

INTRODUCTION

There is “no ruler without men, no men without wealth,
no wealth without prosperity and no prosperity
without justice and good administration.”
—*King Ardashir I, cited in Morony (1984:28)*

THIS BOOK is concerned with Ptolemaic institutional reforms in the wake of Ptolemy’s founding of Egypt’s last ruling dynasty of ancient times, and with the relationship between the Ptolemaic kings and Egyptian society. We will examine the Ptolemies from an Egyptian perspective, with the aim of understanding how, by adopting a pharaonic mode of governance, they fit themselves into long-term Egyptian history, and how, in turn, they shaped Egyptian society and were shaped by it.

I make two claims in this book. First, the Ptolemaic state, far more institutionally heterogeneous than is usually assumed, was initially successful in establishing an equilibrium and in achieving its main aim, namely, revenue capture. This success came in spite of the severe environmental and institutional constraints that the state faced, as well as military threats from competitive regimes, mainly the Seleukids to their East (but there were others). Gradually but inevitably, the rise of aggressive Roman military power in the Mediterranean fundamentally altered the game and shifted the center of politics beginning around 200 BC.¹

My second claim is that the Ptolemies governed their core territory by exercising power not over society, but rather *through* it. In making this claim I am following Barkey (1994) and Deng (1999) in examining the process of state centralization outside of the European experience, and I adopt Barkey’s “bargained incorporation” model of the state centralization process. The state intervened in the internal economy in many ways, for example by monetizing the economy and by means of a closed currency system. But it is the nature of the political economy—the more limited power of the king to control production or the merchant class, and the pre-Ptolemaic institutional continuities—that suggests that a mixed,

¹ On states as equilibria, see Aoki (2001), taking a game-theoretic approach; Greif (2006); Deng (1999). For the Ptolemaic state as an equilibrium, see already Préaux (1971:350); Bingen (1978a). On Roman expansion, see Eckstein (2008).

not a purely statist model is better for the understanding of the economic and legal structure of the state.

My orientation to the Ptolemaic period has been influenced by four trends in Ptolemaic history in the last thirty years. The first is the emphasis that has been placed on Egyptian culture during the Ptolemaic period. That emphasis helps us understand, on the diachronic level, the interplay between the long and short-term, and, on the synchronic level, helps us to see more clearly the society with which the early Ptolemaic kings were interacting. My second source of inspiration has been the work that has come out of a series of volumes and meetings concerned with the details of Persian administrative practices and the interaction of the Greek world with the Near East. The result of this scholarly activity has been to redraw Mediterranean cultural and chronological boundaries, and in some cases to eliminate them altogether. In a sense the many points of contact that existed between Greece and the Near East from the seventh to the third centuries BC have been restored.² Above all, Pierre Briant's work on the Persian Empire and on the transition to Hellenistic state formation has shown us the much important institutional continuity between the Persian Empire and its Hellenistic successors. One can also look to the seventh, not the late fourth, century BC for the beginning of Hellenism in Egypt, and that long history certainly shaped the early Ptolemaic state. My third influence has come from those scholars (Claire Préaux and Jean Bingen, among others) who have stressed the fourth century BC Athenian context of Ptolemaic fiscal institutions. Finally, but very important, I would mention the work, particularly in Leuven on bilingual archives, that has given us a picture of the socioeconomic interaction of Greek immigrants with Egyptians and other ethnic groups at the individual and family levels.

The Hellenistic period has often been described as Europe's first invasion of the Middle East, part of a larger process of Greek expansion into the eastern Mediterranean in the wake of the political struggles that followed Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian Empire and his subsequent death. The impact of this expansion has usually been assessed from the perspective of Greece, and often from an implicitly ideological position that contrasts the evils of state control and central planning characteristic of closed, static, Asian, despotic states with the open, dynamic, Western ideal of a rational, democratic state.

² Within the vast literature, I would single out the series of volumes of the *Achaemenid History Workshop*, Leiden, and the work by Pierre Briant and Amélie Kuhrt, both of whom have well stressed the institutional continuities between the Persian Empire and the Hellenistic states. For fifth century Athenian-Persian contacts, see the important study by Miller (1997). See also the excellent observations of Davies (2001:13–14), with which I am in complete agreement. On the revolution in Seleukid studies driven by the local Babylonian documents, see Sherwin-White (1987).

But the political situation was more complicated. The Ptolemaic state, within its core territory, was neither an *Egyptian*, nor a *Greek* state.³ Indeed, it combined the traditions of the Egyptian monarchy—the ancient agricultural system, political control through the division of the country into nomes, and the ancient temples and priesthoods—with Greek fiscal institutions that derive most immediately from the fourth century BC and from “proto-Hellenistic . . . exchange patterns” (Davies 2001:18). It was, to borrow from Runciman (1989:160), a “hybrid,” that combined elements of pharaonic, Persian, Macedonian, and Greek practice, with new modes of production and taxation.⁴

That hybridity is now becoming increasingly clear in the archaeology of the capital Alexandria, where a good amount of pharaonic sculpture has been recovered in recent years. Whether this was moved from other sites or is of Ptolemaic date is secondary to the point that the Ptolemaic kings saw pharaonic imagery as an important part of the projection of their power and legitimacy.⁵ Their adoption of pharaonic ideology, imagery, and behavior has long been known from the priestly decrees of the period, as well as from other sources. It makes little sense, then, to continue to make a distinction between “modernizing,” rational, dynamic Greek institutions on one hand and despotic, irrational, passive Asian ones on the other.

