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Land tenure, rural space, and the political economy
of Ptolemaic Egypt (332 BC-30 BC)

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Abstract: In this paper I argue that statist (or “despotic”) assumptions of royal power does not adequately describe the nature of political power in the Ptolemaic development of Egypt. I examine the process of Ptolemaic state formation from the point of view of the expansion and the settlement of the Fayyum, the foundation of Ptolemais in the Thebaid, and from the point of view of new fiscal institutions.

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In this paper I argue three points: 1) the usual assumptions of the despotic power of the Ptolemies are built on the false assumptions of political power in ancient Egypt and do not fully describe political power in the Ptolemaic state, 2) the formation of the Ptolemaic state was a process that took close to a century to develop, and it evolved more rapidly in the Fayyum than it did in Upper Egypt, and 3) the effort of socio-economic consolidation during the reign of Ptolemy II suggests that the Ptolemaic state “credibly committed” to protect traditional property rights, which, by the second century BC, were enforced by legal institutions that had become incorporated within the new state structure. This political process, what I have described elsewhere as the “Ptolemaicizing” of Egypt (Manning 2003), did not occur solely through the command of the ruler, as the despotic, or strong state model of the state suggests, nor did it occur rapidly. Rather, Ptolemaic institutions developed by the active acceptance of the new rules by local populations, and this acceptance took time.¹ It goes without saying that this acceptance was probably never universal or uniform across Egypt, but by the second century BC Ptolemaic state institutions had “captured” all of the important ancient institutions. This, in turn, also suggests that the assumption of Ptolemaic state decline should be reconsidered.

The Ptolemaic state

The concept of the state as an economic actor has been central in the study of the ancient economy, from Marx and Weber, to Polanyi, Rostovtzeff and Finley. Statist, or strong state models of the political economy of ancient Egypt have long dominated the understanding of economic development, reinforced by hydraulic theories that correlated irrigation agriculture with centralized political structure. These theories, in turn, have shaped the interpretation of Ptolemaic developments.² Between the irrigation system and the ruler’s direct taxation of agricultural production lay the elaborate bureaucratic structure that the Ptolemies inherited and indeed developed further. The Egyptian state, following the classification of Hicks, is, along with China, the best example of a “classical” bureaucratic state.³ And it is the royal control of this bureaucracy that has formed the basis for the statist assumptions of the Ptolemaic state. A closer examination of Ptolemaic state formation, however, suggests a more complex picture of the interaction of the central state with local elites, and highlights, on one hand, the possibility of local

¹ See Manning 2003. On the *dirigiste* model, see most recently Rathbone 2000.

² See further Manning 2002.

³ Hicks 1969:15-24. Importantly, as Hicks also points out, the Egyptian bureaucracy does not appear to have developed a recruiting and examination system like that elaborated under the Han. While the Egyptian system functioned historically largely as a hereditary system, the Ptolemaic bureaucracy was based on royal appointment. Exactly how recruitment worked is not well known, although certain texts are suggestive of such a system of upward mobility in the bureaucracy based on performance, See e.g. Crawford 1978.

elites following common pool incentives, and, on the other hand, the role of credible commitment to protect traditional property rights in establishing a political equilibrium.⁴

Most histories of Ptolemaic Egypt have divided the period into two parts.⁵ During the first, from the beginning of the kingship of Ptolemy I in 305 BC to the end of the reign of Ptolemy III in 221 BC, the regime established strong control of the land and agricultural production, improved communications and roads, and imposed several new fiscal institutions over the ancient economic structure.⁶ The growth of the new capital of Alexandria is only the most obvious example of the many one could cite of the enormous success of the regime. The second phase, beginning with the reign of Ptolemy IV in 221 BC has been viewed as one of steady economic and political decline, caused by the confiscatory fiscal system, dynastic problems, and the growing power of Rome.⁷ Before turning to the process of state formation and the supposed decline, I turn first to a brief examination of the connection between geography and political power.

