

Andrew Monson, *From the Ptolemies to the Romans. Political and Economic Change in Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, XIX, 343 pp., ISBN 978-1-107-01441-1, £ 64.99.

Andrew MONSON (further M.) is Associate Professor of Classics at New York University, interested in the history of the Hellenistic kingdoms, their relations with the Roman Empire and the history of the eastern Mediterranean under Roman rule. *From the Ptolemies to the Romans. Political and Economic Change in Egypt* has grown out of his doctoral dissertation devoted to the transition from Ptolemaic to Roman rule and the economic, administrative and social transformation in Egypt after its annexation by Rome. This book contains eight chapters grouped in four parts with two chapters each, I: "Introduction", II: "The Land-Tenure Regime", III: "Fiscal and Administrative Reform", IV: "The Politics and Economic Change".

The principal stated aim of this book is "to show the impact of empire on the structure and performance of the agrarian economy in Egypt" (pp. 3 f.), but the author also wants to compare the Ptolemaic and Roman regimes. The chronological framework for this book is quite flexible, with occasional reference as early as the New Kingdom to trace some institutional changes over time or, for example, to illustrate the development of property rights in Egypt (p. 110) and to explain the role of temples and priests in Egypt (pp. 131–133). To put it in M.'s words: "Some factors [...] are evident only from a long-term perspective" (p. 4). However, the adoption of a wider chronological scope is much more important in order to analyze the sources. M. examines the usual sort of sources: Greek and Egyptian papyri, ostraca and inscriptions and, very occasionally, Greek and Roman literary texts. Here the main problem is the lack of evidence for the most significant transitional period between 100 BCE and 100 CE (p. 11). To solve this problem, the author applies a more structural and comparative approach. He reconstructs the situation and the changes in the transitional period based on the analysis of sources from before and after this period, and draws conclusions from a comparison of the differences between them.

In his book M. highlights: property rights, agrarian institutions, taxation, social status, and demography, all arranged in geographical order. The author makes ample use of modern economic and social studies theory, for example of neo-institutional economics and the rational choice theory. He also explains agricultural development in Egypt through the BOSERUP–DEMSETZ model of property rights based on the correlation between population density, agricultural output and property rights¹. This model implies that population growth or any changes in market conditions lead to an increasing scarcity of land causing agricultural intensification especially in pre-industrial societies. All these factors are a powerful stimulus to people to protect their rights, which in turn favours the development of individual property rights (p. 20). Thus, M. shows, the change of the regime caused economic and population growth which was associated with institutional transformation, especially with a gradual privatization of land in Roman times (pp. 284 f.). The BOSERUP–DEMSETZ model is not commonly used in ancient studies. Principles of this concept have been applied by Jane ROWLANDSON².

¹ E. BOSERUP, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change under Population Pressure*, Chicago 1965; H. DEMSETZ, *Toward a Theory of Property Rights*, *American Economic Review* LVII 1967, pp. 347–359; IDEM, *Property Rights* in: P. NEWMAN (ed.), *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics and the Law*, New York 1998, vol. III, pp. 144–155; IDEM, *Toward a Theory of Property Rights II: The Competition between Private and Collective Ownership*, *Journal of Legal Studies* XXXI 2002, pp. 653–672.

² J. ROWLANDSON, *Landowners and Tenants in Roman Egypt: The Social Relations of Agriculture in the Oxyrhynchite Nome*, Oxford 1996.

Admittedly, M. refers to her conclusions, but he is applying this model to study of all of Egypt for the first time.

The next chapter, "Geography and population", presents the impact of the environment on population density, focusing on geographical differences especially between the Nile Valley and Fayyum. M. discusses the problem of soil salinity, which was dependent on the natural hydrological system. In the Nile Valley accumulated salt was flushed out of the arable land by the annual flood, while the Fayyum Oasis had no natural drainage, which led to increased salinization in this region. To estimate population density in the Ptolemaic and Roman age, M. draws upon nineteenth and early twentieth century data. He applies two methods for the interpretation of patchy data. The first of them uses the data from statistical yearbooks for the years 1895–1910 from each region to show relative population density³. From these statistics M. extrapolates the relative population density in antiquity. In his second analysis M. compares the total population and area of cultivation in the nineteenth century with the ancient data which come only from the Fayyum Oasis (p. 37). M. argues that both these analyses indicate that the ancient evidence reflects similar regional variations relative to modern data and on this basis he estimates that during the Graeco-Roman period the Nile Valley had higher population density than Fayyum. It is important to state that M. realizes that neither of these methods enables us to calculate the actual population of a region, but only to estimate the relative population density in the two regions, and he shows that although the best demographic data are from the Fayyum, this region was not typical. Population density in the Fayyum Oasis was under the influence of such factors as less efficient, saline arable land or epidemics caused by the presence of standing water, the perfect breeding area for mosquitoes spreading malaria.

Chapter three, "The regionalism of land tenure", contains the Ptolemaic and Roman land classification and focuses on regional differences in land tenure. According to the BOSERUP–DEMSETZ model which implies that scarcity led to the development of private rights, M. shows that a similar correlation between land scarcity and privatization also existed in Egypt. Chapter four, "The continuity of agrarian institutions", compares land rights in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, both with respect to private and public land. Moreover, M. presents land tenure in temple land and the development of the public property archives until the Roman period.

Chapter five, "Land taxation and investment", depicts the impact of Roman fiscal reforms on the previous fiscal regime. The main change was the abolition of the traditional harvest taxes for private landowners and the establishment of low fixed-rate taxes which led to the enhanced position of private landowners. The next chapter, "Administration and redistribution", discusses the impact of Rome on Egyptian society and administration. Temple estates in particular lost their economic power and the situation of priests was changed. In the Ptolemaic period, native upper classes derived their income mainly from the priesthood, but they were also able to own land or be engaged in other profitable activities. After Roman reforms, the priests' situation was changed and they were not allowed to do anything else besides holding priesthoods.

M. presents a political perspective on institutional changes in chapter seven, "The impact of empire", beginning his discussion with Ptolemy II. For him the Ptolemies operated within what Margaret LEVI calls a model of predatory rule⁴. According to this model, rulers maximize short-term revenue despite the harm it causes when their regime is unstable (p. 31). The Roman empire parted with the fiscal predation for the sake of stability. The last chapter briefly concludes the book, maintaining that many changes in the transitional period were gradual and that they occurred under the influence of such factors as the hydrology of the Nile, population density, the development of property rights or political stability.

³ Ministère des Finances, *Annuaire Statistique de l'Égypte* 1911, Cairo 1911; Ministry of Finance, *The Census of Egypt Taken in 1907 under the Direction of C.C. Lowis*, Cairo 1909.

⁴ M. LEVI, *The Predatory Theory of Rule*, Politics and Society X 1981, pp. 431–465.

The book contains an extensive bibliography with the most recent publications together with older but important literature. *From the Ptolemies to the Romans. Political and Economic Change in Egypt* by Andrew MONSON is the first comprehensive publication about the transition from Ptolemaic to Roman rule. Although extrapolating from late 19th–early 20th c. statistical data to antiquity might seem questionable at first, M.'s discussion of the scant ancient data proves the validity of this method. Also economic models borrowed by him from other disciplines of scholarship allow M. to offer interesting insight into the history of late Hellenistic and early Roman Egypt.

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