Much of this dichotomy has carried over into modern views of Egypt from the observations of ancient Greeks like Herodotus, who drew contrasts between Greece and Egypt for particular political and social purposes, and later, from the Marxist dichotomy between an “Asiatic” and an “Antique mode of production.”⁶ Such stark dichotomies are no longer very productive; and in the case of Hellenistic state reformation, for example, we can now see that the institutional framework of the state was far more complex and built on historical connections and institutional compatibilities between “East” and “West.” Ideology cannot be a substitute for institutional analysis or for economic history. What remains clear, on the other hand, is that the environment affected economic organization

³ Cf. Préaux (1939:570): “L’Égypte lagide est grecque.” Préaux did, however, acknowledge the real complexities of the Ptolemaic state (see the following note).

⁴ Already noted by Préaux (1939:431: “multiplicité des inspirations”), although she concluded (570) that “L’Égypte lagide est grecque.” A “hybrid state” is defined by Diamond (2002) as a state that combines aspects of democracy with authoritarian rule. For my purposes, I take the term to mean a state that combines institutional traditions.

⁵ Some of this material is probably Roman, and there are debates about the dating of many objects, but it seems certain that at least some of the material is early Ptolemaic. See Yoyotte (1998); Bagnall (2001:229–30); Stanwick (2002:19).

⁶ On Hecataeus’ and Herodotus’ views of Egypt, for example, see the important study by Moyer (2002).

in fundamental ways. In this respect, Egypt, with its ancient flood-recession agriculture, is quite unique.

The concept of “state” in the context of the Hellenistic world is not unproblematic, as Austin’s (1986:456) apposite remarks make quite plain. It is certainly true that Hellenistic monarchies were “personal” dynastic regimes. But the reason why the Ptolemies adopted a pharaonic style of governance and many of the ancient institutions that went with it was precisely because this facilitated a claim of political legitimacy over Egyptian territory and was a means by which the new state could penetrate local society.

Ptolemaic governance, then, like the royal portraiture of the period, was a hybrid that combined Greek and Egyptian institutions in a way designed to allocate “free floating” (Eisenstadt 1993) resources in new directions, principally to fighting wars and other state-building activities.⁷ The dynasty did not intend a change of course—indeed it went some way to stress continuity—it merely sought to control resources and to survive. There were other forces at work. In a very real sense, and for the first time, the term “globalization,” complete with the world’s first “big histories” (Diodorus Siculus), is apt (Chanotis 2005:128). This was a violent, rapidly changing and sometimes dramatic period of Mediterranean history. Splinter states of the Persian Empire became locked in never ending competition, “non-stop border feuding” (Green 1990:188), and predatory behavior that eventually yielded to the one larger state in the west, Rome. The case of the Ptolemies presents the historian with an almost unique instance of political takeover, but also reveals the constraints states faced in development and structural reform.

An analysis of Ptolemaic state reformation and its impact also gives occasion to rethink the use of the terms “Hellenistic” and “hellenization.” Both terms have often been ciphers for an historical period that was something less than Hellenic—Greek-like but not fully Greek. This hardly does justice to what was simply a wider world created by Alexander’s conquest. That world became a fertile ground for the interaction of cultures and institutions. “Hellenization” was, indeed, a two-way process, involving not merely the spread of Greek culture to the “East,” but also cultural and institutional adaptations that produced several kinds of responses, from acceptance to rejection, and many things in between.

Hellenistic history, in which Egypt played a major role, was not merely Greek, although Greek culture played a vital part of it. And it was not only Mediterranean, although it was that as well. Greek institutions, coin-

⁷ For a new synthesis of the Ptolemaic army, its organization, and its impact on Egyptian society, see Fischer (2008).

age, banks, gymnasia, and language, became part of the state system, joined to the ancient monarchical ideology.

The formation of the Ptolemaic state, as Ma (2003) has recently suggested for the Seleukid empire, involved the careful use of local idiom, of language as well as of image. In the Ptolemaic case, the kings actively adopted ancient modes of governance of Egyptian society that were a part of the existing state system. The Hellenistic world was a culmination of past history, of a complex web of cultural and institutional interactions that produced a relatively unstable interlude between the larger, and more stable imperial frameworks of Persia and Rome.

My arguments in this book represent a synthesis of what is an increasingly dominant paradigm in Ptolemaic studies that attempts to strike a balance between Egyptian and Greek culture and institutions, and between state aims and historical experience. Allow me to give here one brief but well-known example that will illustrate the shift in scholarship. Kornemann (1925), saw two phases in the reign of Ptolemy I, the first from 323 BC to about 312 BC, when Ptolemy sought assimilation and a fusion of Greek and Egyptian cultures in order to consolidate political power in Egypt, and the second after 312 BC, when the court began to occupy the new imperial center in Alexandria. After the court moved to the new capital, the focus turned to creating “a Greco-Macedonian state apparatus for the exploitation of a subject population” (Murray 1970:141).⁸

The nature of the Ptolemaic state “apparatus” consisted of something more than an authoritarian, “Greco-Macedonian” military elite, although they were indeed important, and power relations were not unidirectional. This is clear in the documentation of the Ptolemaic bureaucracy, both at the village level and, higher up, in the picture of kingship projected by synodal decrees of the Egyptian priesthoods at the end of the third and the early second centuries BC. The attempt at establishing a social equilibrium involved continuous bargaining with several different ruling coalitions, including Egyptian priests and the scribal class, as I will describe in chapter 4. The move to Alexandria made the bargaining between the kings and the priesthoods, especially those at the ancient capital of Memphis, only the more important with respect to the kings’ political position in Egypt.⁹

While the natural boundaries that traditionally defined Egyptian territory from the Delta to Aswan remained in place, the early Ptolemaic reclamation project in the Fayyum significantly altered the Egyptian landscape. This was a massive project, accomplished essentially by lowering the level

⁸ His “nationalist” theories have long since been rejected. See already Westermann (1938).

