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# **Egypt in Late Antiquity**

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## A Mediterranean Society

### *The Agricultural Economy*

The complex reality of the agricultural economy of Egypt is not readily represented by broad generalizations or simple models. A summary of the main circumstances and influences shows why a complex variety of responses necessarily ensued. The ownership of land may be the most fundamental of these elements, though certainly not independent of other variables. At least six major groups of landowners can be identified: (1) A small group of urban residents with large holdings (greater than 100 arouras), probably no more than a hundred families in most nomes; their land was usually spread over multiple locations. (2) Urban residents with holdings sufficient to provide a livelihood from their rents, but not so great as to make the owner wealthy enough to hold his own in the city council; of these there were perhaps three to four times as many as of the really wealthy. (3) Urban residents with small holdings, less than 10 arouras, which cannot have been their principal source of income. These, another 500 families or so per city, must have been partly supported by some other employment or business. (4) Rich villagers, the top 10 percent of the village population, with holdings larger than about 70 arouras. (5) A broad middle range of village owners, with enough land to support a family (10 arouras and up), amounting to three-quarters of the landowners. (6) Village smallholders, less than 10 arouras, who must either have earned part of their living by other means or leased land from others to supplement what they owned.

Overall, this system shows a considerable degree of concentration of landed wealth, although village holdings were far more equal in scale with one another than were urban ones. This concentration shows no signs of increasing at least as late as the middle of the fourth century, nor is there any indication of consolidation of what very large holdings there were. Given the peculiarly semipublic character of the great houses of the sixth century, it is difficult even then to be certain that ownership by individuals was any more concentrated than three centuries earlier.

Different groups of owners had different objectives. In the case of the rich, a secure income capable of bearing the burdens of public office and allowing a fair amount of show was the most obvious need. This is the most important political element in the situation, but it should not be forgotten that the government also needed a stable middle class in the villages, who could shoulder the numerous and sometimes bothersome tax-collection offices required. It would be unrealistic to suppose that all the urban rich were involved in public affairs to the same extent or that all responded in the same way to the stimulus of their position. Despite the well-known predilection of the rich of the Roman world for stability of income, there is good reason to suppose that some looked more ambitiously to maximize the possibilities of their holdings.<sup>1</sup>

Taxation also played a part. Imperial policy, more or less faithfully executed at local levels, laid most of the burden of taxation on landed wealth. It did this in a comparatively impartial manner, levying flat rates (mainly in produce but partly in money) on each unit of land in a particular category.<sup>2</sup> Good land and bad, successful year and poor, all paid essentially the same. Such a policy was easily administered, but it had other effects, perhaps not all foreseen. Compared to a proportionate tax system it exaggerated disparities in value between good and poor land and even led to the abandonment of marginal property.<sup>3</sup> This may not be a bad thing economically, as it should lead to more efficient use of capital and labor, concentrating them where the return is likely to be highest. But, especially when coupled with an administrative system that tried to avoid removal of land from the tax rolls, it could be disastrous for some individuals and offered clear potential for social problems.

The push for higher yields benefited from a long-term change in the technology of irrigation, the tendency to introduce the *saqiya*, or animal-driven waterwheel. With this device the landowner could both irrigate land lying too high to be reached by floodwaters and provide perennial irrigation in place of the annual flooding the Nile offered. Both usable area and frequency of crops could thus be increased. It is

<sup>1</sup>Rathbone 1991.

<sup>2</sup>The higher taxation of "public" land is by this date probably only a vestige of a policy that had benefited urban landowners; the low percentage of public land in fourth-century lists shows that this policy had relatively minor effects.

<sup>3</sup>An example may be helpful. Suppose three plots of land, one regularly yielding 10 art./ar., another 5, another 3. A system of 30 percent taxation makes their net yields 7, 3.5, and 2.1, i.e., preserving the 10:5:3 ratio in income (and something a bit more than that in capital value, to allow for differential yield on other inputs). A flat rate of 3 art./ar. makes their net yields 7, 2, and 0, changing the net income ratio to 3.5:1:0. The last plot will be worthless.

extremely difficult to discern the pace at which this technological revolution took hold. These machines required a lot of capital investment, and evidence for them unsurprisingly comes largely from documents concerning wealthy owners.

