

BOOK REVIEW

From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt. By ANDREW MONSON. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. 364; 4 tables, 14 figures, 1 map. Hardcover, £60.00/\$99.00. ISBN: 978-1-107-01441-1.

Recent generations of scholars concur that Roman rule brought a radical break with Egypt's past by instituting fundamental reforms which progressively assimilated Egypt to the rest of the empire. There is less consensus, however, about both the pace of change and how far its key elements were consciously planned by Augustus as a coherent program. Monson is the first scholar to address these issues through a totalizing, integrated structural explanation of the transformation from Ptolemaic to Roman Egypt which balances multiple variables: the ecological and demographic parameters, economic processes, institutional reform, and government policy (well summed up at 282–8). His account introduces important qualifications to the received view of Roman innovation, and in particular, makes a strong case that fiscal reform was more significant than changes in land tenure in fostering the accumulation of private wealth in landed property. The main arguments are of interest not only to specialists on Egypt, but to everyone seeking to understand the impact of Rome on its provinces.

The book exemplifies how the “Stanford School” approach, applying neo-institutional economics and other social scientific theory (critically introduced in Ch.1), can produce valuable insights into ancient society when combined with meticulous attention to the primary evidence. Monson adduces much recently published material in both Egyptian and Greek alongside neglected older texts. Chs. 2 and 3 test the models of Boserup and Demsetz correlating communal organization of agriculture with low population density; greater density encourages land privatization and agricultural intensification. Ch. 2 proposes that the regional variation found in the 1895–1910 census figures (highest population density in the upper Nile valley, lowest in the Fayyum and most of the Delta) represents a longstanding pattern reflecting ecological constants, true of both the pharaonic (argued by Butzer) and Greco-Roman periods. Whether or not one

accepts that the concentration of government and commerce in Alexandria would not significantly increase the density of settlement throughout the western Delta (p. 60; Strabo noticed the numerous villages south of Alexandria: 17.1.22), the Greco-Roman evidence does tend to bear out a greater population density in the Nile valley than the Fayyum. This contrast is essential to the argument of Ch. 3, which explains the much higher proportion of publicly-owned, communally-organized land in the Fayyum than elsewhere as the consequence of regional demography and ecology, not (as previously assumed) Ptolemaic royal policy. This is reinforced by the reassessment of land tenure in Ch. 4, which demonstrates that private ownership of land (including much royal and temple land as well as *idioktētos*) was already widespread in the Nile valley in the Ptolemaic period, and thus that the Roman step of fully privatizing the cleruchic land was much less far-reaching in fostering capital accumulation and the land market than scholars have thought (except arguably in the Fayyum). There were also Ptolemaic and pharaonic precursors for the property archive, although the Roman innovation of centralizing property records did facilitate long-distance market transactions (122–31).

Ch. 5 systematically revises the modern consensus that the Romans left tax rates on arable land largely unchanged, arguing that the *ekphorion* in the Ptolemaic Fayyum was essentially identical to the Upper Egyptian *epigraphē*, a harvest tax charged at high rates reassessed annually; before AD 32 this was abolished on private land throughout Egypt, leaving it paying only the low fixed-rate artaba tax. Monson supports his case with important new texts, but the evidence still seems frustratingly insufficient to confirm conclusively that Fayyum cleruchs ever regularly paid a harvest tax to the Ptolemaic state (178–80). Nevertheless, the stronger evidence that the Romans abolished the harvest tax in Upper Egypt and reduced tax rates on vineyards and orchards (190) makes the case for an overall reduction in the tax burden on private land convincing, particularly in conjunction with the gradual abandonment of flexible assessment even on the public land (cutting administrative costs). Comparison with early modern England, Japan and France (199–206) suggests why lowering tax rates made sense for the Roman government, a theme pursued further throughout the final three chapters which explore the consequent transformations in sources of wealth and status.

Previous scholars have characterized the change from Ptolemaic to Roman Egypt as one from a redistributive to a market economy, but Ch. 6 shows precisely what this involved for the two main beneficiaries of Ptolemaic redistribution, the priests and civil officials. The sections on priestly office (212–27) together

with temple land (131–41) provide the best succinct explanation of how the Roman government, while overtly respectful of the priesthood, completely undermined its economic and social basis. Likewise the Ptolemaic bureaucracy with its lucrative “rent-seeking” opportunities was progressively replaced by liturgical offices obligatory on the propertied class and mostly unpaid, shifting onto them much of the state’s administrative costs. “Rent-seeking” flourishes, to the detriment of state revenue, under unstable political regimes like that of the later Ptolemies. Olson’s “bandit state” model well describes this period, especially Auletes’ precarious and rapacious reign. The more effective Roman imperial government could afford to think longer-term: by minimizing running costs and reducing taxation they stimulated economic production which ultimately increased the total tax yield, as well as developing a stable power base in the broad and diverse gymnasial class (Chs. 7–8; I would question the suggestion on p. 272 that the Ptolemies’ power base was much narrower).

This rich and thought-provoking book contains many more insights than a short review can convey. It should be read by all ancient historians and their students, and everyone interested in the cross-fertilization of history and social scientific theory.

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