⁹ On the Memphis priesthoods, see Thompson (1988:106–54).

of the Lake of Moeris by radial canalization.¹⁰ It resulted in new land that was settled by *kleruchs* (reservist soldiers given rights to land in exchange for a promise to serve in the army when needed) and others.¹¹ The organization of labor for the project shows the capacity of the Ptolemies to muster and control the rural workforce, and was both a manifestation of the king's ability to control nature and a statement of royal power. Direct government involvement in the project and the influx of *kleruchs* to the region resulted in a more homogeneous zone of Ptolemaic dominance. By the end of the reign of Ptolemy II, the region was renamed in honor of his sister/wife Arsinoë with its capital at Krocodilopolis.

SOURCES

There are two great modern cities in Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria. Both were established by foreign imperial regimes that held Egypt at the core of their empires. Cairo was founded by the Fatimids in the tenth century AD. This book tells the story of the second city, Alexandria, and of the Ptolemaic dynasty that ruled from that city over one of the great Hellenistic kingdoms. Each city in its own right may be described as a “monument to the dynasty and a theater for its dramatic representation in the eyes of world” (Brett 2001:334), and both were centers of trade connecting the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to wider trade networks. Sadly, though, very little evidence is left of the hustle and bustle that was Ptolemaic Alexandria.

The most striking historiographic feature of this period of Egyptian history is the large number of primary sources—papyri written in Greek and in demotic Egyptian, Greek and Egyptian (both demotic and hieroglyphic) inscriptions, and ostraca, mainly receipts. Taken together, these sources present us with the first well-documented state in history.¹²

The abundance of documentary material has itself, however, given rise to hermeneutic issues, among which is the difficulty in assessing continuity versus change from earlier periods of Egyptian history. Egypt, of course, had a long bureaucratic and documentary tradition even before the Ptolemaic period, but only fragments of this tradition have survived. We may assume basic continuity in administrative structures under Persian and Ptolemaic rule, but we have precious little in the way of documents to confirm this. (Although late fourth- and early third-century BC demotic

¹⁰ Butzer (1976); Davoli (1998).

¹¹ Butzer (1976:36–38).

¹² On documentary papyri and historical interpretation, see Bagnall (1995); Bowman (2001); Manning (2003a:13–21).

documents do tend to confirm continuity in scribal practice.) Moreover, although there has been a good deal of new publication in the last twenty years, one additional caveat remains as pertinent as ever: despite the abundance of material, there are still considerable gaps in our knowledge about important places (the two Greek cities of Alexandria and Ptolemaïs, the Egyptian city of Thebes) and regions like Middle Egypt.¹³ Needless to say, any broad general conclusions must remain tentative and fragile.

Although the sources, taken as a whole, present both macro- and micro-level views of the society, they tend to be biased toward the point of view of the state and its fiscal needs.¹⁴ The papyri, however, can present us with the ruler's interests in sustaining power and taxing the countryside, but also with a view of individuals who, on the one hand, tended to avoid the state and, on the other, needed it for protection, for enforcement, and so on. Interpretation of the papyri, which up to now have been the main historical source for the period, have very much been "marked by the currents of their times" (Bagnall 2007:1).

Another interpretive problem lies in the nature of language. Ptolemaic documents were written in two languages: Greek, the language of the new administration, and demotic Egyptian, written in a cursive script that was in use from the middle of the seventh century BC until the second century AD.¹⁵ Demotic texts were generally the work of local village scribes and tend to record economic and bureaucratic activity at a very local level. Greek, the language of state administration gradually penetrated local administration. At times it is not clear if certain phrases reflect Greek mentalities, or are translations of Egyptian ones. A famous illustration of the problem was provided by Eric Turner some years ago (1966). A Greek text presented the translator with the possibility that the death penalty was rather unusually imposed on a local official for a seemingly small offense.¹⁶ That colored the understanding of Ptolemaic justice and the nature of the state. But Turner has pointed out that the translation of the Greek term by "hanging by the neck" did not quite capture the semantics, and in fact the Greek phrase was in all likelihood translating the normal, very ancient penalty for official malfeasance, namely, a public flogging.

One reason for the survival of many Ptolemaic documents is that they were discarded and subsequently reused in the process of mummification beginning late in the reign of Ptolemy I or early in the reign of Ptolemy

¹³ Cf. Préaux (1978/1:358–59).

¹⁴ Similar issues exist in early Chinese sources: Deng (1999:113). The historical debate between micro and macro determinants of history is, of course, an ongoing one (Sewell 2005).

¹⁵ On the rise and decline of demotic Egyptian, see chapter 1, n. 14.

¹⁶ *pCair.Zen.* II 59202 (254 BC).

II. It is not known exactly why this recycling began; it was perhaps connected to the state monopoly on papyrus, and it may have been a way for local records offices to make money by selling discarded texts to mummifiers. Whatever caused the recycling of documents (known as *cartonnage*), it allowed the preservation of local government records, and even on occasion copies of royal decrees, that might otherwise have been lost to us.¹⁷ The papyri make the Ptolemaic economy the best documented of Hellenistic economies; it is finding both the correct framework and the right scale of analysis that is the major challenge in documentary papyrology.

