and supplements. Appian, *BC* 5.4 has Mark Antony claim that the Romans had in 133 BC released the cities of Asia from the Attalid taxes (*phoroi*), but demagogues (sc. Tiberius Gracchus in 133 BC) had instituted the tithe, which at least was fairer than the previous set levies. However several details in this speech, which belongs to the widespread literature of Greek criticism and Roman defences of Roman provincial taxation, are dubious, other subsequent levies are omitted, and the context is a special cash levy by Antony and Octavian to fund the discharge of their veterans!

taxation, the collection of direct taxes by Roman contractors (*publicani*), had mostly, perhaps completely, been abolished before Augustus.²³ While peace and the Principate did bring an end to the emergency levies of the civil wars, and ushered in a more uniform and regularised system of taxation, extortion was still common and the system of requisitions and ad hoc compulsory purchases for civil and military needs remained. Indeed these, along with the now empire-wide web of internal customs dues (*portoria*) collected by *publicani*, became the new bugbear of provincials, because the imperial state, with its standing army, greatly expanded number of salaried senatorial and equestrian officials and extravagant court, was much more expensive than the Republican state.²⁴ To fund the army on which his power ultimately rested, Augustus was obliged to introduce, apparently to all provinces if with variations reflecting local fiscal traditions, a heavy annual poll-tax in cash. Its importance is illustrated by the redefinition of *tributum* to denote a regular tax, not – as in the Republic – an occasional levy (and of *vectigalia* to denote imperial indirect taxes), and the empire-wide conceptualisation of provincial taxation as *tributum capitis*, the poll-tax, and *tributum soli*, the land-tax. Egypt was apparently the first experiment in imposing a poll-tax; the revolt this set off in Upper Egypt would be a result replicated in other provinces. The attempts of Capponi and Monson to downplay the novelty of the Roman poll-tax do not convince for three principal reasons: the Ptolemaic capitation taxes were still levied, there is no precedent for the reduced rate for metropolites, and it was an Augustan innovation throughout the empire.²⁵ Alexandrians, and of course Romans, were exempt; this was a regressive tax on the rural population of the empire.

²³ P. A. BRUNT, 'Publicans in the Principate', [in:] *Roman Imperial Themes*, Oxford 1990, pp. 354–432.

²⁴ For an overview see D. W. RATHBONE, 'The imperial finances', [in:] *The Cambridge Ancient History*, X, Cambridge 1996 (2nd ed.), pp. 309–323.

²⁵ CAPPONI, *Augustan Egypt* (cit. n. 3), pp. 138–141; MONSON, *From the Ptolemies* (cit. n. 3), pp. 254, 262–266. Andrew Monson kindly alerted me that new evidence is emerging for late Ptolemaic precursors of the poll-tax, such as the per capita levies in *P.Tebt.* 1 103 and 189 (61 BC), as described by F. A. J. HOOGENDIJK, 'The practice of taxation in three late Ptolemaic papyri', [in:] *Proceedings of the Twenty-Fifth International Congress of Papyrology*,

On the currently standard view of the Romanisation of Egypt, the major reform was full privatisation of the kleruchic holdings of catoecic status, the only substantive category of arable land more or less privately held, supplemented by gradual privatisation of state land, when it fell out of cultivation for whatever reason, by auction into private ownership. This privatisation was designed to create a class of landowners on whom liturgic posts could be imposed so as to replace the Ptolemaic system of salaried officials, as a step towards municipalisation of the nomes. In his critique of this view Monson accepts that the Romans applied to Egypt their traditional simple and sharp distinction between *ager privatus*, liable (outside Italy) to taxation, and *ager publicus*, which paid rent, and that catoecic land was ‘fully’ privatised.²⁶ However, he argues that there was already extensive privately held land (*idioktetos ge*) in most of Ptolemaic Egypt, and that the real Roman reform was fiscal: they replaced the high, theoretically crop-related, levies (*ekphoria*, *epigraphe*; Egyptian *sbemu*) on this *idioktetos ge* with the low fixed-rate tax hitherto typical of kleruchic land, and reduced the tax on private vineyards and garden-land; probably they also discontinued occasional extra levies on all forms of privately held land. Low taxation stimulated investment, leading to the formation of large private estates. It also meant less profit for tax-collectors, who stopped volunteering for the paid posts, so the Romans had to appoint officials by liturgic compulsion; this was therefore a fiscal rather than an ideological development.²⁷

The large amount of private land (*idioktetos ge*) in Ptolemaic Upper Egypt – in contrast to its absence in the Arsinoite nome (Fayyum), the

Ann Arbor 2010, pp. 313–322; these, however, seem to be front-loaded instalments, probably totalling much less than the poll-tax, for the known *phylakitikon* tax, which continued to be levied separately by the Romans.

