

## 059: Ptolemaic Egypt – Kingdom of Gold, Kingdom of the Nile

When we last left off on the previous episode, we had discussed the roles and presentation of the Ptolemaic monarchy in the eyes of its Greek and Egyptian subjects. As the longest reigning dynasty in Egyptian history, they were undoubtedly successful, capable of maintaining their Greco-Macedonian identity as Hellenistic monarchs while performing the duties as required by a legitimate pharaonic dynasty. Today we will be focusing less on how they were perceived as kings and queens, turning away from their cultural or political ideology and instead largely focusing on their rule from an administrative and economic perspective. The Ptolemies, after all, were famous (or infamous) for the riches and abundance they possessed. It is not a stretch to claim that they were the wealthiest people in the world during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, largely brought about by their exploitation of the Nile River and a rigorous taxation program that was more extensive than anything seen in Egypt before. We'll be looking at how they governed Egypt, the reforms and bureaucratic systems that they introduced, and how they enforced their will on the landscape to reshape it (sometimes literally) to meet their needs.

To start with, why don't we go over the rough administrative layout of Hellenistic Egypt? It must be understood that much of what I am going to say is a bit of a generalization, given that changes were occurring throughout the reign of the dynasty and for the sake of brevity. The Ptolemies had also inherited a system that stretched back thousands of years, their institutions were following patterns that had been developing in the Saite and Persian periods decades before their arrival. As such, I'm not going to keep reminding you of this because it would be unproductive to do so. However, I always recommend that you check out the bibliography and episode transcript if you want to find out more about the nuances of bureaucratic organization and its changes across four centuries of history.

As it had always been, Egypt was divided into several districts that the Greeks called *nomoi* or nomes. Strabo, writing shortly after the end of Ptolemaic rule in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, dedicates most of his 17<sup>th</sup> book to covering Egypt's geography and organization, including descriptions of the nomes during his time.<sup>1</sup> The exact number varied depending on the period, but we can say with some confidence that during the Ptolemaic period it was about 40 to 42.<sup>2</sup> Some were particularly large, such as the Arsinoite nome in the Fayyum or the Thebaid, which covered much of Upper Egypt. These in turn could be further subdivided into administrative or taxation units known as toparchs, and at the smallest level would be the village or kome. Egyptians traditionally named their nomes (known as *sepat*) after animals or deities, but the Greeks tended to rename them after the major cities in the regions, which were themselves often transliterated.<sup>3</sup> For instance: the 13<sup>th</sup> nome is roughly translated from Egyptian as "Prospering Scepter". In Greek it was known as the Heliopolites nome because of the major city of Heliopolis, which was originally the Egyptian *lunu* but likely renamed due to the prominence of the sun cult of Ra (Heliopolis meaning "City of the Sun" in Greek).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.1-54

<sup>2</sup> Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pgs. 72-73; Manning, J.G. "Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt" Pgs. 31-32; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.54.3 suggests 36 for instance.

<sup>3</sup> Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pgs. 67-68

<sup>4</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.27

Seated above all were the king and queen, along with the rest of the royal court based in Alexandria. Like all the Hellenistic monarchies, the Ptolemies were surrounded by a group of close officials known generally as *philoï* or “royal friends”.<sup>5</sup> This was an institution that harkened back to the Macedonian court of Philip and Alexander, and it functioned in much the same way. From the *philoï* would come the bodyguards, military commanders, and diplomats, among other senior administrative positions. The *philoï* could be drawn from the same family across multiple generations, and could wield a great amount of sway and influence over a particularly ineffectual ruler. A flurry of letters would constantly be flowing back and forth from the court, as many petitions and pleas from subjects and government officials would be directly addressed to King Ptolemy for an ultimate jurisdiction, whether he actually read them or not.<sup>6</sup>