THE PTOLEMAIC ECONOMY

Finley's influential *The Ancient Economy* excluded Near Eastern (including Egyptian) economies, arguing that they were organized differently from those of the classical world. In the former, the economy was centered around "large palace or temple complexes" which "virtually monopolized anything that can be called 'industrial production' as well as foreign trade . . . and organized the economic, military, political and religious life of the society through a single complicated, bureaucratic, record-keeping operation . . ."¹⁸ This form of economic organization, centralized and autocratic, was sufficiently different, indeed irrelevant, for Finley until Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire. "At this point," Finley continued, "we shall have to look more closely at this kind of Near Eastern society."

Yet Finley also excluded Hellenistic economies because they did not, to his mind, represent a type of ancient economy different from the Near Eastern model.¹⁹ In terms of historic periodization he was quite right to do so; dividing ancient history into "Archaic," "Classical," and "Hellenistic" is, for economic history, not of much value. But for Finley the point was that "the fundamental social and economic system was not changed by the Macedonian conquerors, or by the Greek migrants who followed behind them" (1999:183).

For Finley, then, Ptolemaic economy was "oriental Greek economy," and neither the Macedonians, nor the Greeks who followed them, nor in fact the Romans later on, wrought any changes. Egypt was in his view a static place, untouched either by Saïte or Persian governance, or by the new post-Persian, multipolar, hyper-competitive reality of Hellenistic states. But, however slow and gradual social or economic change was, it

¹⁷ Egyptian *cartonnage* finds a fascinating parallel in eighth-century AD Japanese material known as *Urushi-Gami Monjyo*, lids for lacquer vessels made from recycled government records. See further Furuoya (2005). On *cartonnage*, see Salmenkivi (2002).

¹⁸ Finley (1999:28).

¹⁹ See further Davies (2001); (2006).

was real. The Ptolemaic economy built on institutional trends beginning in the Saïte period (the seventh century BC), carried over important fiscal technology developed particularly in the fourth-century BC Greek world (especially the “increasingly monetised” [Shipton 2000:5] economy at Athens), and then applied it gradually during the first fifty or so years of Ptolemaic rule. There is something more than an “oriental” Greek economy that needs to be explained, and of course, immigration by Greeks and others, and the finances of war surely shaped that economy, just as it shaped the Ptolemaic state as a whole.²⁰

Archaeology and numismatics play an increasingly important part in the study of the Ptolemaic economy.²¹ While the papyri tend to give us a static picture of the structure of state institutions and how individuals dealt with them, survey and settlement archaeology and numismatic studies are beginning to give us some indication of the economic performance of the state over time. This is of course one destination that we should be “trying to get to” (Davies 2001:14), and we are now at the beginning of the journey.

THE PTOLEMAIC STATE

A detailed study of the Ptolemaic state is important for several reasons. First and foremost among these is the fact that it is the first reasonably

²⁰ On the role of war, see Austin (1986); Davies (2001:36–39); Chaniotis (2005); Fischer (2008).

²¹ The archaeology of Ptolemaic Egypt was long dominated by the search for papyri. In more recent years, archaeological exploration has been invaluable in documenting the expansion of trade routes in the eastern desert, the founding of settlements on the Red Sea coast, and the increased use of coinage, among other things. For the eastern desert and Red Sea coast in the Ptolemaic period, see Sidebotham and Wendrich (1996); Gates-Foster (2006). A brief overview of past archaeological work is given by McClellan (1997); Bagnall (2001). Important survey work has been done, but the focus has been on the Fayyum (Rathbone (1996, 1997). An excellent summary of the archaeology of the Fayyum is provided by Davoli (1998). Archaeological activity in the western desert and oases has been extensive. Among the most important potential finds has been the so-called “Valley of the Golden Mummies” in the Bahariya oasis, reported by Hawass (2000), which promises extensive human burials from late Ptolemaic and Roman times. More information on ongoing work at the oasis is on Hawass’ website: <http://www.guardians.net/hawass/mummy-main.htm>. Underwater exploration at Alexandria has yielded spectacular finds in recent years: see Goddio (1998, 2006); Empeur (1998); McKenzie (2003). The early Roman papyri from the city are being published by Peter van Minnen, for which see http://classics.uc.edu/~vanminnen/Alexandria/Ancient_Alexandria.html. Outside of epigraphic work on temples, very little survey has been done in the Nile valley itself. The most important town in Upper Egypt under the Ptolemies, Ptolemaïs, which served as the regional capital, has not yet been properly surveyed or excavated. On Ptolemaïs, see further below, p. 107–13. Ptolemaic coinage is discussed below, p. 130–38.

well-documented state in history. Papyri and inscriptions from the period document the full range of state activity, from administrative orders to private contracts and local tax receipts, providing important evidence for understanding what has come to be called *Fiscal Sociology*—how the state collects and spends revenue and what the impact of this activity is on society—and for understanding the role of the state in the economy and in law, both key research areas in Economic Sociology (Swedberg 2003). I discuss these issues in chapters 5 and 6. Study of the Ptolemaic state also raises the question of why authoritarian regimes remain in power. How are we to explain the Ptolemaic revival of pharaonic, authoritarian (or “nondemocratic” to use Acemoglu and Robinson’s 2006 preferred term) governance? This form of rule, a feature of Asian states especially but not exclusively, contrasts with the democracies of the west from Athens on. This East/West distinction has existed since Aristotle. More recently, the debate has continued in “modernization theory.” Authoritarian, or “despotic,” states, are usually regarded as a primitive form of governance yet they persist (in fact are now reemergent), particularly on the Asian continent, and this despite the belief that they can only experience growth through “modernization” and democratization. The Ptolemaic case invites us to consider other factors that shape governance strategies, namely the political economy of the state and the nature of hybrid state forms, and to examine anew the validity of the sharp contrast that has been drawn between Asian despotism and democratic development.