Rural space in ancient Egypt

The Nile river and its annual flood created a paradox for the central state. On one hand the river allowed the possibility of the centralization of political and economic power because of the narrow band of cultivation that “captured” a population within a circumscribed territory.⁸ The absence of political opposition at the local level in Egypt allowed the king to assert monopoly power over communications along the river as well as over raw materials (principally stone and metals used for tools); the productivity of Egyptian soil produced large surpluses that were in the control of a hierarchical bureaucracy that sustained “durable methods of taxation.”⁹ On the other hand, because of the river’s length, and the nature of the basin irrigation system, agricultural production, and the irrigation networks that formed the basis of annual production, was controlled at a more local level.

Egypt is divided into three major regions (or “eco-zones” to use the term of Karl Butzer): the Delta, the Fayyum and the Nile valley.¹⁰ To those three regions one may add the oases in the western desert that become important regions from the Persian period onward. The Nile river valley itself was divided into two major sub-units: (1) the Thebaid from Aswan down to the ancient religious center at Abydos, with virtually no cultivable land between Aswan and the sandstone quarries at Gebel es-Silsila, and (2) “Middle Egypt,” from around Abydos north to Memphis, where the cultivation widens on the west bank, due to the Bahr Yusef, which flows northward parallel to the Nile into the Fayyum.

There is little doubt that the state response to the Nile flood produced the “theater,” as Geertz put it, of central royal control. Indeed, there is no more enduring image of ancient Egypt than that of pharaoh exerting control over the factors of production within a unified, centralized state.¹¹ This image contrasts sharply with the generally weak ability of pre-modern agrarian states to maintain a strong hold on their

⁴ The literature on the concept of credible commitment is large. For a summary of the issues involved, see

⁵ For a survey of Ptolemaic history, see Hölbl 1994; Huß 2001.

⁶ Manning forthcoming.

⁷ See e.g. Turner 1984.

⁸ On the concepts of political and economic power, see Mann 1986.

⁹ Totman 1993:15.

¹⁰ Butzer 1976:58.

¹¹ See e.g. Genesis 41.

hinterlands. According to Gellner's general model of these states, this political weakness arose from the relatively small size and social isolation of the bureaucratic elite who were insulated from the communities of agricultural producers.¹² The underlying structural issue caused by the state's need for revenue, what economists call the "coordination problem," meant that it faced high costs in communication and enforcement that were exacerbated by the asymmetric flow of information. The case of Egypt, with its ancient tradition of powerful kings and a hierarchic bureaucracy, would appear to be an exception to Gellner's model, the natural tendency of political fragmentation and high costs being alleviated by the strong caging effect of the river valley.¹³ But the bureaucracy was probably more limited in its effectiveness than despotic assumptions allow because the pharaoh relied on fostering the loyalty of the local elite through a political system that sanctioned rent-seeking behavior in exchange for loyalty to the center, and the requirement of mustering local labor when required. In fact the key to central power in Egypt was the ability of the king, through the local elite, to mobilize local labor—for military campaigns (before a standing army was organized during the New Kingdom), for canal clearance, for quarrying expeditions, and, of course, to tax and redistribute agricultural production through the local temples. In periods of poor Nile flooding, however, the political structure linking villages, to district (nome) capitals, to the political center, in an "interested hierarchy" of population centers, was often severed.¹⁴ Phrases such as the "water of pharaoh" (i.e. "public canal") show the extent of royal ideology, but it measures neither the royal intervention nor the absolute control over local economies. The assignment of rights to land, especially new land, was a royal prerogative, the normal mechanism of which was the gift of land to officials and to soldiers. Inter-village and regional cooperation could also be strengthened by the common practice of split holdings of land and the religious rituals of the temple estates, but there was also private initiative driven by local ecology and needs.¹⁵

Despotism and Egypt

Despotism, and the image of a despotic ruler, is an ancient phenomenon. From ancient Egyptian stories, to the Joseph story in Genesis, to Aristotle, to later European travelers, the display of royal wealth, the richness of imperial cities that stood in contrast to the poverty of the rural hinterlands, wrought by excessively extractive tax collectors, has been a feature of the description of Asian monarchy. Keeping labor applied to the land, the theory goes, was a constant problem, met with by a combination of coercive force and incentive that combined, at times, to predate so heavily that rural families were unable to reproduce because they were kept below subsistence. Despite strong and sustained criticism of the theories of oriental despotism and hydraulic states, the theory refuses to go away, and it underlies much thinking about ancient states, particularly empires. Most historians of Egypt have preferred the despotic or predatory model, and much of the royal material culture, from the time of the pyramids of Old Kingdom Egypt to the Ptolemaic takeover, has been viewed through this despotic lens.