The demand of the government for taxes took particular forms, above all wheat (and its chaff), but some barley and about a third of the total in money.<sup>4</sup> These requirements certainly affected what was grown and how it was marketed; ready convertibility was necessary to allow an individual to make part of his surplus available to the government in the form required. This was not the only market force, however. A sizable urban population needed to be fed. Alexandria and the nome capitals together probably accounted for 30 percent of the country's total. Their food requirements certainly created an extensive market for both staples (grains, wine, oils) and other foods like fruits, vegetables, meat, and sweets. Most of this produce was sold on the spot for cash and escapes documentation altogether. Moreover, Egypt probably produced a sizable surplus of some commodities, especially wheat, for export. All of these market influences exerted pressure on the agricultural economy.

These complexities produced a rich variety of responses. Many landowners could not (or would not) work their land themselves. The very rich are the most obvious, but some smaller holders, including many women, were in this position also. Land owned by those who could not work it was easily matched by those who owned no land but needed an income, the half or somewhat more of the rural population that owned nothing. That description might lead one to expect a one-sided dependency, but things were not so simple. Large landlords had choices to make about management, taking into account the size, character, and concentration of their acreage, along with their ability and desire to invest in capital equipment. In some cases direct leasing to tenants was attractive; in others, leasing through a local farmer doubling as land agent; in others, leasing through a hired bailiff. It might seem attractive to run more concentrated estates through hired staff with paid supervisors. No simple rule says which would be more profitable or safer, or what quality would appeal more to the owner. Nor were the landless and near-landless the only lessees. The factor of entrepreneurship looms large in some surviving archives. Farmers with significant personal holdings took the land of others on lease as middlemen, hiring others or leasing it to them in turn.

<sup>4</sup>The government required this mainly in gold, but that payment was effected by collectors who took in funds in bronze currency and bought solidi, thus producing a lively internal market in currency.

Closely linked to the structures of tenancy were those of credit. For the tenant, the availability of credit from the landlord was an important attraction, even a necessity. It was not less attractive to the lender, for whom the stability of tenant relationships provided some security. A tenant-borrower would thus offer the landlord a place to put capital to work and an overall return from leasing and lending more lucrative than other means of using the land.<sup>5</sup> Lenders thus also had direct opportunities to restructure their loan activity to take account of changing market conditions in the cities, where most of them lived, or to engage in complex operations to hedge their risk in dealing in commodities.

Through such operations, whether direct management or leasing, the substantial part of rural land owned by city residents formed a direct part of an integrated economy of the entire nome, with choice of crops and credit terms geared to urban and even external needs. Nor were village landownings exempted from these links, for the demands of taxation, the need of credit, the leasing of land by the relatively landless, and the entrepreneurial activities of wealthy villagers all provided connections to the urban economy. The physical closeness of the cities to the countryside, even the encroachment of the rural environment into the edges of the cities, also helped cement this integration. Although virtually all village residents probably grew food for their own consumption, hardly anyone was outside the demands and opportunities of the integrated economy of the province.<sup>6</sup> That economy, driven by numerous stimuli and expressed in millions of transactions, could thus transmit to the village level an enormous amount of diffuse information about supply and demand of various goods and of credit. Some people naturally had more ability to adjust their responses to this information than others, and the more active part of the village population was surely not the least dynamic sector of the Egyptian economy. The *possessores* as always had more choices than others, but it would be a mistake to imagine the poor as entirely passive recipients of the decisions of others; labor was a limited good like any other, and the anger occasionally displayed by landlords and employers at having to compete for it shows the limits of their own power.

<sup>5</sup>See Foxhall 1990, 111-13, for the mutual advantages of the system for tenants and landlords (as well as some risks). Many of her remarks, though based on Italy, Greece, and modern comparative evidence, are directly applicable to Egypt.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Foxhall 1990, 113: "However much small farmers might have preferred to be isolated from the market economy, it is likely that most tenants (and indeed all peasant farmers) were integrated into market structures, frequently to their detriment."