Study of the Ptolemaic state also presents us with an ancient tradition, deeply rooted in the Asian past, that can still be observed in many modern Asian states from Singapore and China, to Vietnam and Malaysia. “Even in the most coercive of states,” Sim (2005:176) suggests, “authoritarian governments have always attempted to justify their policies and to acquire legitimacy for their governance.” The efforts of the Ptolemies to legitimize their rule through Egyptian institutions had consequences that will be explored in the second half of this book.

Ptolemaic state development can also contribute material to the debate between the “geographical” and the “institutional” hypotheses (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2002). This debate turns on whether differences in the economic performance of different countries can be attributed primarily to differences in geography or in the institutional organization of the societies. Will a country rich in resources stay rich under European colonization, or do the incentive structures in the society make a difference? Turning to the case at hand, did the Ptolemaic takeover of Egypt negatively or positively effect economic outcomes? I shall argue below that the combination of new fiscal structures with ancient extractive institutions (despite expansion in the form of new settlements and new building projects) coupled with the cost of enforcement, combined

to depress economic performance over the course of the three centuries of Ptolemaic rule. This would provide some a counter-example, *mutatis mutandis*, for the thesis developed by Acemoglu et al. Institutions do matter, but the Nile regime is very difficult to change. If the Ptolemies “reversed the fortune of Egypt,” this effect was only temporary.

PTOLEMAIC EGYPT: BEYOND PRÉAUX AND ROSTOVITZ?

The Ptolemaic regime in Egypt belongs to an era known commonly as the Hellenistic period.²² The use of the term Hellenistic carries with it negative connotations of dissolution with classicists who view the period as the time of the decline of classical culture. Egyptologists, too, treat the period as a stepchild, seeing Ptolemaic Egypt as no longer a part of “pharaonic Egypt” but rather of the “late period,” *la basse époque*, low in terms of both date *and* culture. It does not help that the rise of the Roman Empire overlaps almost entirely with the creation of the Hellenistic states. The study of Ptolemaic Egypt has thus become the preserve of the specialist papyrologist and epigrapher rather than the ancient historian, who often demurs because of the vast amount of material and the now impressively large body of secondary literature. As a result, a separate field of ancient history, papyrological history, has emerged.²³

Two scholars have laid the foundations for our understanding of the Ptolemaic economy. Claire Préaux wrote two major synthetic monographs on Ptolemaic Egypt. The first, *L'Économie royale des Lagides*, was published (remarkably) in 1939 when she was thirty-five. It is a masterful summary of the complex papyrological documentation, but marred somewhat by her treatment of state revenues. Préaux adopted a statist model although she acknowledged, both in this work and even more in her synthesis of Hellenistic history (1978), that a statist or planned economy model for the economy was too rigid.²⁴ The field of demotic studies was too immature in the 1930s and 1940s to take account of the implications of this material for understanding the relationships between local, traditional village and temple economies and the new Ptolemaic royal econ-

²² The term, only roughly translated from the German “Hellenismus,” derives from a famous passage in Droysen’s 1836 study and was used to describe the state of mixed culture in the east that gave rise to Christianity in the period from Alexander’s campaigns at the end of the fourth century BC to the Roman conquest of the East. See the remarks of Bowersock (1990:xi); Cartledge (1997:2–3).

²³ On the methodologies and approaches of papyrological history, as well as the problems involved, see Frier (1989); Bagnall (1995).

²⁴ Préaux (1978/1:376, n.1).

omy, a circumstance that also affected the work of Préaux's contemporary, Michael Rostovtzeff.²⁵

Rostovtzeff wrote two books that are still widely read today: *A large estate in Egypt in the third century B.C.: A study in economic history* (Madison, WI, 1922), and *The social and economic history of the hellenistic world* (Oxford, 1941).²⁶ They were both synthetic works but, in their use of large amounts of documentary evidence, they were more descriptive than explicitly model driven. Rostovtzeff argued that the Hellenistic world was in fact a distinctive historical phase, marked by several key factors: "a single, interdependent economic system characterized by sustained economic growth that was driven above all by long-distance inter-regional trade conducted by agents of a rising urban bourgeoisie."²⁷ For Ptolemaic Egypt specifically, Rostovtzeff's "model" was based on dominant state power, marked by economic planning and coercive force.²⁸ This is an issue that I will treat at greater length in chapter 3.

Rostovtzeff used all of the evidence available to him in creating his picture of the Hellenistic world as an age of experiment, experiments with a new articulation of political institutions, nascent capitalism, a rising bourgeoisie, and economic development and growth. Rostovtzeff's first study focused on what is known as the Zenon archive.²⁹ This collection of documents, something on the order of 1,700 usable texts, were the records kept by a man from Caria (SW Turkey) who immigrated to Egypt, along with thousands of others from the Greek world, in search of opportunity. He served as estate manager for Apollonios, the *dioikêtês*, or finance minister of Ptolemy II Philadelphos (282–246 BC). The bulk of the texts comprise official correspondence and other documents used in the management of the estate. They range in date from 261 to 229 BC. There are other documents within the archive, however, which are the private papers of Zenon acting on his own behalf.³⁰

²⁵ Cf. the remarks of Davies (2001:21).