¹² Gellner 1983:9.

¹³ On the social "caging" effects of the river valley, see Mann 1986:112-14.

¹⁴ I take the term "interested hierarchy" from Skinner quoted in Wilkinson 2000:5.

¹⁵ For the basic issue as it played out in ancient Egyptian history, see Eyre 2000. Cf. Bonneau 1993.

The strongest expression of the theory of oriental despotism is Karl Wittfogel's justly famous 1957 book in which he summarizes much 19th century historical thinking about the political economy of early states, particularly Asian states, that were associated with irrigation agriculture. A "linear causality model", linking environmental stress to irrigation, a hydraulic bureaucracy and despotic central control of economic resources, was advocated.¹⁶ Hydraulic agriculture, he argued, required centralized control. While there is still much of interest in the book, most assessments have soundly criticized the general theory as being "overextended," and "undifferentiated," and having ignored local power structures.¹⁷

Yet despotism remains the implicit model of the state. And while there is reason to maintain some aspects of the model, royal power must be qualified, and it was not linked to irrigation agriculture. The Nile river valley was the strongest social cage in the world, and it allowed an early, and nearly unitary, state to emerge. But the divinity of the ruler existed side by side with provincial elites. A simplified model of the political economy of ancient Egypt led directly into the historical interpretation of the Greek papyri that has characterized Ptolemaic history. Ptolemaic economic historians, most notably Rostovtzeff and Heichelheim, and social historians such as Tarn and Griffith, built on the assumptions of the pharaonic state, developing a dirigiste model of state development.¹⁸ The Ptolemies, in their view, took over an ancient bureaucratic taxation mechanism, and the total political power associated with it, and tightened social control by new fiscal institutions.

The relationship of the king to economic and political power in Egypt was more complex, and varied considerably over time. There was in fact no direct connection between the irrigation system and the centralized, or "despotic," control of the country. There were no central state officials in charge of irrigation at any point in Egyptian history. The natural "communication network" and the population cage that effectively captured farmers within a strongly circumscribed environment created by the Nile river was a decisive factor in the ability of the king to control the vast hinterland of the Nile valley (I leave aside here the issue of how uniform the written language was and the low literacy level), but this control derived from the coordination of agricultural production in irrigation basins that were administered by local elites. It was those same local elites that mobilized labor for the ruler, and collected the agricultural surplus.

Most definitions of the state agree that it is a bounded territory with a "comparative advantage in violence" controlled by a legitimate ruler having sustainable ability to tax.¹⁹ But along with this basic fact, and cutting against despotic central power, were social networks. Social power within states consists of four overlapping power networks--military, political, economic and ideological power.²⁰ Political power comes in two forms: despotic power, by which the ruler and his circle may try to enforce its will "without routine, institutionalized negotiation with civil society groups." "A supreme despot," as the case in Egypt or China where the ruler's divine status was unquestioned, Mann continues, "can thus attempt virtually any action without 'principled'

¹⁶ Butzer 1976:111.

¹⁷ Mann 1986; Butzer 1996.

¹⁸ Tarn and Griffith 1952.

¹⁹ North 1981:21.

²⁰ Mann 1986.

opposition'.²¹ Infrastructural power, Mann's second part of political power, is the real ability of the state to penetrate society and implement its aims. The latter of course was far more difficult to control, given the complex and well-established social networks and the incentive structure of the state. In Mann's analysis, Egypt is the one exception in the ancient world to his federal model, but even here, I believe, centralization was incomplete, and there were symptoms of distributed federal power.

