

is more likely that they all took some kind of poison. She was thirty-nine years old. However it happened, her suicide may have saved the lives of at least some of her children.

Nothing could have saved Caesarion, since his claim to be a son of Julius Caesar made him a potential threat to Octavian. Betrayed by his tutor while trying to escape to Nubia, he was brought back to Alexandria and executed. Cleopatra's other children, however, survived, and were raised by Antony's former wife, Octavia. Cleopatra Selene even grew up to become a queen herself, marrying Juba II, the king of Mauritania in North Africa. Their son Ptolemy succeeded his father and ruled his kingdom until he was executed in 40 C.E. by the Roman emperor Caligula. His death finally ended the long line of Ptolemies, whose glory Cleopatra had struggled so hard to reestablish.

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CHAPTER 3

PTOLEMAIC EGYPT: HOW DID IT WORK?

The recent discovery of a papyrus with a sample of Cleopatra's handwriting created a sensation. Although she had written only one word—*ginestho*, "let it be so"—at the end of the document, the document is of great interest because it provides historians with a rare glimpse of Cleopatra at work. After all, her glamorous affairs with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony occupied only a relatively small part of her long reign in comparison to the time she spent as queen of Egypt.

The papyrus contains a royal decree with a subscription in Cleopatra's own handwriting ordering that it be enforced. The decree was issued in February 33 B.C.E. and instructs government officials to ensure that privileges awarded by Cleopatra to a member of a Roman senatorial family named Quintus Cascellius be honored. According to the decree, Cascellius was granted the right to export substantial amounts of grain from Egypt and import wine tax-free. In addition, his lands were also to be tax-free, and his tenants—together with their work animals and the Nile boats he used to transport his grain and wine—were to be exempt from government service.

Cleopatra's purpose in issuing this decree was obviously to encourage the loyalty of a member of a distinguished Roman family. Unfortunately, we do not know if she was successful. The decree does, however, reveal her at work doing the unglamorous but essential business of governing Egypt: reviewing public documents, providing for their transmission to the appropriate offices, and ensuring that their provisions were enforced. Except for the fact that Cascellius was a Roman, nothing distinguishes this decree from the innumerable other such documents Cleopatra must have dictated, reviewed, and subscribed during her reign. As the docu-

ment's editor noted, for Cleopatra to fulfill these duties, "she would have had to work round the clock."¹

Many of these duties were religious. As pharaoh, she and her predecessors played an active role in the religious life of Egypt, fulfilling the Egyptian king's traditional duty of performing the rituals and ceremonies believed necessary to ensure the survival not only of Egypt but of the world itself. Similarly, in their capacity as successors of Alexander the Great as Macedonian kings, they also officiated at the numerous festivals and sacrifices in honor of the Greek gods that were celebrated at Alexandria. Other duties were ceremonial, such as greeting subjects, receiving petitions, welcoming ambassadors, and appointing officials to office. The bulk of a monarch's time, however, was occupied by duties that were invisible to his or her subjects but essential to the governance of Egypt, namely, those connected with the position of head of government. Until relatively recently, however, the details of the Ptolemaic government of Egypt were almost unknown.

PAPYRI AND PTOLEMAIC EGYPT

Discovering how the Ptolemies actually governed Egypt is one of the great achievements of modern historical research. It required the efforts of historians from many countries during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and even the creation of a whole new science known as papyrology. This effort was necessary because of a fundamental difference in the goals of ancient and modern historiography. While modern historians believe all subjects can be treated historically, ancient historians aimed to tell stories of action. The result was a narrow focus on political and military history.

Today, social history, economic history, or administrative history are the subjects of whole subdisciplines of history. In antiquity, however, they were not considered suitable topics for historical works. Except for the occasional anecdote that might throw light on the character of a king or queen, therefore, Greek and Roman historians ignored these subjects in their works. The discovery by archaeologists of documents—such as the decree for Cascellius—written on a variety of materials—stone inscriptions, ostraka (pieces of broken pottery), and especially papyrus—has filled this gap and revealed the nature of the government of Egypt under the Ptolemies.

Ptolemaic Egypt: How Did It Work?