²⁶ For the University of Wisconsin background of the first book, see Bowersock (1986, esp. p. 396). The later book was written during Rostovtzeff's tenure at Yale University that began in 1925. I do not include a discussion here of Rostovtzeff's chapter on Ptolemaic Egypt for the *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 7, 1928, which is a more general discussion of the period. For Rostovtzeff as an historian, see Momigliano (1966); Wes (1990); Shaw (1992); Archibald (2001); Rowlandson (2003).

²⁷ This is an important contrast with Finley's thesis, which is well summarized by Cartledge (1997:11–12). The differences between Finley and Rostovtzeff are perhaps to some degree exaggerated, on which see Saller (2002). On the unity of the Hellenistic world, see Davies (1984).

²⁸ Still the standard view. See Rathbone (2000).

²⁹ The literature on this estate is massive. For an orientation, see Pestman (1981); and the surveys of Orrieux (1983); (1985); Clarysse and Vanderpe (1995).

³⁰ For recent attempts to isolate the private papers of Zenon, which counted 450 texts, see Orrieux (1983, 1985). For the criticism of isolating documents based on an assumption of two systems of accounts, see Franko (1988).

As Rostovtzeff stressed in his introductory chapter, this archive is among the most important collections of papyri from the early Ptolemaic period, a time when the Fayyum region was put under intensive cultivation. Along with what is known as the “Revenue Laws” papyrus (*pRev.*), the Zenon archive has formed the core documentation for our understanding of the workings of the economy. It is not valuable for local history alone. Indeed Rostovtzeff keenly felt that the documents recovered from this large estate offered insights into the “conception of the ancient world in general.”³¹ Above all, he stressed the close relationship of the king and the finance minister to the estate and its management as revealed by the texts. But for our purposes, locating the texts within the specific geographical and socioeconomic context of third-century BC Fayyum is crucial to their interpretation.

Rostovtzeff’s second work is a synthetic study of the entire Hellenistic world, based in large part on extensive and complex evidence obtained from inscriptions and papyri. Underlying his treatment was a belief in the unity of the Hellenistic world and in the efficiency and rationality of the Ptolemaic system, run by a large and professional bureaucracy. Rostovtzeff, to be sure, focused on the reign of Ptolemy II, and thus the height of the Ptolemaic system, but there are other ways to read the evidence, and we are today better able to distinguish rural Egyptian reality from Ptolemaic goals.

Since Rostovtzeff there has been no comparable synthesis of the Hellenistic period, either in the scope of material used or in the historical vision. Most scholars today work below the level of large-scale narrative, studying archives and other groups of related texts and, given the large numbers of demotic papyri of which Rostovtzeff had only limited knowledge (although he did acknowledge their importance, 1941:257), it would be impossible for one person to command a perspective as broad as Rostovtzeff’s. From his comprehensive viewpoint he read in the papyri evidence that a fundamental shift occurred in the Hellenistic period, a shift from the classical Greek world to a more modern kind of state-planned economy that above all was interested in economic growth. His understanding of the economic operations on the large estate was constantly reinforced by other evidence from the third century, in particular the “Revenue Laws” papyrus (*pRev.*),³² and *pTebt.* III 703,³³ a text that Rostovtzeff himself edited with detailed commentary in 1933.

³¹ Rostovtzeff (1922:15).

³² Text edition by Grenfell and Mahaffy (1896); extensive comments by Préaux (1939). An important new text edition was published by Bingen (1952) and should be read in conjunction with his new interpretation of the entire document, Bingen (1978a).

³³ Published in the third volume of the Tebtunis Papyri. See the comments by Samuel (1971).

Since the 1950s, our understanding of the Ptolemaic state has been reshaped by a kind of “post-colonial” thinking that questions the extent of the state’s ability to control the economy, and by a broader concern for culture and the underlying Egyptian society.³⁴ Eric Turner’s (1984) chapter in the *Cambridge Ancient History* is a “flat rejection of Rostovtzeff” (Austin 1986:452) and his planned economic model, seeing Ptolemy II as the villain, not the hero. Although Rostovtzeff and Turner agreed in viewing the Ptolemaic economy as fundamentally modern, Turner’s assessment is essentially a negative one: the state failed to achieve growth and ended in a “sterile stalemate” (1984:167) between Egyptians and Greeks.

Turner developed two models of the obligations of individuals to the royal economic structure (i.e., the taxation structure). Model I, based on late second-century documents from the Fayyum but presumed to apply to the whole of Egypt throughout the regime, centers on royal land and the peasants who farmed it. The king provided a seed loan and equipment to the farmer, and the farmer agreed at the time of the loan to pay a fixed rent at the harvest.³⁵ There was no written lease and, while force was occasionally used, the king was required to negotiate and, after the harvest, to carefully monitor grain shipments each step of the way to the royal granaries. A good part of this system was informal and traditional in Egypt, state needs being joined to production and distribution through the use of labor contracts and private capital in the form of contractors, shipowners, and boat captains. Moreover, royal land was only part of the agricultural system in Egypt; social relationships may have differed substantially in Upper Egypt where temples and landed estates were still functioning throughout the period.³⁶

Private capital is even more in evidence in Turner’s Model II. Here the tax on agricultural production (other than grain) and on raw materials was calculated in money. The king controlled production in key monopolized industries (oil, linen, and banking, among others) in licensed factories. The right to sell goods in these industries was also regulated by the public tender of licenses. In this system, we see more of the new, Greek-inspired plan to stabilize economic production, but we are still a long way from the old notion of a planned economy.³⁷ Rather, the system envisaged by *pRev.* was a mixed one, formed by the king in collaboration with private parties who bid for the right to sell manufactured goods and collect

³⁴ Bagnall’s (2007) summary of trends in Ptolemaic scholarship gives an excellent overview. See also Samuel (1989).

