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ROMAN EGYPT IN THE THIRD CENTURY

The historian of the Roman Empire tends to take a gloomy picture of the third century and to present it as a period of universal economic decline. It is the purpose of this study to utilize the abundant evidence of Egyptian coins and papyri and to discover how far this province was affected by the decline of the West.

The billon coinage of Egypt was fiduciary from the beginning of its issue. Whether it contained one or five percent of silver made little difference to the peasant, who used it only as a convenient instrument of exchange, and so long as the government accepted it in the payment of taxes, and so long as there was no increase in the volume of issue to make up deficits in the budget, the people accepted this fiduciary currency without question.

While the currency issued by the Alexandrian mint does not add greatly to our knowledge of economic conditions in the country, the documents found in contemporary papyri are much more important. This evidence, however, must be used with some discretion. Thus a village situated on the edge of the desert may be suffering from lack of irrigation and much of its land may be abandoned, while other villages with more abundant water supply may be flourishing. Since more papyri have been preserved, from sites above the flood level, the evidence which they present may tend to distort the general picture of economic condition¹.

The economic health of Egypt depended primarily on the agricultural prosperity of the farmer and to a lesser degree on the industrial activity of the cities. In one respect Egypt enjoyed an advantage over other provinces. The Nile each year renewed the fertility of the soil to a certain extent, while other lands suffered

¹ The villages on the upper levels of the Fayûm oasis suffered from lack of water in the latter part of the third century and much of the marginal land was abandoned.

from exhaustion. Artificial fertilizers were as yet unknown, and scientific agriculture had advanced very little beyond a knowledge of rotation of crops. Thus the wheat production of the older provinces was unable to meet the demands of a growing population, and the price of this staple food steadily advanced in the imperial period². In the larger cities we find constant reference to officials whose duty it was to provide grain in times of scarcity. In Egypt there were sporadic failures of the flood with consequent distress and famine, but the advance in the price of wheat was not due to local conditions so much as to the general rise in Mediterranean demand. The tax structure remained unchanged throughout the third century so far as the tribute in wheat was concerned; the irrigation system was not affected by the revolutions or civil wars and seems to have been maintained as usual³. There was little abandonment of leaseholds, except for marginal lands, and there is not record of the flight of peasants to avoid the cultivation of the land, if we except an edict of Caracalla⁴.

Industrial and commercial activity was limited to urban centres. Coptos depended almost entirely on the caravan trade with Red Sea ports. Alexandria took the eastern imports and prepared them for the western markets. The trade in luxury goods, such as ointments, perfumes, spices, drugs, fine weaves, glassware and the like, was designed primarily for the same market where there was a ready sale. Other cities in the Delta and in the Nile valley presumably shared in the development of industrial life since living costs were low, labor was cheap and reasonably abundant. Of these activities not much is known beyond the fact that weaving seems to have been carried on everywhere.

In the third century the industrial centres of Egypt fared much worse than the agricultural villages. The western market for luxury products steadily declined as purchasing power became

² *Econ. Survey* II 310 gives the prices published up to 1936.

³ There is no clear evidence for advances in rates. The taxes presumably varied with the height of the Nile flood, but how this was used to determine rates is unknown.

⁴ The assessment for those who had fled to escape poll-tax disappears in the second century. There is no evidence that land was uncultivated beyond the edict of Caracalla ordering the peasants in Alexandria to return to their native villages (P. Giss. 40).

limited to a few wealthy families. The barbarian invasions, civil wars, and plagues took their toll far and wide. In addition to the loss of markets, the direct route to India seems to have been closed to Alexandrian merchants. The Homeritae controlled the southern approach to the Red Sea and apparently took their toll of all sea-borne cargoes⁵. The rise of Palmyra and Petra as caravan cities is an indication that Egypt was being by-passed in eastern commerce. An obscure tribe called the Saraceni, whose home was on the Persian Gulf, enter history for the first time, and it is interesting to find that Alexandrian merchant princes like Firmus had some sort of understanding with Palmyra and the Saracens which apparently was used to induce the industrial interests to revolt from Rome⁶.