The Economist Douglass North has elaborated on the basic definition of the state by proposing two models: the predatory model, and the "contract" or neo-classical model.²² In the predatory model, the state functions as the agent of one group or class, collecting and distributing revenue to that one group or class. In the neoclassical model, the state acts as wealth maximizer. The ruler exchanges protection and justice for revenue. Property rights are specified to guarantee maximum revenue, or "monopoly rents," but the property rights structure tends to benefit local constituencies (in order to maintain stability for the ruler), creating inefficiencies that will add costs to the state. Additionally, the state acts as a third party to every contract, standing beyond them to enforce private rights, and functioning as a "monopolist" in assigning property rights to each group or class within the state that maximizes revenue. Because revenue is collected by state agents, principal-agent problems can arise, exacerbated by asymmetric flow of information to the center, which creates uncertainty and higher enforcement costs. The social and cultural isolation between the elite and the agricultural producers observed in all pre-modern agrarian states adds another dimension to the general problem of loyalty and compliance.

State formation under the Ptolemies

Without question there had been a "centralizing principal"²³ in the Egyptian state, and indeed Egypt came closest in the ancient world to being a unitary state, long before the Ptolemies. The Nile river, of course, allowed a ruler to capture a population within the circumscribed territory of the river valley, and a hierarchical bureaucracy penetrated the whole of the Nile valley, collecting taxes and taking a biennial census. A hierarchical bureaucratic structure began to be established by the end of the Old Kingdom, and was further articulated during the Middle Kingdom, when the Fayyum was first developed. The bureaucracy was further elaborated in the New Kingdom. Four hundred years after the collapse of the New Kingdom state, the Saite rulers reconsolidated political power throughout Egypt, and Persian control of Egypt brought more centralization.

The Ptolemies built on Saite and Persian centralization, and many important economic and social features were carried over. In terms of social power, military and military settlement appears to have been the key, and in this the Ptolemies carried over an ancient imperial pattern of state development, carrying on in particular the "organizational capacity" and the "promiscuousness" of military power.²⁴ Mann, although not treating Hellenistic empires for more than a page, summarizes developments: they were loose Persian-style states, Persian and others elite were "extruded" from independent position of power within the state, the ideology of the ruling class was

²¹ Mann 1986:170.

²² 1981: Chapter 3.

²³ Chaudhuri 1990.

²⁴ Mann 1986:174-6.

intensified from the Persian ideological morale, and created a more "cohesive, diffused ruling-class basis for rule" than before.²⁵ So ideology and Greek immigration reshaped an ancient system of agricultural production and taxation. Socio-economic continuity, with the Persians and the Ptolemies, was something consciously supported and encouraged. The important features of land tenure, and a very traditional one is Asia, that tied state service to land holding and to finances of the ruler, was certainly maintained.

The formation of the Ptolemaic state was a dynamic process, which involved both direction from the ruler and cooperation from local elites. The Ptolemies intended, and succeeded for much of the period, to control the whole of Egypt, but this control, through ideological mechanisms, through the acceptance of local elites, and by military settlement, was not solely accomplished through the political authority of the king, but also through local traditional institutions. An examination of the Ptolemaic documentary sources alters our understanding of the history of the Ptolemaic state from one in which a despotic regime devolved by 210 BC, to one in which local institutions *evolved*.