### *The Economic Life of Cities*

The vertical integration of the agricultural economy had in turn a profound impact on the urban economy, or rather, had a set of effects not all in the same direction. For the elite, the "hundred families," the products of their diverse country holdings to some extent offered self-sufficiency: their own wine, oil, perhaps pottery, building materials, and much else. There is, however, little evidence that the wealthy chose the complete autarky that owning slave craftsmen in a variety of skills could have provided. And whatever choices these families made, the size of the nome capitals was such that even a hundred wealthy households could not have made up more than a fraction of their economies.

The food surplus extracted from the countryside via rents and interest extended far beyond whatever the very rich brought in. Some of it passed through (usually minimal) processing in the cities and was then exported, but probably most was consumed locally except for wheat. It was sufficient to feed a sizable population, but it did not reach that population directly as unearned income from their own rural holdings, for only 10 to 15 percent of urban households owned any noticeable amount of land outside the city.

The enormous diversity of urban occupations documented by the papyri reflects a complex array of transactions. Those with rental or interest income naturally bought goods and services from a wide range of producers and servitors, and a considerable multiplier effect must be expected. Inexpensive labor and a high concentration of wealth meant that a rich diversity of service activities is found. But these and the spending of income from wealth cannot alone explain the size of the urban economy, even taking into account its role in passing through agricultural surpluses to the outside world. For that, two other parts of the economy are essential.

First, most of the better-documented cities show clear signs of craft production of a kind and at a level suited for export, not only for local consumption. The best quantitative evidence is from Oxyrhynchos and from the second half of the third century, but qualitative signs elsewhere and later are consistent with the hypothesis that such export-directed production in textiles was found also at Arsinoe, Hermopolis, Panopolis, and no doubt in other centers not so abundantly documented. Nor would it be safe to assume that this production was limited to textiles merely because chance survivals document that industry the best. The economy of the Delta may have involved

quite other products. Papyrus is the most obvious,<sup>7</sup> but tanning, leatherworking, and other derivatives of cattle raising are also likely to have been much more important there than in the valley. The volume of Oxyrhynchos' production of textiles seems to have been at least on a level comparable to late medieval cloth-producing cities of northern Europe. Although the number of persons employed was certainly not of the same level as the agricultural work force of a nome, within the city itself such production may have been the largest engine of the economy.

Second, the metropoleis must have had a significant role in supplying the villages with goods not produced by village workshops. The sharp decline in diversity in the village economies from the second century to the fourth is not likely to be merely a delusion produced by deceptive documentation. Matters were perhaps not so extreme as the Isidoros and Sakaon archives would suggest, but the fourth century saw all the same a continuing growth of urban and village economic interdependence. Some of the profusion of specialized work in the cities may thus have come at the expense of economic diversity within the villages. It is likely, however, that villages would have supported generalists within any given trade; the centralization of production and (equally important) of distribution in the capitals allowed the existence of specialists who could not have flourished in the villages.

### *The Transformation of Society*

This change in the economic relationship of city and villages was not an isolated phenomenon. If the documents do not mislead, the third century witnessed the effective demolition of many structures of village life. The end of any vital existence for most village temples stripped away the literate and respected leadership class the priesthood had long provided and no doubt eliminated to a large degree the ritual occasions that lent the village a sense of itself as a community. Even spatially it is hard to imagine that abandoned and decaying temples, whether in the center of villages or integrated on the periphery, did not depress the ability to perceive the village as something more than a collection of houses. With the temples, too, went writing in the traditional Egyptian scripts and presumably the literature of those scripts, never translated into Greek. The end of the world came slowly, but it was apocalyptic all the same.

<sup>7</sup>See N. Lewis, *Papyrus in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford 1974) 116-17, for the Delta's apparent domination of this important industry.