²⁶ I note that the list of Roman land categories which Tomsin claimed at the Warsaw/Cracow Congress of 1961 were applied to Egypt is too extensive (and some are fictions of the *agrimensores*): A. TOMSIN, ‘Les continuités historiques dans le cadre des mesures prises par les Romains en Egypte concernant la propriété de la terre’, [in:] *Actes du x^e Congrès International de Papyrologie*, Warsaw 1964, pp. 81–95.

²⁷ For a concise preview of this argument, see A. MONSON, ‘Land tenure and taxation from Ptolemaic to Roman Egypt’, *Tyche* 25 (2010), pp. 55–71.

provenance of the data on which the standard view is based – is a discovery of enormous importance which we owe mainly to the growing band of demotists, but how it will affect our story of the transition from Ptolemaic to Roman Egypt is yet to emerge from the scholarly debate which Monson's bold thesis is bound to provoke. First, there are many factual issues to be clarified about the categorisation and taxation of land in both the late Ptolemaic and the early Roman periods. One, for example, is the relationship between the *idioktetos ge* in the Apollonopolite survey of 118 BC, which seems distinct from royal and sacred land, and the privately held (*idioktetos*) royal and sacred land in other texts. Another is the uncertainty about which variable and which fixed-rate levies were raised regularly or occasionally on different categories of land. A third difficult issue is whether land tenure in Middle Egypt and the Delta was closer to the Upper Egyptian or Arsinoite pattern, or somewhere in between. A further general problem for evaluation of the transition, granted the regional variation in administrative and fiscal practice, is the lack of documents from the same region, apart from the Arsinoite, which attest the 'before' and 'after' situations.

While Monson's case for a Roman reduction in the basic taxation of private land is attractive and may be right, my instinct is to be cautious about accepting a significant gross diminution in the annual tax target of the state; extra levies, too, if initially avoided, were to re-appear before long as requisitions (in theory compensated) and the crown tax. I now suspect that at the micro-level, beneath the overarching rubrics of 'public' and 'private', the Romans made no major changes to the Ptolemaic classification and administration of land. I remain sceptical about the supposed confiscation of sacred lands (if indeed Greek *hiera ge* was really the same as demotic 'temple' land). The one documented case is from Tebtunis, in the Arsinoite nome where temple estates did not exist as in Upper Egypt.²⁸ Octavian, at least, according to the Kalabsha gate of 30/29 BC, confirmed that the Dodekaschoenus belonged to Isis, not her

²⁸ *P. Tebt.* II 302, AD 71/2. There are Ptolemaic precedents for payment of *syntaxeis* to temples.

rival Khnum.²⁹ This was standard Roman religiosity, attested by inscriptions in other eastern provinces, such as that of AD 14(?) from Ephesus which records the building of a road out of the revenues of the estates granted by Augustus to Artemis-Diana.³⁰ Privately held land may have been the type most affected, if we accept that a low fixed-rate tax was applied across the board, and that any latent restrictions to its free alienation were removed, including ‘cessions’ of catoecic land.³¹

Monson nowhere discusses the motivation of the Romans for reducing taxes, if they did, on private land in Egypt; he simply subsumes them in a sociological model that stable governments tax less, and implies that they shared the neoliberal conviction that low taxation fosters economic growth. If so, one may wonder why they did not privatise and reduce the taxes on public lands too. There is also the question of why private land was not accumulated in the Ptolemaic period, despite high taxes, by families in order to store and transmit wealth; there must have been some block, probably politically motivated confiscation by the state. Conversely, any initial stimulus to investment in the Roman period because of low taxes will soon have been offset by a rise in the price of land, which Monson believes did occur; the Roman provincial administration, however, only confiscated property as a legal or administrative sanction, and promptly auctioned what it acquired back into private ownership. To me, therefore, the most plausible explanation for the Roman changes, which can

²⁹ E. WINTER, ‘Octavian/Augustus als Soter, Euergetes und Epiphanes: die Datierung des Kalabscha-Tores’, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 130 (2003), pp. 197–212.

³⁰ *SEG* xli 971. Cf. Republican protection of sacred lands from land-tax demands by *publicani*: e.g. *I. Ilium* 71 = *OGIS* 440 (89 BC), lands of Athena at Ilium; *SIG*³ 747 = *FIRA* 1 36 (73 BC), lands of Amphiaros at Oropos, Boiotia.