It seems clear, for example that the development of the Fayyum was an important aspect of early Ptolemaic state development. The Fayyum had been developed before, by the kings of Dynasty 12, whose capital city was nearby. But it was the first two Ptolemaic kings, perhaps with the Macedonian reclamation project at Lake Kopais in their minds, who developed the Fayyum most extensively. The reclamation project, importantly, did not merely involve central state intervention, but a combination of state and private initiative. New crops, notably *triticum durum*, and new populations transfers from other places in Egypt, certainly had the hand of the state on them, but the shift to wheat, once considered a hallmark of Ptolemaic intervention in rural production, is more likely the result of a natural process begun before the Ptolemies, and the population movement was almost certainly accomplished with some economic incentive as well as coercion.²⁶ The scale here of the work approached the building of the pyramids some two thousand years before, but the purpose was altogether different.²⁷ Local initiative may be observed in the reclamation of land by the military settlers who were granted plots of land in exchange for service to the state when called upon, and in the model estates of the third century BC, technically "gifts" of the king to officials. The latter group of texts documents royal interest certainly, but planting decisions, water conditions and the management of the estate was all accomplished locally. The state intervened here, as it did under the pharaohs, in limited contexts, mainly for purposes of internal colonization of new lands, new canal digging and in establishing new settlements.²⁸ Much of the work by the new state, however, was accomplished not through despotic, coercive central power, but through the use of labor contracts— an ancient feature of Near Eastern societies— and traditional rural social structure.²⁹ Taking control of new arable land allowed the Ptolemies to dictate new institutional rules over this land, and thus assert direct royal control. Arable land was greatly expanded in early Ptolemaic period, and the entire region became a kind of showcase of royal prestige, and by the end of the third century

²⁵ Mann 1986:247.

²⁶ On the shift to wheat, see Thompson 1999. For the shift in wheat being natural rather than state-directed, see Van Minnen 2001.

²⁷ See Thompson 1999a:112.

²⁸ Cf. Eyre 1994:80.

²⁹ See e.g. Briant 1987:7 for the Persian period.

BC. The emphasis on the production of wheat is a good reflection of central state interest.³⁰

Ptolemy I and the “legislation” of Ptolemy II

We have very few Greek documents dated to the reign of Ptolemy I, and with the enormous documentary material for the reign of Ptolemy II, it is usually, and easily, assumed that it was the second king, who formed what we think of as the Ptolemaic royal economy. The absence of papyri and ostraca for the first king's reign is, I believe, suggestive. An important first step, and an indication of a plan to govern Egypt, was taken by Ptolemy I in founding the southern Greek city of Ptolemais (modern el-Manshah) just above modern Sohag. The foundation of a Greek polis in this part of Egypt was a recognition that the Thebaid required some kind of administrative presence by the new regime. The Thebaid, centered on the temple of priesthood of the god Amun in Thebes in the first millennium BC, was used to semi-independence from the political capital in the north. Another text of primary importance here is the so-called Satrap Stela, a text of a royal decree by Ptolemy while he still functioned technically as a satrap of Egypt. The contours of royal ideology are already clearly established in this text. Ptolemy, while still a satrap, and before therefore he had declared himself *basileus* in Greek eyes, he functioned as a pious Egyptian pharaoh.

With Ptolemy II's reign we have much more documentation in Greek and Egyptian, and it is assumed that this increase reflects not merely an accident of preservation but an increase in state activity. The well known Karnak Ostrakon, for example, a demotic text dating to 258 BC, shows that a royal order to survey land, reached the south of the country and the important temple of Amun at Thebes.³¹ Such an order emanated from the king himself, probably originally in the form of a *prostagma*, and was sent down the chain of the bureaucracy, and translated into demotic so that local priesthoods (or agents of the state) as well as farmers could be informed what was expected by the Ptolemaic authorities who were responsible for generating a budget for the king. This suggests that the orders were intended to go through the temple bureaucracy, not through a separate bureaucracy, a good indication that the temple structure was utilized by the early Ptolemies for such administrative purposes. The order also clearly shows that information on tenure and water conditions flowed from the villages up to the capital and not the reverse. This is in any case the theory, and the text at hand is good evidence that the order penetrated deep into the Egyptian countryside to at least the powerful priesthood of the temple of Amun at Karnak.

Two important texts from the reigns of Ptolemy II and III show us the ideal of the bureaucracy, and the operation of the new fiscal system. The first text, P. Tebt. 703, dating to the early part of the reign of Ptolemy III Euergetes, is thought to contain a series of instructions from the chief financial official in Alexandria (*dioikêtês*) to an official in charge of nome finances (*oikonomos*). Its literary connections to earlier Egyptian instruction (of the Pharaoh establishing the proper code of conduct for officials and a sense of “justice” between the State and its subjects) should be taken seriously, although the mention of difficult times suggests that the text was a specific attempt to restore order

³⁰ Thompson 1999b.