From the royal court, we descend to the administration of the nomes. At the head of the nome was the governor, initially called a nomarch but later changed to the Greek title *strategos* by the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> These were the king’s hand-picked officials often drawn from prominent local families, who oversaw administrative and military practices of the nome, and were often considered the final arbitrator on local judicial matters.<sup>8</sup> When we speak of administrative functions, ultimately the main principle was to ensure the smooth uninterrupted process of agricultural production and tax harvesting. The jurisdiction of the governor could be quite large – many times we find that a single person in control of multiple nomes – and so the nomarch was able to delegate his task to a veritable horde of delegates and officials. The *oikonomos* was the main man responsible for the nome’s finances and taxation, and the range of work that this entails is rather comprehensive: in addition to balancing the books and overseeing audits, the official would be responsible for overseeing irrigation and building projects, or inspecting local industries involved in the production of goods like beer and linen.<sup>9</sup> One of the key day-to-day officials would be the scribe, an Egyptian role that became an important cog in the bureaucratic machinery. Though there was a royal scribe, your average representative would be localized at the village level, providing reports and information to his superiors. Eventually the scribe would replace the *oikonomos* in terms of importance, as the former fades in our records from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries.<sup>10</sup>

The administrative language was predominantly Greek, as were most business transactions and contracts.<sup>11</sup> But there are many examples of royal decrees being written in Egyptian alongside Greek, whether in Hieroglyphic or its shorthand form known as Demotic.<sup>12</sup> The most famous example of a bi-or

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<sup>5</sup> Grainger, J.D. “*Kings and Kingship in the Hellenistic World: 350-30 BC*” Pgs. 85-94

<sup>6</sup> See Plutarch, *Moralia*, 790b for an anecdote pertaining to the Seleucid court, but one that almost assuredly can be applied to the Ptolemaic court as well.

<sup>7</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.73.1

<sup>8</sup> Chaveau, M. “*Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*” Pgs. 73-76; Manning, J.G. “*The Ptolemaic Governmental Branches and the Role of Temples and Elite Groups*” in “*A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*” Pg. 111

<sup>9</sup> Rowlandson, J. “*Administration and Law: Graeco-Roman*” in “*A Companion to Ancient Egypt*” Pg. 242; Evans, J.A. “*Daily Life in the Hellenistic Age: From Alexander to Cleopatra*” Pgs. 85-87

<sup>10</sup> Chaveau, M. “*Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*” Pg. 76;

<sup>11</sup> Manning, J.G. “*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*” Pg. 151

<sup>12</sup> Manning, J.G. “*The Ptolemaic Governmental Branches and the Role of Temples and Elite Groups*” in “*A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*” Pg. 105

trilingual inscription is the Rosetta Stone, erected in the year 196 during the reign of Ptolemy V.<sup>13</sup> But when we look into the personal archives of Ptolemaic officials, we see that day-to-day tax receipts or order forms can be in either language, though it is worth acknowledging that documents written in Egyptian tended to be from officials in positions lower down the hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> The amount of documentation that such a system generated must have been quite large – papyrus was certainly cultivated in mass amounts by the Egyptian government for use in record-keeping, but we also find scraps of potshards known as *ostraca* that was used as a cheaper (and ultimately more durable) form of writing material. It is thanks to this and the arid climate of Egypt that we know so much about the Ptolemaic system relative to any other ancient society of the time. We actually have an intimate snapshot of how the bureaucratic system actually worked, thanks to the recovered writings of a Ptolemy, son of Glaukias. We will be spending considerable time getting to know this figure for quite different reasons in an upcoming episode, but during the year 158 he petitioned King Ptolemy VI to have his brother recruited into the army. Tracing its path through a civil and military bureaucracy, the petition resulted in 32 additional pieces of paperwork and took 5 months before it was officially processed and acknowledged by the king.<sup>15</sup> Of course, responses for these kinds of documents are rather terse, but Ptolemy VI himself may have personally signed off on it. A similar document has been recovered that dates to the reign of Cleopatra VII, and to answer its verbose description she scratched out *Ginesthoi*, literally “make it so!”.<sup>16</sup>

Like the other Successor dynasties, the Ptolemies founded several Hellenic-styled cities across Egypt and its adjacent areas. The most important of these would be Ptolemais to the south in the Thebaid, and to the north would be Alexandria, the dynastic capital and easily the Hellenistic period’s greatest city. Both served as administrative centers for Upper and Lower Egypt respectively, and paralleled the previous pharaonic practice of having two centers of power to better oversee the entirety of their kingdom. At the same time, many of the great cities of Egypt’s past like Thebes and Memphis continued to prosper into the Ptolemaic period. Whether traditionally Hellenic or Egyptian, they each carried quite different legal traditions and customs, and so they needed to be overseen in a manner that was most appropriate. Places like Alexandria and earlier Greek settlements like Naucratis were governed like a traditional *polis*: there would be local communities divided into tribes and *demes*, an assembly of city representatives, and a board of magistrates.<sup>17</sup> The Egyptian cities would largely be left to their own devices, at least in the sense that they did not radically alter the way they were governed.<sup>18</sup> Temples would continue play an important role in overseeing the social, economic, and judicial life of Egyptians.<sup>19</sup> Many of them were directly patronized by the royal family with donatives and tax exemptions, so it was a relationship that was mutually cultivated in order to secure a greater amount of stability.