The unfavorable situation in Egyptian urban life may be indicated by Caracalla's edict expelling the country peasant from Alexandria with the exception of the linen weavers⁷. This emperor is said to have massacred several thousand Alexandrians in cold blood. Whatever the truth of the story, there was probably considerable discontent and unrest in the city at that time, and the expulsion of the peasant was not merely a device to secure an accurate census of the villages in the rural districts, but was probably actuated by a desire to get rid of the unemployed in Alexandria itself.

The situation at Oxyrhynchus between 235—248 A. D. presents an unfavorable picture. In the year 235 A. D. a census of houses in one of the wards of the city enumerates 73 houses of which 42 were sparsely occupied and 31 were empty or sealed up⁸. Now the historians tell us that a great plague, originating in Ethiopia, ravaged the Empire for fifteen years with especial virulence in Egypt and Alexandria. Whether the desolation at Oxyrhynchus in 235 A. D. was due to plague is uncertain. Some years later we find eutheniarchs appointed at this city, and this was usually done when famine conditions prevailed⁹. At about this same time

⁵ Pauly-Wissowa, RE s. v. *Homeritae*.

⁶ SHA. Firmus 3. 3.

⁷ P. Giss. 40.

⁸ P. Oslo 111; cf. BGU 734-5.

⁹ P. Oxy. 1417, A. D. 247; P. Erlangen 18, A. D. 248; P. Fouad 52. In the Erlangen document the prytanis speaks of the hard times (*πενεχορία*). It is very doubtful if the survey of land at Hermopolis can be interpreted to mean a decline (*Stud. Pal.* XX 58).

Arsinoe sought to draft wealthy villagers from the Fayûm to undertake civic liturgies, apparently on the plea of hard times¹⁰, and the petition of a citizen of Hermopolis shows that he attempted to shift a costly municipal liturgy by *antidosis* with the nominator¹¹.

In spite of this evidence of distress the resilience of the cities is more remarkable. At Oxyrhynchus the city called for estimates in repairing a public bath and game room. One item called for an appropriation of six talents¹². It is possible that the estimates were not approved or that the work was not done at the time, but we may be certain that estimates were not called for as a matter of idle curiosity. Some ten years later the Baths of Hadrian were repaired at a cost of five talents¹³. The extraordinary expenditure on public works during the third quarter of the century is clear evidence of prosperity. In 258 A. D. Antinoopolis spent about 90 talents for water supply and public works¹⁴. Hermopolis engaged in great public works about A. D. 207 when over 200 talents were spent on beautifying the city¹⁵. In addition, contracts were let for water supply and generous maintenance allowances were granted to athletes and other victors in contests¹⁶. Whence came the funds for all this municipal expenditure? The imperial treasury was exhausted and had no money for public works anywhere¹⁷. So far as known the cities had no power to tax the citizens and there is no evidence that they had any public land granted by Severus when he instituted the senates. The only recourse was private generosity. This was the chief source for

¹⁰ SB 7696.

¹¹ CPR 20.

¹² P. Oxy. 1450, 249/50 A. D.

¹³ P. Oxy. 54, 261 A. D.

¹⁴ *Archiv f. Papyrusforsch.* IV 115.

¹⁵ *Stud. Pal.* XX 68.

¹⁶ C. P. Herm. 55, 66, 67, 95 etc.

¹⁷ It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Gallienus issued grants of fiduciary currency from the Alexandrian mint to Egyptian cities. An envoy from Hermopolis to the Emperor about this time seems to have been successful (C. P. Herm. 125 = *Chr.* 40) and he may have requested funds for public works. The issue of fiduciary currency cost little beyond minting charges and if such issues were authorized they may have been responsible for the later inflation.

public works in Asiatic cities and it seems to have been the same in Egypt¹⁸.