³¹ Bresciani 1983; Burstein 1985:122-23.

after a period of civil unrest linked to a war and, perhaps, bad Nile flooding.³² The allusion to soldiers who have abandoned their duties reinforces this view. The long text covers many aspects of the royal economy from the maintenance of canals, to sowing, to the registration and care of cattle. The shipment of grain to the capital and the production of fruit trees are also given prominence. The text gives us a (static) picture of the bureaucracy and the central state's expectations of compliance and reporting.

The second text is known as the “Revenue Laws Papyrus” (P. Rev.) and dates to the reign of Ptolemy II. The best-preserved section of the text deals with the production, the organization and the pricing of oil crops—sesame, castor, safflower among others (olive oil was not included in the regulations contained in P. Rev). On the basis of early translations of this text, it was thought that the entire process, from seed loans to survey of the fields, to tax collection, to the setting of the price of the raw material, and its delivery to state factories was centrally planned and controlled. The careful analysis by Bingen has shown, however, that the text is not, in fact, a systematic treatment of the collection of the royal revenues at all but, rather, a compendium of seven separate “laws” (*nomoi*) issued by Ptolemy II Philadelphus governing a range of topics concerned with royal revenue, from tax farming, to the oil crops and other key industries. The connection between the principles in the text, and the rural economy is far more tenuous, and the ability of the state to plan the economy was far less than some earlier interpretations have suggested.³³

If state central planning of the economy has been discounted, that is not to say that there were no attempts at state reorganization by Ptolemy II. The “text” that provides us with the most important information about the nature of the Ptolemaic state survives only by way of references in other documents, where it is referred to simply as “the legislation” (Greek *to diagramma*).³⁴ Whether it occurred on one occasion, or over the course of several years, references to different sections of the “legislation” suggests that the effort was a comprehensive one. Among other issues, it empowered courts to decide the law assigned to it, it established rules for selecting judges, and it promulgated maximum interest rates. These reforms of Ptolemy may also have prompted the recording of Egyptian legal procedures that appear in handbooks such as the so-called Hermopolis Legal code.³⁵ The consolidation of legal traditions of Ptolemy II appears to have been a concerted effort to bring the constituent elements of Ptolemaic Egyptian society under the corporate structure of the state while at the same time preserving the legal customs of the various populations in Egypt. The efforts of Ptolemy II reached villages in Upper Egypt as well as in the Fayyum.

Upper Egypt, its ancient institutional structure and its incorporation into the new state

Upper Egypt, or the Thebaid, was a strategically vital part of Ptolemaic Egypt. Through this region flowed gold from the eastern desert mining regions, as well as elephants that supplied the Ptolemaic war machine. I have already mentioned that the temples in this

³² Cf. the remarks of Crawford 1978.

³³ Bingen 1978.

³⁴ On this “legislation,” see Wolff 1960; Mèlèze-Modrzejewski 2001:190-93.

³⁵ Mattha and Hughes 1975.

part of Egypt were historically powerful institutions that controlled land and other resources. The temples had been administrative centers, not merely religious institutions. The Ptolemies recognized their importance by actively incorporating them, and their priesthoods, into the Ptolemaic state. The founding of Ptolemais, and the settling of Greeks there, was an important first step in the projection of Ptolemaic political power in Upper Egypt. Subsequently, the Ptolemies established administrative control over the temples and the taxation of agricultural production, by the appointment of officials in charge of monitoring temple finance and by the introduction of coinage and the use of banks. The banks in Upper Egypt issued tax receipts, a phenomenon that appears to have been a phenomenon exclusive to Upper Egypt. Tax receipts protected tax payers by recording the time and place of tax payments, and may have been a concession to the ancient private property rights regime there.