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<sup>13</sup> BM EA 24 ([Link](#))

<sup>14</sup> Falivene, M.R. “Government, management, literacy: Aspects of Ptolemaic administration in the early Hellenistic period.” *Ancient Society*, 22: 203-227

<sup>15</sup> UPZ I 14; Manning, J.G. “The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC” Pgs. 148-149

<sup>16</sup> Berlin P 25 239, see (<https://archive.archaeology.org/0101/newsbriefs/cleopatra.html>)

<sup>17</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.42; Monson, A. “From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt” Pg. 262; Chaveau, M. “Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra” Pg. 57; Fraser, P.M. “Ptolemaic Alexandria” Pgs. 93–131

<sup>18</sup> Grainger, J.D. “Kings and Kingship in the Hellenistic World: 350-30 BC” Pg. 132

<sup>19</sup> Monson, A. “From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt” Pg. 263

The division between Greek and Egyptian can also be felt with the organization of Upper and Lower Egypt. Upper Egypt remained largely traditional, but Ptolemy I's foundation of Ptolemais in the Thebaid was intended to assert his control over it, lest the memories of the glory days supersede the political realities of Macedonian rule.<sup>20</sup> In this, Ptolemy would absolutely be correct, for the Thebaid would become the center of Egyptian resistance during the great revolt around the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

Law in Ptolemaic Egypt was also divided between the traditions of the Greeks and that of the Egyptians. This is something that I want to elaborate more on in a few episodes, but the general framework was that both operated within separate spheres and each largely handled their own affairs. This is not entirely true though, and there are many instances of litigation occurring between different parties that need to be discussed in the future. A simple example of cross-cultural legal interaction can be seen in marriage contracts dating to the period. Egyptian women possessed greater legal rights than their Greek contemporaries, and marriage contracts show a blend of legal customs when it comes to the autonomy of the bride and the specific terminology used in the agreement. Though explicit evidence for Greco-Egyptian marriages is somewhat uncommon, a blended family can result in situations where you have Greek law being applied between two individuals bearing Greek names, yet the contract itself would be written in Demotic.<sup>21</sup>

Though Ptolemaic rule was very much presented as a legitimate Egyptian dynasty, their power and authority ultimately rested on the back of a military composed largely of Greco-Macedonian soldiers. Since the time of Ptolemy I, Egypt was viewed as the "spear-won" property of the family, and competition between them and the other Hellenistic dynasties was near-constant. The unique circumstances of Egyptian geography (a subject we will talk more about in a bit) certainly provided considerable financial and defensive advantages for the security of the Ptolemaic state. On the other hand, this position left them culturally isolated as the Macedonian rulers of an empire that was overwhelmingly Egyptian in terms of its population. Unless in times of dire need, the Ptolemies were not keen on integrating the Egyptians into the Macedonian-styled phalanx lest they were seized with the desire to revolt. Relying exclusively on mercenaries would always be a fleeting solution, and an outright expensive one to boot. Of course, the difference between a mercenary and professional soldier is more ambiguous than we'd like to believe, but clearly one implies a greater degree of transience than the other. To solve this problem, Ptolemy and his descendants would instead cultivate a professional army, one that would be bound to the land of Egypt both figuratively and literally.

The Egyptian military was largely based on the cleruchic system. The term *Kleurochos* literally means "land-owner", and the system operates on that principle. Instead of just paying a wage, the government would provide each soldier a piece of property measured in *arouras*, the amount of cultivatable land. The size of each land grant varied depending on the role, with infantry receiving 25-30 *arouras* and up to

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<sup>20</sup> Manning, J.G. "The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC" Pgs. 104-106

<sup>21</sup> P. Giessen 2; P.Petr.2 I; Parca, M. "The Women of Ptolemaic Egypt: The View from Papyrology" in "A Companion to Women in the Ancient World" Pgs. 323-325; Haring, B. "Administration and Law: Pharaonic" in "A Companion to Ancient Egypt" Pgs. 235-236; Ruprecht, H.A. "Marriage Contract Regulations and Documentary Practice in the Greek Papyri" Scripta Classica Israelica vol. XVII 1998 pp. 60-62