Another significant element of change was the concentration of the wealthy landowners, with their Greek culture and books, in the metropoleis. As late as the second century, important families still seem in many cases to have had their principal homes in villages; the descendants of Laches in Tebtunis are perhaps the best-documented example, but they were certainly not the only ones. The elevation of the metropoleis to proper urban status, with the opportunities for official roles and all the grand display of city life in the Greek East under Roman rule, may have been the decisive factor that drew the elite to the cities in the third century, so that by the fourth there is no sign of them in the villages. One telling sign is the disappearance of Greek literary papyri from village documentary assemblages of the period.

The apparently undeveloped society of the villages, thus bereft of both Egyptian and Greek leadership, had no institutions to substitute for what had been lost. Individuals might of course grasp for positions like the *komarchy*, through which the coercive power of the imperial government could be used or abused for their benefit. And anyone of decent means was likely to take up roles from time to time in the structures whereby the village records were maintained, taxes were collected, and order maintained, all largely in the interests of the central government rather than of the villagers themselves. But none of this was truly local in nature; none of it created community. The villages were, by the beginning of the fourth century, essentially lacking in institutions.<sup>8</sup>

By that time the replacement of village institutions had begun, and it continued with decisive results during the fourth century; by the early fifth century, the characteristic structures of Byzantine Egypt had been created. The new developments were several, but they had in common that they involved integration of the villages into the world of the cities. In some ways the easiest element to trace is the church. Village clergy assumed the leadership roles vacated by Egyptian priests and elders, and by the end of the fourth century it is normal to find presbyters and deacons as the representatives of the village population. The presbyters on average had more education than most other villagers, and they certainly had a moral authority deriving from their position. But the clergy also had a direct link to outside power, being the direct subordinates of and appointees of the bishop of the metropolis. Such ties may have been a chancy matter in the earliest years, before the church itself was fully institutionalized, but by the later fourth century that process was well advanced. Pres-

<sup>8</sup>Such institutional weakness is found in other undeveloped societies, of course, such as eighteenth-century America; cf. Wood 1992, 44.



byters thus had a useful line of communication; at the same time, they represented that central power to the villagers. Because bishops were themselves appointed by the bishop of Alexandria, a village priest had only one intermediate step between himself and one of the great notables of the country. Such integration could be desirable or not, according to the circumstances, but it obviously represented a radical change from the far less hierarchically structured world of the Egyptian temples. The patriarch, as he sought to mold the behavior of the population after the teachings of the church, had powerful machinery at his disposal, of a kind never before seen in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> Even if, as is normal, most of the population disobeyed the church's wishes much of the time, the patriarch had a kind of influence hitherto unparalleled.

A second kind of vertical integration was perhaps equally important, the influence in villages of large landowners who lived most of the time in the city. Some of them, perhaps all, maintained country seats as well and spent some time there, but through most of the year they were absentees. And yet they were a presence, physically represented often by their *epoikia* and legally by their business agents. These latter lent money or commodities, leased land, negotiated problems, and interceded with the *geouchos* for more credit or whatever the villagers needed. They became, in an important sense, the economic equivalents of priests, intercessors for the petitioners before an absent deity. The entire apparatus linked the villagers to the seat of wealth and power in the city, in that relational sense of class and status that so pervades this society. Both longstanding Roman ideology and the teachings of the church pushed the notables to use their power for the benefit of their dependents, to replicate the divine work of salvation in their own relationships. It does not, to be sure, take much imagination to see the potential for abuse placed in the hands of the wealthy by this system or that conferred on their agents by the intermediary position they occupied. But it would at least be conceptualized in beneficent terms. These patterns were not entirely new, but they were greatly reinforced by the changes in the relationship of city and village and by the parallel structures of the church. They extended upward beyond the city, of course, to the provincial and imperial levels.

At the administrative level also the process of integration proceeded. The cities acquired responsibility for managing the nomes not in one act but over a long period, going back at least to the creation of their municipal status and gradually taking shape over the

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Kaster 1988, 74, on the church's tendency to match the social fabric.

course of the third century. The fourth-century creation of the *pagi*, governed by wealthy metropolitans, cemented the structure with an intermediate layer between the city administration and the village. The city government was both increasingly localized in personnel and yet tightly watched and managed by the provincial governors. Just as the governor held the civic notables responsible for the management of the *nome*, however, so also these (through the *praepositus pagi*) held the village elite responsible for the local tax collection on which the success of the *nome* in paying its dues rested.