The liturgies which the Greeks in the urban communities imposed upon themselves had always been heavy. Before Severus gave them the right to have a senate with a quasi-municipal organization, the prefect had regulated the expenses of the gymnasiarchy at Hermopolis, and still later we find a citizen avoiding one of the expensive liturgies at that city¹⁹. These were, however, voluntarily imposed, or had developed by custom, and it was within the power of the Greek community to eliminate the expenses if they so desired. The offer to exchange properties (*antidosis*) with the nominee was sometimes resorted to, but the practice was not common and was probably limited to periods of economic distress²⁰. It may be noticed that in the third century it was not uncommon for a citizen to hold office, whether as a senator or as an official, in different cities²¹.

The liturgies for the state were in a different category from the municipal charges. It was the usual practice to nominate the holders of state liturgies with the nominator or nominators as sureties. The most important state liturgies were the collection of taxes. Some of these were farmed out, in some cases the collector seems to receive a salary, but in a few others the responsibility of the incumbent, his nominator, and his sureties is evident²². It was apparently only in times of stress that the state threatened to exact deficiencies from the sureties.

¹⁸ See P. Amh. 64, A. D. 107. The cost of maintenance of the water works at Arsinoë was met by contributions from civic officials. P. Lond. 1177; cf. P. O. 1413, 2127.

¹⁹ P. Amh. 70; P. Ryl. 77.

²⁰ CPR 20, A. D. 250; BGU 473; PSI 1292; P. Oxy. 1642. The *cessio bonorum* is not always to be distinguished from bankruptcy, cf. P. Vindob. Boswinkel 4.

²¹ A hasty survey shows citizens holding office in different cities: SB 7814; 7817; P. Oxy. 1252, 1255, 1412, 1458, 1498, 2108, 2120, 2130; BGU 1073; PSI 303, 1255; P. Flor. 382; P. Fouad 52; P. Oslo 85. Pliny found citizens willing to serve as senators in more than one Bithynian town when he was governor (*Ep.* X 114).

²² Salary paid in SB 7375, cf. P. Harris 64; the alabarchic taxes were farmed out. The sale tax on fine bread seems to be farmed, BGU 1062. In A. D. 247 the nomarchic taxes in the Fayûm were made the responsibility of the collectors, nominators and sureties, but this seems the only clear case of such a threat in the third century (BGU 8).

In the last quarter of the third century the economic situation in Egypt is more obscure. Inflation in prices quoted in terms of the fiduciary currency suddenly became acute during Aurelian's reign. He apparently handled the problem with wisdom, since the upward spiral was checked and did not become serious until Diocletian sought to regulate prices by edict. One of the steps taken by Aurelian was to increase the tax on trades, seemingly in an attempt to balance the Egyptian budget by increased taxation, rather than by increasing issues of fiduciary money. His tax on glass, linen, and hemp was a more dubious expedient, as it must have hampered the export trade of cities interested in the production of these wares, and the profit to the state was probably lost in the increased bureaucracy needed to handle the new taxes in kind. Since Egypt had a monopoly on papyrus, the tax on this commodity did little more than limit profits.

The problem of inflation and its relation to the country's prosperity is more difficult to answer. Egypt had fiduciary currency from Augustus to Diocletian. This was accepted by the state in the payment of all money taxes, and was readily accepted by the Egyptians in all business transactions. Prices of wheat rose slowly but steadily from the beginning of Roman rule. Thus the average price under Augustus was three drachmae per artaba. In the first century the average was six, eight in the second, and twelve drachmae in the early third century. From 254–256 A. D. prices of twelve, sixteen, and twelve drachmae imply relative stability²³. In 269 A. D. a price of twenty-four drachmae is quoted²⁴. In 276 A. D. the price had risen to 200 drachmae²⁵. Thereafter the price remained fairly steady at the new level until the end of the century²⁶.