100 for cavalrymen.<sup>22</sup> To give a sense of scope, one *aroura* is roughly equivalent to .7 acres, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an American football field.<sup>23</sup> Now I don't mean to suggest the image of Cincinnatus-like figures working the land before being called to service, turning their ploughshares into swords in defense of their homeland. Certainly, generations of immigrants living in Egypt probably had substantial personal ties to their family farms and plots. But the grants were intended to provide a steady income for full time soldiers, who would often rent out parts or the entirety of their lots to others, including native Egyptians.<sup>24</sup> This worked to the security of both the soldiers and the government, as these properties could be kept within the soldier's families and passed along to their descendants, while the Ptolemies could count on generations of new troops to bolster their ranks. Not to mention that this meant the overall amount of land that was being cultivated increased, ergo, increasing the amount of taxable income.<sup>25</sup>

For the most part, the cleruchies would be occupied by soldiers of Greco-Macedonian origin.<sup>26</sup> Ptolemy I would settle thousands of Greek mercenaries that were either captured or recruited during the wars between Alexander's Successors, and even in Alexander's time a substantial body of troops would remain behind as he continued on his conquest.<sup>27</sup> However, there was a significant portion of the army that was recruited from outside of Greece and Macedonia, and incorporated into the cleruchic system. Jews taken captive in Ptolemy I's seizure of Judea or attracted by economic opportunities found themselves enlisted in the army, with a few sizeable communities in the Arsinoite nome and stationed along Egypt's fortresses.<sup>28</sup> From North Africa we find Libyans and other tribesmen serving as cavalry or infantry, and despite their hesitation the Ptolemies did employ native Egyptians, albeit in smaller amounts or in times of extreme duress.<sup>29</sup> Substantial numbers of Thracians would also immigrate to Egypt, and we even find communities of Celts settled in the nomes – members who were either part of the initial migration of Celtic tribes into Asia Minor during the 270s, or their descendants recruited from Galatia.<sup>30</sup>

At its peak in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Ptolemaic army was gargantuan. Specific ancient accounts can provide us with clues as to the actual size, like the description of Ptolemy II's military parade or the organization of the battle line of Raphia in 218.<sup>31</sup> One expert suggests that during times of war, the Ptolemaic military numbered roughly 170,000 troops.<sup>32</sup> The Seleucids meanwhile could muster about 120,000, though much of the difference is likely due to the vast Egyptian fleet that helped safeguard Ptolemaic interests

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<sup>22</sup> Fischer-Bovet, C. and Sanger P. "Security and Border Policy" in "A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt" Pg. 167

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/weights/area.html>

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, N. "Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt" Pg. 32

<sup>25</sup> Fischer-Bovet, C. "Army and Society in Ptolemaic Egypt" Pg. 199

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, N. "Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt", Pg. 21;

<sup>27</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 18.21.7–9, 19.84.1-4, 19.85.3; Plutarch, *Life of Demetrius*, 5, 19; Arrian, *Anabasis*, 3.5.5

<sup>28</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.1.4-9; Aristeas, *Letter to Philocrates*, 12-15; Bickermann, E.J. "The Jews in the Greek Age" Pg. 84

<sup>29</sup> Polybius, *Histories*, 5.65.5; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 19.80.4

<sup>30</sup> Cunliffe, B. "The Ancient Celts, 2nd Edition" Pgs. 207-209

<sup>31</sup> Appian, *Preface*, 10; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 196a-203b;

