

J. Rowlandson, *Landowners and Tenants in Roman Egypt: The social relations of Agriculture in the Oxyrhynchite nome* (Oxford Classical Monographs). Pp. xiv + 384; 3 maps; 6 figs; 20 tables. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. ISBN: 0 19 814735 X

This is an important book which will be an invaluable resource for historians of Roman Egypt, papyrologists and economic historians for years to come.

Rowlandson's work adds to the growing body of scholarship on the economy of Roman Egypt by exploring the economic, legal and social relationships at the heart of Egyptian agriculture through a sensitive analysis of documents drawn mainly from the Oxyrhynchite nome. R. deals with a great variety and volume of evidence. Her arguments are intricate but the treatment of the material is always cautious.

The main themes relate to the economy. Most who have worked in this area have tended to draw their data for urban centres from the Oxyrhynchite evidence and that for rural settlements from the Arsinoite. R. calls this approach into question. Almost everywhere she looks she finds regional variations in behaviour and landownership and, although this is not fully explored here, this pattern of local differences is one that continues into the fifth and sixth centuries. R. illustrates the notable heterogeneity of agricultural exploitation even within the Oxyrhynchite: rents varied, prices for land varied, rates of tax varied (even on lands that were of similar juridical status), the terms of agreement in leases varied, the length of leases varied, the manner in which landowners chose to exploit their land varied, and the mix of private and public land varied from community to community. Even in a land where environmental variables were limited, the heterogeneity of agricultural and tenorial arrangements is instructive.

One of the most interesting aspects of the study is R.'s explanation of chronological developments. Although R. accepts that there was a gradual concentration of property in the hands of the urban elite, she points out that there is no explicit evidence for this change and the mechanics of the process by which it came about are unclear. R. suggests that key to this problem was the ability of the

elite to gain access to public land, either land sold off very cheaply by the state or leased to the elite. There is evidence both that the government tended to prefer to impose the leasing of such land on the wealthy who could provide some additional security for the taxes due, and that, when the land was of good quality, the wealthy could use their influence to win the leasehold of public land. Such land tended to remain in the hands of the wealthy landowner who was able to invest in the land or increase the levels of rent. This land was, in effect, privatised, though it was taxed at a higher rate than fully private land. This is certainly an attractive idea since it could account for the rise of a metropolitan landowning class while allowing for the continued importance of smallholdings for which there is substantial evidence into the seventh century, and provides a link between the increasing social and political power of the urban elite and their ability to gain control of economic resources, though it seems unlikely that this privatisation would be sufficient to account for the areas of land accumulated by several very large estates in the first three centuries AD. In spite of the difficulties, R.'s (somewhat questionable) depiction of a fairly static land market in which many of the transactions were adjustments of family property between family members or friends and neighbours, leads her to rely on access to state land to explain the apparent success of certain families in rapidly accumulating substantial private estates.

R. shows that the social relations depicted in our leases suggest that the evident status differentials between the contracting parties were fairly minor. Many of the leases were only for a single year or were very short-term and R. sees this not as a sign of the power of the elite who could easily extract themselves from leases or change the terms of a lease as conditions changed, but as a manifestation of agricultural specialisation. The landowner was often interested in securing high quality labour for his land, especially for vineyards (though one might argue that these particular leases represent a special economic relationship and should not be seen as having general applicability to landowner-tenant relations). Tenants were not tied and

the later growth in long-term leasing marked a decline in the status of agricultural labour.

The leases and other forms of contract allow R. to trace changes in landowner tenant relations over the first three or four centuries of Roman rule. Since we have more detailed information from Egypt than from any other province, the varied patterns of social relations attested in Egypt must have implications for the far more uniform historiographic depictions of rural society that we have from other areas of the ancient world. R.'s book should change the way we think about the social relations of agriculture throughout the ancient world.

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