³⁵ The rent was established on the basis of the quality of the land.

³⁶ For the royal/temple land distinctions, see Manning (2003a), and chapter 5.

³⁷ See the remarks of Turner (1984:151–53).

particular taxes, and who ran the royal banks used to deposit tax receipts. The primary concern of the king seems to have been to reduce risk caused by fluctuations in production and tax revenue. Turner has stressed that the aim was fiscal, intended to increase production and collect rents, rather than to control the entire economy.³⁸ The taxes collected under Model II were collected in coin. The silver standard remained, but most taxes were probably paid in bronze coinage for which a conversion charge, or *agio*, was collected. I shall argue below that there may well have been political motivations for the new fiscal organizations that have nothing to do with increasing revenue or reducing risk.

In recent years it has been the work of Jean Bingen that has been perhaps the most influential in revising our views of the Ptolemaic state.³⁹ Although his work focused on the immigrant Greek population and how they coped with their new Egyptian environment, Bingen's close reading of *pRev.* revealed that the text is in fact a compilation of seven separate texts and should be regarded as an ad hoc document written to produce immediate results rather than as evidence of long-term central planning.⁴⁰ That there exists this gap between intentions, about which we know much, and evolving rural realities over the three centuries of Ptolemaic rule has now become the accepted view. For Bingen, the Ptolemaic state was a failure not so much for what it did but for what it did not do.

The gap between Ptolemaic economic policy in the third century BC and its actual implementation in Egypt is well illustrated by the other key text, the famous *pTebt.* III 703. A "policy manual" written by the *di-oikêtês* for the *oikonomos* in charge of royal revenues in the nome, the text is detailed, but far from being a comprehensive guide to the office, and it contains no specific references to time or place.⁴¹ It stands, however, in a long pharaonic lineage of written instructions for officials. We have on the one hand then the traditional Tebtunis papyrus, and on the other hand *pRev.*, which shows an attempt to adapt Greek economic thought on tax farming to the very different conditions of Egypt. Both documents provide detailed descriptions of the operation of monopoly industries, and give evidence of close supervision by nome officials of agriculture, irrigation, and animal husbandry. It is important to note, however, that both were written from the central government's point of view.

Comprehensive state control over the economy is the principal distinction between Ptolemaic Egyptian and classical Greek economies. Ptolemaic Egypt was for Rostovtzeff a "strong and well organized state," dom-

³⁸ Turner (1984:152).

³⁹ See his translated collected essays in Bingen (2007).

⁴⁰ Bingen (1978a).

⁴¹ Bagnall and Derow (2005:165).