In the 360s the outlines of a transformation of management of taxation and administration, leading to the privatization of public business and the bureaucratization of the private, start to be visible. The *nome's* wealthiest families become increasingly and more continuously responsible for village tax collections, to effect which they use private business agents. Toward the end of the century, a letter of such an agent to his superior (but still an agent, not the principal) lists the persons involved in the posting of the tax rates in a village: the landlord, the "more important men" of the village, the *nomikarioi*, and the "more important of the landowners."<sup>10</sup> The *geouchos* has a high-level responsibility for the village's taxes, but he operates in concert with the local leadership, both the landowners whose taxes form a large part of the total revenue and those currently serving in official roles (partly no doubt the same people), and with the ill-known *nomikarioi*, apparently rural fiscal agents with some official power but little independent importance. Public and private, urban and village, come together to fix this official matter in concert, ensuring (as they hope) the proper functioning of a vertically integrated system in which all of them are implicated and the failure of which can mean disaster for all.

One need not believe that the overall degree of economic equality in Egypt declined to see that the fourth century systematized and integrated hierarchies where before they had been far less regularized and connected. Private economic relations, official structures, and ecclesiastical hierarchy operated in concert. As the church came increasingly under the control of the wealthy, these three forms of vertical organization increasingly depended on the same people. In the fourth century, however, that process was still in an early stage.

The integration of the villages into the city economy and society certainly contributed to the dynamic and diverse character the latter possessed, and it conformed Egypt much more closely to the prevail-

<sup>10</sup>SB XVI 12324; cf. Bagnall 1991a.

ing mode of social and economic organization of the eastern empire. It did not, however, restore to the villages much independent structure or community. Integration thus created a type of dependence that brought with it vulnerability to any decline in the ability of the cities to provide their share of the unequal partnership.

### *Forms and Uses of Power*

The civic elite that wielded this economic power over the village economy was not a fourth century novelty, but its ability to found urban political dominance on a rural base was developed only in the third century and reached maturity in the fourth. This elite was, because of the lack of civic institutions, slower to develop in Egypt than elsewhere in the eastern empire, but its foundations go back to the beginning of Roman rule. Still, it is striking that it comes to full flower in a century sometimes seen as marking the crisis and decline of just this group, the curial class. The translation of economic power into political power is never before so sharply visible in the metropoleis. Indeed, the growing tendency to make large landowners responsible for tax collection in the countryside linked to a remarkable degree private economy and public administration.

This linkage was a mixed blessing for those involved. There were undeniable opportunities for profit in managing the taxes, and clearly at any given time some collectorships would be safer or more profitable than others. But risks and costs were attached to all civic offices. They were the natural result of a system that personalized expenses in the form of compulsory, but conspicuous, contributions by individuals rather than collecting them in the form of taxes.<sup>11</sup> It did not require extraordinary intelligence for many members of this class to realize that the ideal life would be the low taxation made possible by this system coupled with their own personal exemption from the concomitant personal burdens. There were various ways of pursuing this state of bliss, so advantageous for any individual but ultimately fatal to the system. All involved exemption from curial duties, and a complex body of imperial rulings governing these attempts grew up.<sup>12</sup>

The search for personal exemption intersected with the growth of other forms of power: the army, the church, and the state. These hardly form a trio of council-swallowing monsters. Despite the sweeping generalizations of a Libanius, it seems clear enough that the

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Millar 1983, 77, pointing out that it was by personal expenditure, not by taxation, that cities of the second century elsewhere in the Empire had done so much building.

<sup>12</sup>Discussed by Millar 1983.

military did not grab away any substantial share of the available land, nor yet did the bureaucratic *militia*. Nor is there any good evidence to support the belief that the military establishment grew in size.<sup>13</sup> The bureaucracy may have gained somewhat in numbers, but even so a sober estimate shows that they remained tiny by the standards of ages with real professional administrations (above, p. 66). Bishops hardly constituted a great throng, hardly numbering a hundred in an area (Egypt and Libya) of perhaps five million population. The numbers of presbyters and deacons are harder to assess, but they neither threatened the power of the curials nor, probably, much exceeded the numbers of the priests of the Egyptian temples in earlier centuries.