<sup>32</sup> Fischer-Bovet, C. "Army and Society in Ptolemaic Egypt" Pg. 76

across the Mediterranean.<sup>33</sup>

In order to keep the peace locally, the Egyptian government employed a police force located in both city and countryside. The *phylakitai* would be the day-to-day law enforcement agents, performing functions not too dissimilar from modern police officers: leading criminal investigations, overseeing the apprehension and detainment of criminals and suspects, and acting as mediators during litigations.<sup>34</sup> Those lower on the totem pole would be given responsibility of more tedious tasks like handling vast amounts of paperwork both internally and from civilian petitions, guarding property and grain shipments, and we even have a papyrus fragment of an officer who was the designated errand boy collecting musicians and food for a party.<sup>35</sup> As much as a force is needed to protect the roads, there was also the need to oversee the great artery of Egypt, the Nile River. The relatively calm waters of the Nile made it a natural highway to allow for the movement of commercial goods and people at a reasonable and cost-effective rate. But this also encouraged pirates and bandits, who would snatch slower-moving vessels or hold up travelers who had docked for the night. Written in the time of Ptolemy VIII, a police report filed on behalf of a Paalas reveals how bold the pirates could be: Paalas was a guard stationed on an government-sanctioned ship belonging to a high-ranking official, and a group of robbers forcibly boarded the anchored craft and assaulted Paalas, all the while vandalizing the ship and stealing whatever they could.<sup>36</sup> It is likely that a police force was dedicated exclusively to patrolling the Nile, with guard posts staffed by dedicated officials who were also incorporated the cleruchic system.<sup>37</sup> In unstable periods or for high priority cargo and travelers, they could also act as escorts. Two interesting points of note: one was that the percentage of policemen within the adult population of Egypt was approximately 3.0%.<sup>38</sup> To put that into perspective, the percentage of active police officers in the population of the United States is about 0.3%.<sup>39</sup> Such a difference may suggest a degree of instability in Ptolemaic rule, or high crime rates brought about by endemic poverty and tension between Egyptian and Greek communities. For all of Alexandria's splendor, mob violence seems to have been a recurring feature of its history – Polybius was shocked at the level of chaos and response from the government under Ptolemy VIII, which admittedly was a period of civil war.<sup>40</sup> But another noteworthy element of the police force is that it recruited very heavily from the Egyptian population from its earliest incarnations, and it was far more integrated than the army.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For a discussion on Seleucid manpower, see Bar-Kochva, B. "The Seleucid Army: Organization and Tactics in the Great Campaigns" Pgs. 7-18; Aperghis, G.G. "The Seleucid Royal Economy: The Finances and Financial Administration of the Seleucid Empire" Pg. 197

<sup>34</sup> Bauschatz, J. "Law and Enforcement in Ptolemaic Egypt" Pgs. 53-64

<sup>35</sup> P. Hib. I 54.1–32

<sup>36</sup> P. Tebt. III.1 802.1-20

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of the Nile police, see Kruse, T. "The Nile police in the Ptolemaic period" in "The Ptolemies, the Sea and the Nile: Studies in Waterborne Power" Pgs. 172-184

<sup>38</sup> Rowlandson, J. "Administration and Law: Graeco-Roman" in "A Companion to Ancient Egypt" Pg. 240

<sup>39</sup> Taken from the National Sources of Law Enforcement Employment Data, April 2016,

<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/nsleed.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, 34.14; Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.12; For later examples see Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.102, Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.83, Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.8.1, Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.13-15

<sup>41</sup> Fischer-Bovet, C. and Sanger P. "Security and Border Policy" in "A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt" Pg. 170

On that last point, I believe that this is a sufficient enough overview of the organization of Egypt's administrative layout, lest we get too bogged down in the tiny details. But with a general understanding, we can now explore the systems by which the Ptolemies extracted the wealth from the countryside, mainly through taxation and the gift that is the Nile River.

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## **ECONOMY AND AGRICULTURE**

It might seem like an obvious question, but how did the Ptolemies become so wealthy? There were several state-controlled monopolies that could directly fund the government's coffers. Egypt was one of the exclusive cultivators of papyrus, the paper of the Mediterranean world. Commodities like linen and oil were often overseen directly by the crown.<sup>42</sup> Trade routes spanning across the seas and sands would be developed and promoted, with places like Alexandria serving as the hub for merchants who brought exotic goods from Africa or India (along with the various fees for imports and docking in the harbor). But the revenues that these would bring in would pale in comparison to Egypt's most valuable product: grain, or more specifically wheat and barley, of which no other land in the known world could rival in terms of output.