Throughout most of antiquity, papyrus was the standard writing material in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean basin. It was a paperlike material made from strips cut from the papyrus reed, and provided an excellent medium for writing, but one whose long-term survival required that it be protected from damp, mold, and other threats. Only the dry desert climate of Egypt has allowed papyrus documents to survive in substantial numbers. Ancient papyri first began to reach Europe in the eighteenth century c.e. It was only with the beginnings of systematic excavation of Egyptian sites in the nineteenth century c.e., however, that large numbers of papyri were discovered, and their significance as sources for Egyptian history was recognized.

While papyri have restored to us many lost literary works—such as poems of the Greek poetess Sappho—and have provided valuable information about the whole range of the lives of the inhabitants of Ptolemaic Egypt, they are particularly informative about the multifarious activities of the Ptolemaic government of Egypt. Administrative organization and policy, tax collection, religious affairs, and legal proceedings are all illuminated by papyri. Moreover, since the Egyptian populace encountered representatives of the Ptolemaic government on an almost daily basis, this rich documentation provides us with snapshots of the Ptolemaic government at work, from the royal court to the smallest Egyptian village.

Most but not all papyri are written in Greek and document the lives of the privileged Greek minority in Ptolemaic Egypt. Although detailed study of the numerous Demotic (vernacular Egyptian) papyri has barely begun, it has already made clear that despite the influx of Greeks, the Egyptian way of life, legal system, and religious institutions all endured and even flourished in Ptolemaic Egypt. Unfortunately, while papyri have done much to compensate for the deficiencies of the literary sources for the history of Cleopatra and her dynasty, their evidence is often incomplete and hard to interpret.

The problem is that there are significant gaps in the papyrological evidence. The first and most serious gap is the almost total lack of papyri from Alexandria, the capital of Ptolemaic Egypt, because the high water table in the area has destroyed them. The vast majority of papyri have been discovered instead in Middle and Upper Egypt, particularly in the waste dumps and cemeteries of the new towns and villages the Ptolemies founded for Greek immigrants in the depression west of the Nile known

as the Fayum. The result is that we see the Ptolemaic government only as it is reflected in the provinces; it is as if historians were trying to analyze the government of the United States based only on evidence from rural Kansas. Chance has also played a large role in determining what periods and topics historians can study with the aid of papyri.

A good example is provided by a famous and informative batch of papyri found at the site of Tebtunis in the Fayum. During excavations there in 1900 for the University of California, Berkeley, and the Hearst Foundation, Egyptian workmen discovered a cemetery full of mummified crocodiles. One of the workmen, furious because there was no reward for mummified crocodiles, savagely hacked open one of the crocodiles, revealing that it was filled with papyri from the second and first centuries B.C.E. The papyri turned out to be discarded records from the office of a royal scribe named Menches and provided invaluable information about both the duties of royal scribes and the village of Kerkeosiris in which Menches lived and worked. If that workman had not become so frustrated at his "bad luck," historians would lack the most important extant body of evidence for studying the life of an Egyptian village in Ptolemaic Egypt in the late Ptolemaic period.²

THE ORGANIZATION OF PTOLEMAIC EGYPT

Ptolemy I hit the jackpot when he gained control of Egypt. The fifth century B.C.E. historian Herodotos claimed that Egypt had more wonders than any country in the world. Essentially a gigantic oasis watered by the Nile, Egypt was richer in history and resources and more densely populated than any other country known to the Greeks. Four centuries later, another Greek historian named Diodoros claimed that during Cleopatra's reign, almost seven million Egyptians lived in more than thirty thousand towns. Although the numbers are certainly exaggerated, they give a vivid idea of the impression Egypt made on visitors. Governing such a vast country required the Ptolemies to develop the extensive and complex administrative system revealed by the papyri.

The Ptolemies were autocrats, who ruled Egypt simultaneously as successors of the pharaohs and Macedonian kings. Their dual roles not only guaranteed their power over both Egyptians and Greeks, but also meant that they had a relatively free hand in developing their administrative

system, since Egypt and its native and immigrant population literally belonged to them. Nevertheless, the Ptolemies did not create a new administration from scratch, but built on the foundations laid by their Egyptian predecessors.