Neither numbers nor absorption of wealth, then, provides an adequate explanation of the threat posed to the curial order, a threat dealt with too often by imperial edicts simply to be dismissed as the hysterical self-interest of a Libanius. Part of the answer certainly lies in the competition of other groups for the members of the curial class. Not only did becoming an imperial official (civil or military) or a bishop have significant attractions for members of this group, these other callings consciously drew from it. High imperial officers and bishops came from the same group of the propertied as did curials, and they may even have begun their careers in their local councils. The emperor and the church needed to recruit men of ability and education, and the civic elite was the natural place to look. A real competition for a limited pool of manpower could not pass unperceived, and in a council with a membership of a hundred or less the loss of even a few would seem threatening to the stability of the rest.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps still more appalling to the curials, this competition was acute precisely because the civil service, the army, and the church all accumulated substantial power, power acquired in considerable part at the expense of the civic elites as such, even if all drew their membership from the same group. Even with all allowances for ancient and modern exaggerations, officers, bureaucrats, and clergy can all be seen exercising various forms of power, and at all levels of the power structure, from the village to the imperial court. It is hardly surprising that the curial elite saw this phenomenon as threatening, corrupt, and indeed evil. That is the normal reaction of aristocracies to bureaucratic gains at the expense of their own amateur rule.<sup>15</sup> Corruption, though

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Carrié 1986, 457-59, and above, p. 174.

<sup>14</sup>Millar 1983, 96, acutely points up this competition, although without adequately recognizing the church's place in it (cf. however 83-84).

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Cannadine 1990, 244, dealing, to be sure, with (as he emphasizes) an administrative class *not* drawn from the ranks of the aristocracy.

recently proposed as a candidate for chief villain in the decline of the Roman Empire,<sup>16</sup> was neither demonstrably greater in the late empire nor particularly different; it is always someone else acting in his own self-interest, rather than you in yours.<sup>17</sup> More generally, corruption is simply the evil twin of patronage, which is the inherent way of doing business in a very hierarchical, personalized, monarchical society. Where public and private are barely delimited into separate spheres and the government operates by "mobilizing the power of private persons to carry out public ends," and where public discourse lacks any conception of government but monarchy, "corruption" is the only charge available.<sup>18</sup>

In any case, in Egypt as no doubt in most of the empire, these bureaucrats and clerics were "one of us" for the curials, not outsiders, and the decline of the landowners' power should not be exaggerated. The documents suggest that the newer centers of power were readily, if not uncomplainingly, accommodated within the vertically integrated economic and social power structure of the *nomes*. Their presence may have increased the pressure on the remaining councilors, and that was no doubt unwelcome to them. But there is no reason for the outside observer to adopt their viewpoint and consider their burdens too heavy. Although it is often asserted that the middle ranks of the civic elite faded and eventually disappeared under these pressures, the evidence does not support such claims.<sup>19</sup>

### *Egypt and Mediterranean Culture*

From many points of view the third century seems a decisive watershed in the history of Egypt as part of the Mediterranean world. The singularity of Egypt in earlier periods was real, if easily exaggerated.<sup>20</sup> It remained a distinctive place, of course, but Egypt in the fourth century had reached its maturity as a constituent of the Hellenism of

<sup>16</sup>MacMullen 1988. For an effective demolition of MacMullen's main thesis, see the review by Richard Talbert, *Phoenix* 45 (1991) 85-87.

<sup>17</sup>"In any case, the contemporary corruption that such men denounced was probably less—assuming that such comparisons can be usefully made—than that of the period from the 1780s to 1820s, when it had been the old aristocracy, not the new plutocracy, who had been most successfully on the make." (Cannadine 1990, 229).

<sup>18</sup>See Wood 1992, 80-82, 105, 174-75, on this matter.