Most of this abundance would indeed be thanks to the Nile River, arguably the most important agricultural region in all human history, and the great shaper of Egypt's identity and lifestyle. Herodotus' description of Egypt as the "gift of the Nile" is nothing short of an understatement.<sup>43</sup> To briefly summarize the inundation process: tropical monsoon rains from the highlands of Ethiopia swell the waters of the Blue Nile (one of the Nile's tributaries) and carry with it a vast amount of nutrient-rich sediment in the current. Though it is somewhat unusual to have a north-flowing river, gravity dictates that water will always run downhill, which is what exactly happens. Much of Egypt is at a lower elevation, and the course of the river is carried into the appropriately called Nile Valley. In late July-early August, the deluge spills over the banks of the river and carries the life-bringing waters and nutritious silt to enrich the fields, while the rest empties into the Nile Delta and Mediterranean. This is a pattern that occurs almost without fail, and its predictability is largely the reason why it was so invaluable. But fluctuations in the Nile's cycle could (and did) occur, and the resultant overflowing or lack thereof could lead to disastrous consequences in the harvesting of grain.<sup>44</sup> The Egyptian government was therefore understandably concerned about keeping tabs on the flooding, and although they probably did not rely on prophets like the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, they did have a system in place to measure and document each year's inundation.<sup>45</sup> Diodorus and Strabo describe the use of a "Nilometer", a series of fitted stones at Memphis with markings to indicate the height of the river.<sup>46</sup> An extension of this documentation can be seen in the lower levels of the government, as local leaders in nomes were

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<sup>42</sup> Manning, J.G. *"The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC"* Pg. 118

<sup>43</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.5

<sup>44</sup> For the failures of the Nile's flooding during the Roman period and its consequences, see Harper, K. *"The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire"*, Pgs. 132-136

<sup>45</sup> Gen. 40-41

<sup>46</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.36.10-11; Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.48

required to provide two annual measurements: one for when the land is immediately cultivated, and another when the crop is standing to determine the land's productivity (and, ergo, how much it can be taxed).<sup>47</sup>

But to take advantage of the Nile's blessings, an extensive irrigation system needed to be maintained. Crops would fail if they had to subsist on the water brought in by the measly amounts of precipitation that Egypt experiences, or if too much flooding occurs in the fields. Much of this was done at the local level, with village leaders making sure that all able-bodied adults pitched in the digging of canals and maintenance of the dikes.<sup>48</sup> Did the Ptolemaic government introduce any changes into the patterns of irrigation? Well, perhaps. It is unlikely that the Ptolemies carefully planned out the response of each inundation, in the sense that they did not presume the same flooding conditions each year. Egyptian exploitation of the Nile was rooted in thousands of years of experience, but they did not control nature any more than we do, hence the need to try and account for the variance of the floodwater's heights.<sup>49</sup> Still, the Ptolemies masterfully expanded the amount of cultivatable area in places like the Nile Delta, an area that require a far more intensive management program when compared to most of Egypt's arable lands due to the problems of salinization.<sup>50</sup> Scholars have theorized that some of the scientific advancements brought about during the Hellenistic period improved the efficiency of the irrigation process. The Archimedes screw, a hand cranked corkscrew pump thought to have been invented by the Syracusan scientist of the same name, could certainly have complemented the seesaw-like Egyptian *shaduf*, but the extent of its implementation is not well known.<sup>51</sup>

For all their limitations, the Ptolemies were capable of transforming the physical landscape of Egypt in an impressive display of engineering and organization. Approximately 60 miles to the southwest of Memphis is the region known as the Fayyum, an Arabic transliteration of the Egyptian name *P-iom* (meaning "the sea"). The Fayyum is what geologists would call a land depression, a product of wind and water erosion that results in a sunken elevation. To its northwest would be Lake Moeris, from which the Fayyum would be gravity-fed and create a veritable oasis, a land filled with marshlands and wild animals that would otherwise be surrounded by sandy dunes. Previous dynasties recognized its potential to support agriculture, such as Dynasty XII during the 1800s BC, but the oasis does not have a natural drainage system to prevent salinization, unlike much of the Nile Valley.<sup>52</sup> During the reigns of Ptolemy I and especially that of Ptolemy II, a massive project would be undertaken to reclaim the Fayyum. Tens of thousands of workers and engineers would coordinate to artificially lower the water level of Lake Moeris, draining it using a series of canals and dams to prevent the Nile's tributaries from replenishing it while in turn using them to water their fields.