³¹ The status of catoecic land remains enigmatic. On the one hand, first-century texts attest purchases and ownership by villagers. On the other hand, it was still alienated by cessions registered and taxed by a special ‘military allotments’ office (contracted out), and texts like *P. Köln* v 227 (AD 12/3), a register which (l. B5) refers to *katoikoi* who underwent *gnosteia* in AD 5/6, imply that ownership was still in theory restricted. Even in AD 220/1, for instance, almost all the holders of catoecic land in *P. Prag.* 11 137 (Tanis, Arsinoite) bear Greek or Roman names, but maybe because the (wealthier?) urban elite had been able to dominate acquisition.

easily accommodate a reduction of taxation, remains ideological and political. The Romans treated private land in Egypt like *ager privatus* in Italy: necessary, and entitled to state protection, as the economic base of a stable and conservative landowning elite, like themselves, whose interests would align with Roman rule and who would run the province for them. This had been consistent Roman policy since the fourth century BC when they began their conquest of Italy.

I am now dubious about the development of a liturgic system in early Roman Egypt.³² Haensch has rightly stressed the continued use of indigent salaried officials, including the *strategoi* and royal scribes, in the upper echelons of the administration.³³ I now also suspect that many of the metropolite and village officials, such as amphodarchs, *sitologoi* (granary supervisors) and village-scribes, whom we conventionally term ‘liturgists’ were, in the first and second centuries, in fact paid; only their appointment was ‘liturgic’ in that it was by nomination and compulsion from defined socio-economic groups, which for some posts involved a property qualification (*poros*). This was certainly the case for the various and newly-named *phylakes* (public guards).³⁴ It was Roman practice from the Republic to pay those undertaking civic duties, such as soldiers, governors, members of senatorial commissions, a daily allowance for expenses, which by the Principate came to be seen as salary; indeed the Latin word *salarion* (*salarium*, which originally meant ‘allowance’) now appears in the papyri to denote the pay of *strategoi* and royal scribes.³⁵ For administrative functions which produced revenue, such as tax-collecting and

³² Cf. the caution of J. D. THOMAS, ‘Compulsory public service in Roman Egypt’, [in:] G. GRIMM *et al.* (eds), *Das römisch-byzantinische Ägypten (Aegyptiaca Treverensia 2)*, Trier 1981, pp. 35–39; ‘The administration of Roman Egypt: a survey of recent research and some outstanding problems’, [in:] *Atti del XXII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia*, Florence 2001, II pp. 1245–1254, at 1249.

³³ HAENSCH, ‘Die Provinz’ (cit. n. 3).

³⁴ C. HOMOTH-KUHS, *Phylakes und Phylakon-Steuer im griechisch-römischen Ägypten*, Munich – Leipzig 2005, pp. 60–71, 123–135.

³⁵ Roman military pay: RATHBONE, ‘Military finance’ (cit. n. 6), p. 159. *Salarion*: KRUSE, *Der königliche Schreiber* (cit. n. 19), p. 52–55; also occasionally used of payments to deputies or scribes.

registration of documents (for a fee), the Romans instead seem to have favoured contractors, combining their own and Ptolemaic precedents. In the Roman as in the Hellenistic world, contractors were required to have sufficient property as surety, so references to checking the *poros* of candidates do not prove they were liturgists rather than contractors. As noted above, the Principate had no general antipathy towards *publicani*, who still collected the imperial indirect taxes (*vectigalia*), and contractors were commonly used by cities to provide services (buildings, banks) and to collect imperial and local taxes – the ‘publicans and sinners’ of the Gospels. Contractors in early Roman Egypt came from the imperial elite down to wealthy villagers. The position of *arabarches*, a *publicanus* who collected the 25% customs levy on eastern imports into Egypt, was held by Roman equestrians, in the first century often Alexandrian notables.³⁶ The known contractors for the Arsinoite *nomarchia*, another huge operation, seem to have been Alexandrians.³⁷ In AD 139 a *strategos* of the Kopite complained to the prefect about the insolence of the Alexandrians, Roman citizens and veterans acting as *praktores* (collectors) and in other *demosiai chreiai* (public functions) whom he could not control, and who must therefore have been contractors rather than liturgists.³⁸ Our two best attested village officials of the mid-first century, Nemesion the *praktor argurikon* (cash-tax collector) at Philadelphia and Kronion the co-keeper of the *grapheion* (registry) at Tebtunis, both held office for years on end, which implies they were volunteers, and Kronion paid a variable but substantial monthly *diagraphē*, perhaps instalments towards his

³⁶ F. BURCKHALTER, ‘Les fermiers de l’arabarchie: notables et hommes d’affaires à Alexandrie’, [in:] *Alexandrie: une mégapole cosmopolite*, Paris 1999, pp. 41–54.