One reality determined governmental organization throughout Egyptian history: the pharaohs and the gods were the greatest landowners in Egypt. All Egypt was their estate and provided the revenues needed to enable the kings to govern the country and perform the rituals and ceremonies essential to the survival not only of Egypt but of the world itself. Grants of royal land paid officials and provided the economic basis for the innumerable temples whose priests served as the king's deputies in the worship of the gods. Although the extent of temple holdings during the Ptolemaic period is unknown, only they rivaled the government in the size of their holdings. Their workshops produced a variety of goods needed for their ceremonies and for trade, including fine textiles, metals, and papyri. Not surprisingly, the priests of the greatest temples formed a tiny but wealthy and influential native elite.

The Egyptian populace on whose labor both the government and temples depended lived in the towns and villages of Egypt. These were grouped into territorial units called *nomes*—whose number varied from 36 to 40—each of which was administered by an official historian called a *nomarch*. The *nomarch* was responsible for maintaining order in his *nome*, collecting and forwarding taxes to the central government, and judging disputes that were referred to him. In carrying out his tasks, the *nomarch* was assisted by a varied body of officials including village scribes, elders and village headmen, tax collectors, and police officials.

Although local officials received new Greek titles to replace their offices' venerable Egyptian titles, the Ptolemies otherwise retained this organization essentially unchanged from the establishment of the dynasty in the late fourth century B.C.E. until the Roman conquest in 30 B.C.E. What they did do, however, was superimpose on it a new centralized administrative system for Egypt as a whole that was based on the principle that the king's work takes priority over all other activities. Although the first hints of the new system were already apparent during the reign of Ptolemy I, its chief architect was his successor, Ptolemy II.

Ptolemy II based his new system on the rigorous exploitation of Egypt's rich agricultural land—land so rich that Herodotos believed that Eryp-

tians grew crops without work. The first historians to study the Ptolemaic government of Egypt believed that in order to achieve his goals, Ptolemy II thoroughly reorganized the Egyptian economy, transforming and modernizing the barter-based economy of pharaonic Egypt by the introduction of coinage on a large scale. Land usage also was rationalized by the introduction of a comprehensive classification system according to which all Egyptian land was divided into two broad categories: royal land for basic agricultural production and "released land." There were four sub-categories of released land, which were defined by their function: (1) cleruchic land to support the army; (2) gift land to reward government officials; (3) temple land to support Egypt's numerous temples; and (4) private land, which included personal house and garden plots owned by individuals.

The nonagricultural sectors of the economy were also tightly organized. Major areas of the economy such as textile, papyrus, and oil production were organized as state monopolies, intended to generate the maximum revenue for the king from fees and taxes. Aggressive efforts were made to minimize foreign competition for the profits of Egyptian commerce. Strict currency controls were imposed that required that all foreign coinage be exchanged for Egyptian coinage at artificially low rates. Similarly, government regulations limited the amount of imports that could be brought into the country and required that they be sold at artificially high prices.

In the new system, every aspect of the Egyptian economy was subject to the supervision and control of an extensive bureaucracy headquartered in Alexandria, but with agents—Greek at the upper levels and Egyptian at the lower—in even the most remote village. To facilitate proper functioning of the system, every person from royal peasant to immigrant soldier was registered according to place of residence and economic function. Annually, each village was instructed what crops to plant. Peasants and their animals were forbidden to leave their villages during key phases of the agricultural cycle such as planting and harvesting, and royal officials had first claim on the crop. By Cleopatra's time, even the temples had been brought within the system. Government officials oversaw the management of their lands and revenues, and provided the priests and other temple staff with subsidies to perform their functions and maintain the temple buildings.

HOW DID PTOLEMAIC EGYPT REALLY WORK?

Ptolemy II's goal in developing this system was clearly to bring as much as possible of the Egyptian economy under the supervision and control of the government. While his intentions are clear, the extent of his success is less so. The first historians who studied the Ptolemaic administration of Egypt optimistically described it as a successful example of Greek rational planning applied to the government of an "oriental" kingdom. As scholars have investigated how the system actually worked, however, it has become increasingly clear that the idea of Ptolemaic Egypt as an orderly planned society managed by a rational and efficient bureaucracy is a myth.

The original view had resulted from scholars' efforts to understand the mass of papyri discovered by archeologists, most of which deal with individual transactions such as tax receipts or royal decisions with little if any explanation of why they were created. As a result, scholars devoted particular attention to documents such as the so-called "Revenue Laws of Ptolemy II" and "The Instructions of a Dioiketes [financial administrator] to his Oikonomos [steward]," which seemed to be official handbooks of the rules governing the organization and administration of some of the most important governmental and economic institutions of Ptolemaic Egypt. Moreover, they were encouraged to interpret these documents in this manner based on their similarity to documents issued by the new bureaucracies that developed in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America.