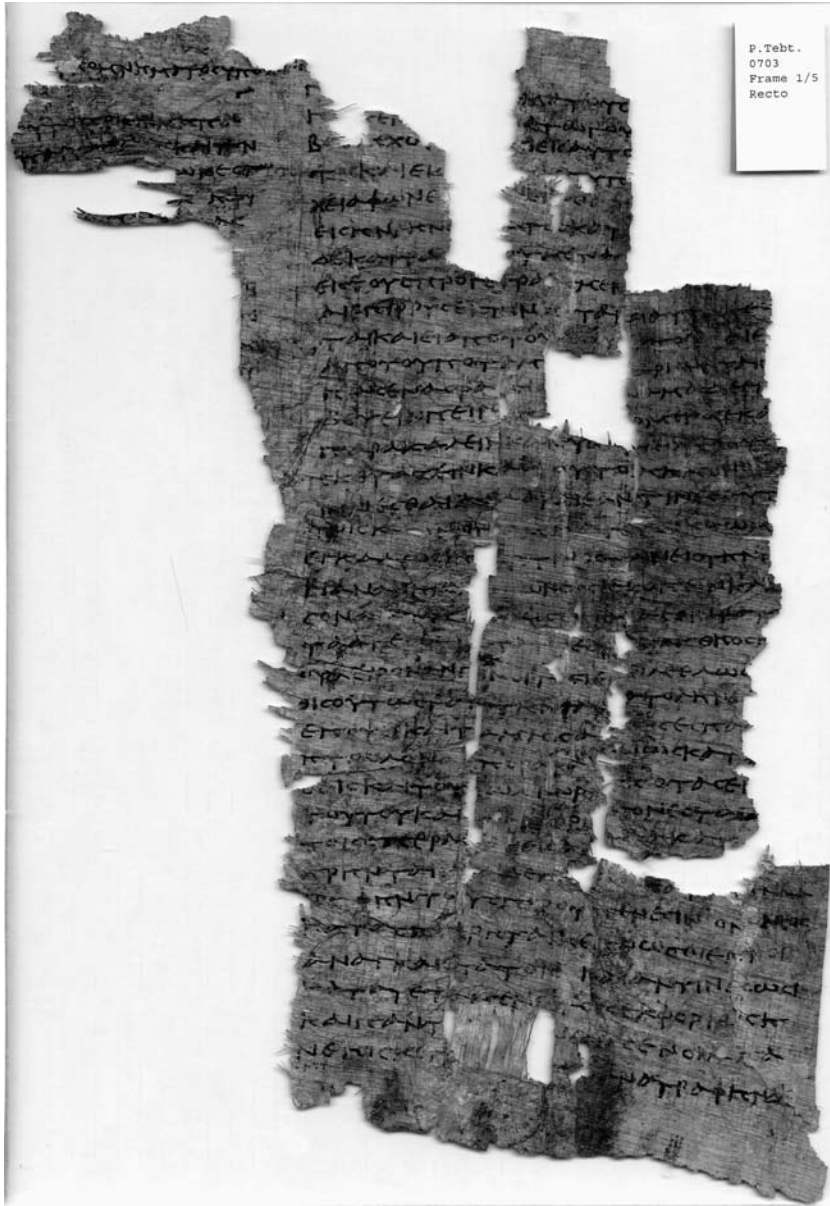


Figure 1. *pTebt.* III 703.

inated by a minority Greek population. It was organized rationally and planned efficiently, but at the same time it preserved ancient Egyptian institutions (local economic organization around temple estates controlled by priests) centered on the ancient administrative structure of the nomes.⁴² The Ptolemies followed pharaonic theology by claiming ownership of all the land, and thus all sources of production in Egypt. This was certainly the ideology of the Egyptian state, and the strongly centralized, autocratic (or hydraulic) model of Ptolemaic Egypt had in its origins this reading of the ancient Egyptian state. Any “right” claimed by the Ptolemies, however, must have been backed up by coercive power, or at least by a threat of coercive power. And coercion there certainly was, as we know from specific incidents and can infer from the size of the rural police force.⁴³ There is as well much good evidence to suggest that the *structure* of the economy (taxation administration and the flow of information from village to nome capital to Alexandria) was planned. But the massive revolt in the Thebaid (the southern Nile valley), which effectively expelled Greek presence there for twenty years (205–186 BC), is enough to suggest that there were enforcement problems and practical limits on state building. A new manifestation of this old conception was the royal monopoly of key industries that regulated production and fixed prices of raw materials.

The power of the Ptolemaic state itself and its ability to directly intervene at the local level were key components of Rostovtzeff’s model. The legacy of his work is this “statist,” “dirigiste,” or command economy model in which orders were issued from the king and transmitted down the chain of administrative command.⁴⁴ Throughout his work, Rostovtzeff stressed the ideals of the Ptolemaic “administrative machine” as against the realities: the king, as the pharaohs before him, was the embodiment of the state, and he controlled the population absolutely.⁴⁵

For Turner (1984), it was not only the state’s ability to intervene in the economy so heavily as to cause its collapse, but more significantly the institutional structure established by Ptolemy II to fund war that was to blame for Ptolemaic failure.

⁴² Rostovtzeff (1922:3–4). Cf. *ibid.* p. 126 stressing continuity with ancient Egypt. Something of a contradiction between the “rational” organization stressed by the Greek papyri and the fact that the Ptolemies added a new layer of control on top of ancient institutions.

⁴³ Clarysse and Thompson (2006).

⁴⁴ This centralized conception of the Ptolemaic economy derived ultimately from Mahaffy and Grenfell’s *editio princeps* of the Revenue Laws papyrus (1896). See the remarks of Turner (1984:148).

⁴⁵ Rostovtzeff (1922:126). He offered as specific parallels the kings of Dynasty 4, 11, and 18, i.e. the height of centralized power in pharaonic Egypt, for some reason leaving out Dynasty 19, a much more effective period of coerced labor.

THE METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

My methodology differs from earlier approaches to Ptolemaic history in two principal areas. First, I write from the point of view of long-term Egyptian history and focus on how the Ptolemies established themselves within the existing institutional framework of Egyptian society, a society that was neither moribund nor static at the time of their arrival. Secondly, I situate Ptolemaic state making in the history of premodern states, and I broaden the analysis by including a chapter on law, which I argue was fundamentally important in the state-making project.

I begin with a summary of the history of Egypt during the first millennium BC. It is that history—and in particular the formation of the Saïte state in 664 BC and Egypt's subsequent annexation into the Persian Empire in 525 BC—that directly shaped the Ptolemaic state and Egyptian society. In chapter 2 I discuss the various ways in which the Ptolemaic state has been understood, and then in the following chapter, I set the Ptolemaic state into the historical context of premodern states and the issues that confronted their rulers. Those issues, which I treat in some detail in chapter 4, required the rulers to bargain continually with key constituencies. Finally, in the last two substantive chapters, I examine the role and the impact of the Ptolemaic state in shaping economic and legal institutions. I attempt to strike a careful balance between the power of the rulers to act unilaterally in trying to achieve their goals and the bargains that they struck with constituent groups. In taking over a state that had socioeconomic institutions extending back three thousand years before their arrival, the Ptolemies faced an unusual situation, paralleled only by the Seleukids. It is important to examine the economic and legal institutions together because they show, in a sense, the “topography” of the core of the Ptolemaic state. On one hand the aim of the new rulers was to extract resources. Toward this end the Ptolemies utilized new economic institutions such as banks and coinage within what was essentially an ancient bureaucratic framework. On the other hand, when it came to the law, the Ptolemies incorporated the various legal traditions within the bureaucratic framework they inherited. The economic and legal reforms went hand in hand. And in both cases, Ptolemaic action was informed by the Egyptian past.