³⁷ F. REITER, *Die Nomarchen des Arsinoites. Ein Beitrag zum Steuerwesen im römischen Ägypten*, Paderborn 2004. Note that the *nomarchia* used both sub-contractors and salaried staff (cf. *P. Oxy.* LXXVIII 5179). By the mid-second century *epiteretai* (supervisors) also appear, whom Reiter (pp. 192–198, 277–284) thinks were ‘liturgists’, although in my review I express some doubts: D. W. RATHBONE, ‘Taxation in Roman Egypt’, *Classical Review* 57 (2007), pp. 490–492.

³⁸ *BGU* III 747 = *WChr* 35; ‘Roman citizens’ probably overlaps with Alexandrians and veterans, but might cover imperial and other freedmen, such as appear in the ostraka from Berenike and Myos Hormos.

annual bid.³⁹ Truly liturgic service may have been a development of the later second century, perhaps because, in a postponed version of Monson's thesis, the profitability of tax-farming was in decline.

The picture of an Augustan initiative towards municipalisation, which I and Alan Bowman sketched over twenty years ago, certainly needs some modification; I think we were right on the main point if wrong on some details.⁴⁰ Hagedorn, Haensch and Jördens have all argued that the metropoleis were run by central rather than civic officials, at least until the second century. This is true, at least in part, and indeed central officials in the nomes were not eclipsed by councils until Diocletian's reforms. Nonetheless, some moves towards municipalisation are indisputable. Nome capitals were called *metropoleis* and their inhabitants were termed metropolitites and favoured with a low rate of poll-tax, usually half that paid by villagers. Documents from Nero's reign show that the metropolis of Arsinoe, properly Ptolemais Euergetis, had acquired an unprecedented official identity as 'the *polis* of the Ptolemaeans', although political decisions on its behalf, such as to vote honours and send embassies to Claudius and Nero, were carried out by the 6,475 (or 6,470), in full 'the *katoikoi* (military settlers) from the total of the 6,475 Hellenic men in the Arsinoite', a status group equivalent to the *katoikoi* of the Heracleopolite and 'those from the gymnasium' in some other nomes.⁴¹ It is now clear that the definition, relation and functions of these groups,

³⁹ Nemesion: A. E. HANSON, 'Village officials at Philadelphia: a model of romanization in the Julio-Claudian period', [in:] L. CRISCUOLO & G. GERACI (eds), *Egitto e storia antica dall'ellenismo all'età araba*, Bologna 1989, pp. 429-440. Kronion: A. E. R. BOAK, *P. Mich.* II (1933), pp. 4-5, 93-102. For a tax-collector at Theogonis in 61 BC paying a similar monthly *diagraphē*, see HOOGENDIJK, 'The practice' (cit. n. 25), pp. 318, 320.

⁴⁰ A. K. BOWMAN & D. W. RATHBONE, 'Cities and administration in Roman Egypt', *Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992), pp. 107-127. See n. 3 above for critiques.

⁴¹ SB XII 11012. This formal civic organisation of the *katoikoi* seems to be new. Although petitions to (and responses from) later Ptolemaic rulers are known from (and to) the *katoikoi* in the Arsinoite nome (e.g. *P. Tebt.* I 124; cf. *BGU* IV 1185.ii) and those in the Heracleopolite nome (e.g. *BGU* VIII 1756, 1757, 1768, XIV 2374), these seem to have been initiated and organised through military units, and the *katoikoi* do not seem to have any other formal collective body. Royal rulings with nome-wide applicability use vague terms such as 'the whole mass (*plethos*) of the military settlement (*katoikia*)' (*BGU* VIII 1768).

and how they were administered, need careful re-investigation. Leaving aside here the disputed issue of whether officers of the gymnasial group were originally local or central, I note that we have all ignored the metropolites. Under Claudius or Nero the term for street was changed from *laura* to *amphodon*, and an official called the *amphodarches* appears: could this be a Roman-inspired step towards municipal self-administration modelled on the *vicomagister*?⁴² Although the gymnasial group seemed to have constituted the political voice of the metropoleis, the metropolites too contributed to formation of proto-municipal government of the nomes; for instance, metropolites were now nominated for ‘liturgic’ offices, including the *sitologia*, by *amphodon* officials.⁴³