The Thebaid revolt (206-187 BC)

In 206 BC, a serious rebellion broke out throughout most of Upper Egypt.³⁶ Among the first acts documented during the revolt was the seizure of the Edfu temple and the stoppage of work on the temple's rebuilding. While Aswan appears to have remained loyal to the kings, the Nile valley, perhaps as far north as Abydos, broke away from Ptolemaic control for a generation and was controlled by two Egyptians in succession.³⁷ The motivations for the revolt cannot be clearly discerned from our sources, and scholarship has been divided whether to interpret the root causes of this revolt, and others during the Ptolemaic period, as "nationalistic" responses to Ptolemaic rule, or more localized "economic" responses to Ptolemaic control. Whatever the causes though, the unrest is an example of the region following its "common pool incentives" in reaction to a weak political center.³⁸

Some results of Ptolemaic state formation

At the end of the Thebaid revolt, the Ptolemaic state established greater control of the area by settling new military communities and asserting economic control by the auction of land that had become neglected by the disturbances. The extent of administrative control of Upper Egypt is illustrated in a famous probate dispute at Asyut in the middle of the second century BC. A contest between two half brothers over the inheritance of two small plots of land arose. In 173 BC the younger brother made a petition to obtain a real division of his inheritance to the Greek *strategos* of the Thebaid. That petition was in turn sent to the *strategos* of the Asyut district for a hearing. The older brother was unable (or did not want to) go to the registration office to reassign part of the family, and so the dispute was resolved at the local temple in which they held office. Three years later, the dispute still raged, the younger brother again making a petition, this time to a local Egyptian official. More petitions followed, by him and by the wife of the older brother to the *strategos* of the Thebaid to not allow a division of the family property. The dispute

³⁶ There have been many comments on the revolt. For an excellent summary of the evidence, see McGing 1997, and Véisse 2004.

³⁷ There has been some debate whether these southern rulers were Egyptians or not. See the remarks of Véisse 2004:84-95.

³⁸ Weingast 2004.

was again referred to the local priestly tribunal in the temple, where a trial was finally held. A decision was made by the priests, but the family dispute apparently continued afterward. The affair illustrates quite well that the Ptolemies maintained the ancient legal system, adding monitoring officials in the court (the *eisagogeus*). The reference to a “law of year 21” in the dispute may very well be yet another example of the impact of the “legislation” of Ptolemy II on Egyptian law.

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that statist or despotic assumptions of royal power does not adequately describe Ptolemaic development. I have examined the process of Ptolemaic state formation from the point of view of the expansion and the settlement of the Fayyum, the foundation of Ptolemais in the Thebaid, and from the point of view of new fiscal institutions. From these examples I have argued that state formation was a process that took close to a century to develop, and that it evolved more rapidly in the new region of the Fayyum than it did in the Nile valley. Finally, I have examined the so-called “legislation” of Ptolemy II and have argued that the Ptolemaic state credibly committed to protect traditional property rights, which, by the second century BC, were enforced not by traditional institutions but by new state ones. The credible commitment here was no doubt an important factor in the acceptance of the political legitimacy of the Ptolemaic kings. This political process did not occur solely through the command of the ruler, nor did it occur rapidly or without resistance, especially in the Thebaid because of its ancient institutional structure.

Historians have usually assumed a decline of the Ptolemaic state after the reign of Ptolemy III. But the demotic and the Greek documents, as well as the continuing settlement of soldiers, suggests that this supposed decline has been exaggerated. Nor, does it appear, that there was a decline in the local bureaucratic structure although to be sure there was both a problem (severe?) of maintaining labor on the land and rent-seeking behavior of local bureaucrats. Furthermore there was no wide development of internal markets for land, despite the Greek fiscal institution of public auction that was introduced in the early Ptolemaic period. Here is a contrast to Roman Egypt. I differ only slightly from Dominic Rathbone's conclusions on the differences between Ptolemaic and Roman Egyptian land tenure.³⁹ Rathbone, in summing up the different trends on the land in Egypt and Republican Rome, argued that the Ptolemies "did not allow the emergence of large private agglomerations of land." But it was not a matter of permission, it was the structural limitations of the state that *prevented* private investment and development.

³⁹ Rathbone 2000.

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