<sup>19</sup>Nor, to be fair, can it disprove it. Neither the Apion archives nor the papers of Dioskoros of Aphroditos, the two largest masses of papyri from the sixth century, can be looked to for a portrait of this group in that epoch.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Rathbone 1989 on the economic side. Such claims of uniqueness serve in many cases mainly as an apology for scholarly unwillingness to come to terms with the quantity and difficulty of the papyrological evidence.

the eastern Roman empire. Political life, agonistic institutions, and economic integration of the countryside with the cities all give the observer a sense of continuity with the world known from the inscriptions of Asia Minor and elsewhere. Even the diet of Egypt had largely completed its transformation from distinctively Egyptian forms to the repertory basic to Mediterranean life, with beer yielding to wine, oil from seeds to olive oil, other grains to wheat. The educated urban residents read the same literature that any other group of Greeks would have known.

Many of their fellow townsmen could neither read nor write Greek, and some of them may even have been unable to speak it. In the countryside around, a partly bilingual, partly Egyptian-speaking population existed with minimal diffusion of competence in writing, thanks to the ability to get by with the help of scribes and family members. The absence of documentation comparable to the papyri makes it impossible to say with any confidence how typical this situation was, but it would be surprising if places like Syria and Armenia, at least, were not broadly similar.<sup>21</sup> And even where no written vernacular later flourished things may still have been much the same.

Third-century Egypt was, moreover, essentially without a written vernacular. That curious state of affairs, brewing since early in Roman rule, was a breach of a tradition more than three millennia old. It is a symptom of a broader collapse of the institutional basis of separate Egyptian culture, the temples. Their neglect, decline, and abandonment over the 250 years from the middle of the first century to the end of the third, though still only a partially known story, cleared the way for the society of the fourth century and for a new form of Egyptian culture, one integrally linked to Christianity. It is impossible to assess the relative contributions to this process of imperial policy, which is unlikely to have thought matters through to such implications, and of organic internal factors.

The new Egyptian civilization, conventionally called Coptic, differs radically from its predecessor. It was, unlike the old temples, distinctively urban in origins and character. The Coptic script and the peculiar form of Egyptian it embodied were the products of an educated bilingual milieu, with 80 percent of its alphabet and 25 percent of its vocabulary taken from Greek. That bilingual milieu can originally only have been urban. It was also, unlike some of the experimentation that led up to it, closely tied to Christianity, a religion very much based in the cities through the third century and which

<sup>21</sup>For other parts of North Africa, see F. Millar, "Local cultures in the Roman Empire: Libyan, Punic and Latin in Roman North Africa," *JRS* 58 (1968) 126-34.

adopted a vertical, city-dominated power structure to govern village churches. The use of Coptic was not long, if ever, limited to the city, any more than the city was isolated from the country; but the earliest documentary uses, private letters, were apparently written to (and presumably by) monastic establishments. Because a large part of such correspondence to monks comes from the cities, it is probable enough that so too do the Coptic letters. "Coptic" art is equally a product of commissions by a wealthy city elite, rather than a manifestation of popular village taste.<sup>22</sup>

It may seem paradoxical to point out that precisely this wealthy city elite was the bearer of Hellenism. It is, after all, conventional to look at Coptic culture as an antithesis to the Hellenism of the powerful.<sup>23</sup> But that conventional view is wrong. The Egyptian elite was probably quick to seize the instrumental advantages of learning Greek already under the Ptolemies, and by the third century it had fully internalized the conquerors' culture.<sup>24</sup> "In language, myth, and image it [Greek culture] provided the means for a more articulate and a more universally comprehensible expression of local traditions. This became the precious mission and character of Hellenism in the Christian empire of late antiquity."<sup>25</sup> A look forward to a more finished product, Dioskoros of Aphrodito, confirms this understanding. Drawing on both the common culture of the Greek Mediterranean and the resources of Egyptian traditions, Dioskoros read, wrote documents, and composed original works in both Greek and Coptic. In the middle of the sixth century, he lived as a Christian in a completely Christianized society.<sup>26</sup> For him, Hellenism had no connection to paganism, despite his use of an entire mythological framework that derived from it;<sup>27</sup> the resources on which he drew were the common intellectual inheritance of all educated men.