We took the gymnasial group to be an ‘elite’ within the metropolites, whereas they were a group of similar size, as Ruffini has shown for the Oxyrhynchite and the ideal number of the 6,475 itself shows for the Arsinoite.⁴⁴ However, while the Leuven tendency to present the two as ‘overlapping’ groups seems largely true for their membership, I still think their ideology and functions were quite different, as their distinct *epikrisis* procedures imply.⁴⁵ Their very title and their dedications in villages show that the Arsinoite *katoikoi* were an elite of the nome, if focussed in the metropolis (note the name ‘mother-city’ itself), which soon came to host the sole gymnasium in each nome and where most or all of the group claimed residence, perhaps notional in some cases. I now incline to see the gymnasial groups as affiliated socio-cultural branches of Alexandria in the Roman overarching model for Egypt of one city (*polis*) and its terri-

⁴² R. ALSTON, *The City in Roman and Byzantine Egypt*, London 2002, pp. 138–142; add now on the Roman background J. B. LOTT, *The Neighbourhoods of Augustan Rome*, Cambridge 2004.

⁴³ E.g. *SB* VI 9050.i, early II AD.

⁴⁴ G. RUFFINI, ‘Genealogy and the gymnasium’, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 43 (2006), pp. 71–99.

⁴⁵ P. VAN MINNEN, ‘*Hai apo gymnasiou*: “Greek” women and the “Greek” elite in the metropoleis of Roman Egypt’, [in:] H. MELAERTS & L. MOOREN (eds), *Le rôle et le statut de la femme en Egypte hellénistique, romaine et byzantine*, Leuven 2002, pp. 337–353; Y. BROUX, ‘Creating a new local elite: the establishment of the metropolitan orders of Roman Egypt’, *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 59 (2013), pp. 143–153.

tory (*chora*). Many of the numerous ‘Alexandrian’ victors at the Olympic games in the first two centuries AD probably came from the metropoleis and nomes, which were not recognised as Hellenic city-states until AD 200/1, and so had needed an Alexandrian ‘passport’ to compete.⁴⁶ The gymnasial groups also seem to have been the prime movers in the development, on its way by the mid-first century, of a distinctive provincial elite culture, with regional variations. This is best attested in the Arsinoite where the elite had themselves mummified in a couple of specially prestigious cemeteries, using Roman-style veristic portraits in which they sport Roman status markers like coloured stripes (*clavi*) on their tunics and Roman hairstyles and jewellery, and developed a distinctive socio-religious attachment to Isis, Serapis and Harpokrates after whom they increasingly named themselves and whose brother-sister marriage they sometimes imitated.⁴⁷

As we all know, a fundamental problem in studying the transition from Ptolemaic to Roman Egypt is the relative dearth of papyrus documents from the period. That is why the approach and presuppositions of scholars matter particularly here. The emerging picture of early initiatives being given firmer shape under Claudius and Nero suspiciously mirrors the growth in evidence, but has another possible explanation: the accession of Claudius, grandson of Mark Antony (and only grand-nephew of Augustus), offered Alexandria and Egypt an unexpected chance to seek favours.⁴⁸ Alexandria promptly sent an embassy offering extravagant honours and asking for a *boule*, as they had once or twice asked Augustus, and some other reforms; a similar petition to Nero, who had an unconsum-

⁴⁶ As is argued by S. REMIJSEN in *P.Oxy.* LXXIX (2014), pp. 193–194; note Pausanias 5.21.15 on the expulsion from Olympia of two competitors from the Arsinoite nome.

⁴⁷ See, for instance: S. WALKER & M. BIERBRIER, *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt* (London 1997), e.g. nos. 93–94; W. CLARYSSE & M. C. D. PAGANINI, ‘Theophoric personal names in Graeco-Roman Egypt. The case of Sarapis’, *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 55 (2009), pp. 68–89; J. ROWLANDSON & R. TAKAHASHI, ‘Brother-sister marriage and inheritance strategies in Greco-Roman Egypt’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009), pp. 104–139.