There was no apparent cause in the Egyptian internal economy for the sudden rise of prices under Aurelian. Presumably the Me-

²³ *Ec. Survey* II 310.

²⁴ P. Erlangen 101. This increase may be due to famine. For a distribution by the state in Egypt for the previous year see Wilcken, *Chr.* 425.

²⁵ *TAPA* 76 (1945), 144.

²⁶ A price of 300 dr. is recorded for A. D. 293 (P. Oxy. 2142); 220 and 232 dr. per artaba in A. D. 294 (P. Harris Appendix 93). In his edict of prices Diocletian fixed the price of wheat at 100 *denarii* per *modius castrensis*. In Egypt this would be equivalent to 1200 dr. per artaba.

diterranean price levels had risen, due to inflation in the imperial currency under Gallienus or Claudius, and this was speedily reflected in the Egyptian open market for grain. The advance in wheat prices enabled the peasant to pay his money taxes more easily. Thus he could pay his poll tax under Augustus by selling about fifteen artabas of wheat. In the second century five artabas were sufficient. If the same tax were exacted in the third century, the payment could be met by the sale of three artabas. Practically nothing is known of the system of taxation after Aurelian. It is known that he advanced the rate of the tax on trades, and if there were other taxes in money paid by the peasant the rates on these were presumably raised to correspond to the new level in prices. The peasant who had borrowed money or mortgaged property on the old scale of values could now cancel such indebtedness much more easily. Under inflation there is usually a redistribution of wealth to the advantage of the debtor class. But the accumulation of fiduciary money in itself did not bring wealth, unless it was converted into other forms of property. Since there was little private land in Egypt, there was slight opportunity for the development of private estates of any importance, although it is possible that a beginning was made in that direction. The hoarder of this new wealth was destined to lose most, if not all, when Diocletian reformed the currency and stopped further issues of tetradrachms from the Alexandrian mint²⁷.

In the last quarter of the third century the documentary evidence for Egypt is very slight. The destruction of Palmyra brought some readjustment of trade routes but apparently Alexandria did not profit thereby. Firmus and other merchant princes seem to have desired closer trade relations with the Saraceni and Palmyrans but the revolt of Firmus was nipped in the bud. The causes of the revolt of Coptos and Alexandria under Diocletian are obscure. Coptos was destroyed and Alexandria put up a desperate resistance. A few years later Diocletian granted a dole for the city poor, and the implication is that the revolt was inspired

²⁷ Nine hoards of Alexandrian tetradrachms have been reported from Aurelian to Diocletian (West and Johnson, *Currency in Roman Egypt* 178 n. 1). Over 20,000 coins were reported in these hoards, of which more than half were issued by Diocletian. These hoarders evidently had confidence in the currency.

by industrialists who perhaps hoped to restore Alexandria to its place in the sun by a new realignment of eastern powers, and thus regain their former profit from the Indian trade²⁸.

This brief survey would seem to indicate that Egypt in the third century did not share in the misfortunes of the rest of the Empire. There was admittedly a decline in some industrial centres, but Egypt was primarily an agricultural district. The land retained its fertility, was not plundered by barbarian invasions, and did not suffer from the requisitions and exactions of frequent troop movements. Taxes in kind were not increased and the farmer received good prices for his surplus grain. Thus when the rest of the Empire was torn apart by civil wars and when barbarian invasions were at their worst in Asia Minor and the Balkans, Egyptian cities indulged in a veritable orgy of public works hardly paralleled by any other province in the most prosperous days of the Empire.

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²⁸ See *Class. Phil.* 1950, 13 ff. Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* VII 21, 9) implies that a dole had been given earlier. Possibly he has confused it with the distribution granted by Macrianus and Quietus in 261 A. D. (Wilcken, *Chr.* 425). Apparently another was ordered by Claudius (*ibid.*).