On closer investigation, however, the similarity proved to be superficial. Thus, close analysis revealed that the "Revenue Laws of Ptolemy II" do not describe the actual management of the Ptolemaic oil monopoly but the government's unrealistic idea of how such a monopoly ought to work. Similarly, another document, the so-called "crop planting schedule," which was originally thought to be a plan drawn up annually in Alexandria that set out in detail for each region of Egypt the crops to be planted in the following year, turned out instead to be a report compiled by the central government from speculative assessments by local officials of their district's future crops. Its purpose was not to rationally plan Egyptian agriculture but to provide crude estimates of the government's future revenues. Likewise, "The Instructions of a Dioiketes to his Oikonomos"

was not an official manual for new administrators but a literary work describing the duties and character of an ideal official.

The Ptolemaic administration also lacked some of the key characteristics of any true bureaucracy, such as defined career paths, clear chains of command, and clearly specified areas of responsibility for its officials. The problem started at the top and extended throughout the government. While Ptolemaic Egypt was an autocracy, it was a personal autocracy. The government consisted of the king, his friends (the king's personal entourage), and the army. Government officials were not professional civil servants but political appointees, who often had multiple and sometimes even overlapping responsibilities. Nor were they trained for their offices but fulfilled whatever position the king posted them to, irrespective of their previous service. Moreover, not only were they untrained, but—as the practice of selling government papers in bulk to undertakers reveals—they also lacked such basic bureaucratic tools as comprehensive archives to assist them in making their decisions.

In other words, the Ptolemaic administration was far from being a rationally designed and efficient bureaucratic machine intended to manage a complex planned economy. Instead, it was a system riddled with irrationalities and inefficiencies, whose primary purpose was to control the king's Egyptian subjects and to extract the maximum amount of revenue from them. Documents such as the recently discovered Egyptian translation of Ptolemy II's order for a complete economic survey of Egypt, and his letter threatening lawyers—whose support of their clients reduce revenue—with fines and confiscation of their property bear witness to his insatiable need for money to support his ambitious foreign policies.

Not surprisingly, abuse was inherent in the system. From its origins in the reign of Ptolemy II to the time of Cleopatra, rulers found it necessary to repeatedly issue royal orders forbidding government officials from exploiting the king's subjects for personal gain. The situation eventually became so serious that kings routinely began their reign by publishing blanket amnesties forgiving unpaid debts owed the government and canceling outstanding charges of wrongdoing by government officials so as to provide a "clean slate" for the new reign. Equally unsurprising, resistance to the system's demands was also rampant. Resistance took many forms, but the most important was a form of strike that Ptolemaic documents refer to as *anachoresis*, "withdrawal"—the abandonment *en masse* of their villages and fields by royal peasants. The purpose of *anachoresis*

was not revolution but to pressure local officials to reduce their demands by threatening the revenues on which the government depended, and the ploy often succeeded because maintenance of the revenue stream was more important than enforcing the letter of royal policy. This was true from the origin of the system under Ptolemy II to its end during the reign of Cleopatra, whose decrees forbid the same abuses as those of her great ancestor.

Contemporary historians' views of Ptolemaic Egypt are more complex than those of the scholars who first studied the papyri and tried to reconstruct the Ptolemaic organization of Egypt. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the government was able to extract large revenues from its subjects. Records still available in Alexandria in the second century c.e. revealed that during the reign of Ptolemy II, revenues were sufficient to support a huge military establishment that included 240,000 infantry and cavalry, 300 war elephants, and 3,500 warships.³ And two centuries later, when Egyptian power had declined from its third-century B.C.E. peak, Cleopatra was still able to conduct a substantial building program, build at least two fleets, and assume much of the cost of Antony's various campaigns. At the same time, however, the repeated references to resistance by the Ptolemies' subjects to the government's demands and the crown's inability to prevent abuses by its own officials make it clear that royal autocracy was more apparent than real. It was only through flexibility and compromise that even the strongest Ptolemies such as Ptolemy II and Cleopatra could achieve their goals.