⁴⁸ Previewed in the reception of Germanicus, Claudius’ older brother, at Alexandria in AD 19.

mated fixation on Egypt, may have led to the reform of tribes and demes attested in the self-description of Alexandrians in official documents.⁴⁹ Ptolemais Euergetis sent embassies to Claudius and Nero which secured definition and confirmation of the communal and individual rights of the 6,475, sadly but typically lost in a lacuna.⁵⁰ The old model of Romanisation in the west saw urbanisation as a top-down process, and this is how we have imagined municipalisation in Egypt. The melange of documents and fiction about relations between Alexandria and the Julio-Claudians shows that leading Alexandrians at that time wanted a *boule* (council) to be restored to them and apparently believed that some of the early emperors might grant it; but when even Claudius, after consulting, decided not to, the issue seems to have died down, perhaps because they had in other ways gained a satisfactory level of civic privileges and autonomy. Similarly, the 6,475 presumably had a clear idea of what they wanted and, by the time of Claudius and Nero, of what they might get.

We assume that Septimius Severus granted *boulai* to Alexandria and the metropoleis in AD 200/1 because that is what they had long wanted, but there is no evidence that it had been a live issue at Alexandria since the mid-first century, or ever in the metropoleis.⁵¹ I suspect that from the start the Romans were in principle keen to municipalise Egypt – hence they considered restoring Alexandria’s *boule*, they invented metropoleis and metropolites and the privileged gymnasial group. However, the local elites who benefited from these demarches picked out, protected and tried to extend the privileges they liked, and showed little enthusiasm for assuming the liturgic burdens which they knew full well from their contacts with the wider Hellenic world were the inescapable downside of

⁴⁹ On the various embassies to Gaius and Claudius, and the different versions of Claudius’ response to Alexandria, see A. HARKER, *Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt. The Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 9–47.

⁵⁰ SB XII 11012.i.10–14: ‘whatever you have had ...’, followed by a missing section of the text.

⁵¹ The only possible indication of a wish for metropolite councils is circulation in the *chora* of the so-called *Acta Alexandrinorum* and related texts, but they refer to Alexandria alone, and were more a literature of entertainment than protest; see HARKER, *Loyalty and Dissidence* (cit. n. 49).

civic self-government through a *boule*. Instead they prospered, and developed by the second century an impressive array of civic monuments, facilities and culture without, it seems, the endemic financial and political crises attested by the orations of Dio of Prusa and Pliny's letters in other Greek cities in the late first to early second centuries.

Does this then make Roman Egypt a peculiar province in a different way? I return to Roman Britain. The Romans were apparently keen to urbanise Britain, but evidence for flourishing municipal life is thin: outside the *coloniae* there are almost no civic inscriptions, in marked contrast to Gaul and Spain (though there are blanks there too), and we have to talk of '*civitas*-capitals' because the administrative status and structure of these regional urban centres is so elusive.⁵² It seems that the British elite, while happily accepting Rome's confirmation of their local dominance under (presumably) the new titles of Roman municipal office, preferred to stick to their rural bases (huntin', shootin' and fishin'), where they built themselves Roman-influenced villas and ate Roman-style dinners from Roman-style dishes. Whether or not we think it helpful to call it 'creolisation', I suggest that the 'Romanisation' of Egypt, like that of Roman Britain and all other provinces, was a complex and kaleidoscopic process of negotiation between Roman and local aspirations, both changing across time.

One last methodological point: we tend to decry historians of the Roman empire who ignore Egypt and the papyri on the grounds of supposed exceptionality, but we too have tended to study Roman Egypt without adequate reference to the broader history of Rome and its empire, or to the new approaches developed by our colleagues to similar issues in other provinces.⁵³ This is beginning to change; for example,

⁵² E.g. M. MILLET, *The Romanization of Britain. An Essay in Archaeological Interpretation*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 65–101, tacitly side-stepping the lack of epigraphic evidence for municipal offices and activities.

⁵³ There is also room for more comparative study of Ptolemaic Egypt in the wider Hellenistic context (especially Seleucid Babylonia), as noted for land categories in her review of Monson by L. CAPPONI, *Sehepunkte* 13 (2013), Nr. 4 [15.04.2013], [at:] <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2013/04/21478.html>.

many of the German papers I have cited are contributions to volumes discussing general aspects of Roman imperial administration. What I hope to have shown here is that Egypt's transition from Ptolemaic to Roman rule can be better understood if studied in the context of Roman history, especially Rome's previous experiences in annexing Hellenistic kingdoms and the changes to Rome's own system of government which were contemporary with the development of Roman rule of Egypt.

Dominic Rathbone

Department of Classics
King's College London
Strand, London WC2R 2LS
UNITED KINGDOM

e-mail: *dominic.rathbone@kcl.ac.uk*