<sup>22</sup>Thelma Thomas, "Greeks or Copts?: Documentary and Other Evidence for Artistic Patronage During the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Periods at Herakleopolis Magna and Oxyrhynchos, Egypt," *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society* (SAOC 51, Chicago 1992) 317-22.

<sup>23</sup>This viewpoint can still be seen in Irmscher 1989.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. the behavior of elites in British India: G. Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York 1989), esp. 43, 140.

<sup>25</sup>Bowersock 1990, 9; his overestimation of paganism in late antique Egypt does not detract from this fundamentally correct understanding of the relationship of Hellenism and indigenous culture.

<sup>26</sup>Dioskoros' home, Aphrodito, officially a village in the sixth century, had once been a nome metropolis and clearly still had some of the character of one.

<sup>27</sup>See Bowersock 1990, 55-69, for a consideration of the role of Greek literature and myth in Egypt. As he puts it (67), "The poets and artists of Egypt held on to the gods and heroes of the pagan past not to protest anything that went on in the present."

Indeed, it was—another seeming paradox—precisely Christianity that provided the integrating element in Egyptian Hellenism. Right from the start, the Christian character of Coptic and the culture it carried ensured that Hellenism as the vehicle of Egyptian culture was specifically Christian, not pagan. Only with Christianity does Egyptian culture emerge from being a survival in the near-ghetto of the temples. That does not mean, to be sure, that pagans were somehow excluded from this culture; but it does mean that Christianity was the central engine in the enterprise, and the cultivated pagans peripheral, not the reverse. For that matter, pagans who attempted to use Hellenism as the bearer of their indigenous traditions did so in isolation from the original language of those traditions; it was the Christians who actually turned Egyptian into a vehicle for a new era. In that peculiar and narrow sense, the pagans were indeed the Hellenes.

The essential configuration of this society, then, is that of late antique Hellenism. The cities remain flourishing, as for the most part they did in the eastern Mediterranean until the late sixth century.<sup>28</sup> Around them was a generally prosperous countryside, albeit one under constant pressure from the city for higher revenues and subject to stresses from the taxation system and changes in agriculture. This rural world was tightly knit to the cities by economic, administrative, and religious hierarchies. The papyri have not yet yielded a fourth-century counterpart to Dioskoros, someone who will allow the modern observer to see the complex strands of culture and identity gathered through the consciousness of an emblematic, well-defined individual. The fourth-century documentation, rich and urban though it is, has so far a strongly external character, and the published personal archives are village or monastic in origin. The cluster of Hermopolitan family papers comes closest, but even a composite of these reveals frustratingly little about the personal outlook and culture of the upper-class principals.

All the same, the evidence taken together points to a society consciously both Egyptian and Greek, valuing diverse elements of culture that to a modern mind might seem contradictory but that to contemporaries were simply parts of an identity binding them simultaneously to their country with its past and to the larger Mediterranean world ruled from Rome and Constantinople. This outlook,

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Charlotte Roueché, *Phoenix* 44 (1990) 298, arguing (on the basis of Aphrodisias, Sardis, and Anemourion) that it is in the third quarter of the sixth century, after Justinian's reign, that the cities of Asia seem to have lost the capability of rebounding from natural disasters. How far Egypt was on a parallel course at that period remains to be studied.



enduringly united with Christianity, is dominant in Egypt by the middle of the fourth century. For a century previously the various elements of the Egyptian late antique synthesis—political, economic, social, and cultural—were in formation, sometimes spurred and rarely deterred by the changing policies of emperors, but finally given stimulus by Constantine's victory over Licinius in 324 and the irretrievable—despite Julian—dominance of Christianity that followed. The papers of Theophanes of Hermopolis in the early fourth century (above, p. 271) show, however, that even before that time the culture of pagans and Christians had converged to a remarkable degree. The elusiveness of his own religious allegiance is eloquent testimony to the synthesis in formation.