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<sup>47</sup> Manning, J.G. "Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt" Pgs. 146-148

<sup>48</sup> Kehoe, D. "The Economy: Graeco-Roman" in "A Companion to Ancient Egypt" Pgs. 310-311; Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pgs. 73-76; Lloyd, A.B. "The Ptolemaic Period" in "The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt" Pg. 418

<sup>49</sup> Eyre, C. "The Economy: Pharaonic" in "A Companion to Ancient Egypt" Pg. 292-293

<sup>50</sup> Monson, A. "From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt" Pgs. 49-50

<sup>51</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.34.2; Eyre, C. "The Economy: Pharaonic" in "A Companion to Ancient Egypt" Pg. 292

<sup>52</sup> Callendar, G. "The Middle Kingdom" in "The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt" Pg. 164; Monson, A. "From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt" Pgs. 52-53



This hard work would be greatly rewarded. The reclamation of the Fayyum would triple the amount of cultivatable land available in the region, going from approximately 400 km<sup>2</sup> up to 1500 km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for around 10% of the total arable land in the entirety of Egypt.<sup>53</sup> There are hints of problems with combatting the salinity of the soil, since the lack of any natural drainage systems can lead to standing water, and the threat of the desert encroaching upon the landscape was ever present.<sup>54</sup> However, that doesn't diminish the fact that it should be placed in the ranks of the most impressive engineering feats in all of antiquity. An apt comparison could be made between the Ptolemaic Fayyum and Seleucid North Syria. Both were relatively underdeveloped and weren't densely populated, yet they had potential, and this made them attractive to their respective dynasties who sought to reform the landscape in order to suit their ideological and political needs. The Fayyum was seen as a gift to Egypt from the Ptolemies, and it certainly bears their dynastic stamp: as an administrative unit, the oasis would be known as the Arsinoite nome, named after Ptolemy II's sister-wife Arsinoe II, and was the only nome to have such a designation.<sup>55</sup> The population of the Fayyum greatly expanded, going from a few scattered villages to 100,000 individuals spread across 145 settlements by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century alone.<sup>56</sup> The revenues brought about by such an increase in overall productivity must have also been substantial. From a military perspective, the sudden availability of arable land without any prior claims of ownership provided an excellent opportunity to parcel it out to cleruchs, who provided thousands of new soldiers and made up about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of all landowners in the region.<sup>57</sup>

Thanks to the fertility brought by the Nile River and its paradoxically inhospitable climate outside of its immediate zone, Egypt was the one of the most populated and densely settled regions in the Mediterranean if not the world. Estimates from ancient authors suggests that the population of Egypt reached between 3 and 7 million at the turn of the millennium.<sup>58</sup> This also doesn't take into consideration the population of Alexandria, which apparently held another 500,000 residents within its borders.<sup>59</sup> Modern estimates are lower, roughly 3 to 4 million inhabitants, but still quite large relative to the time.<sup>60</sup> But it is when we look at the population density that the contrast between Egypt and other lands becomes striking. As a province of the Roman Empire during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, lowball estimates suggest that there were 167 persons per square kilometer – the second most dense region, Italy, “only” had 45 persons per square kilometer.<sup>61</sup> This number has been estimated as high as 300, far greater than many industrialized nations like modern France.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Manning, J.G. “*Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt*” Pg. 107; Monson, A. “*From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*” Pgs. 40-41

<sup>54</sup> Monson, A. “*From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*” Pgs. 52-54

<sup>55</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.4, 17.1.39

<sup>56</sup> Manning, J.G. “*Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt*” Pg. 107; Monson, A. “*From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*” Pgs. 37-41

<sup>57</sup> Fischer-Bovet, C. “*Army and Society in Ptolemaic Egypt*” Pgs. 202-209

<sup>58</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.31.8; Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 2.385

<sup>59</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 17.52.6

<sup>60</sup> Monson, A. “*From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*” Pgs. ; Apherghis, G.G. “*The Seleukid Royal Economy: The Finances and Financial Administration of the Seleukid Empire*” Pgs. 54-56

<sup>61</sup> Harper, K. “*The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*”, Pg. 31

<sup>62</sup> Chaveau, M. “*Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*” Pgs. 55-56

There's quite a lot of hungry mouths to feed, and even more if we consider that the Ptolemies were able to sell their exports. It's tough to determine the annual yield of Egyptian cultivation, but a few rough estimates can be made: one ancient writer suggests that the Ptolemaic government could reap about 1.5 million *artabas* a year.<sup>63</sup> One *artaba* equates to about 32 kg of grain, and it requires roughly 8 *artabas* to provide the caloric intake of an adult for an entire year. Scholarly estimates find this figure to be way too low, and suggest that 8 million (enough to feed over a million people) is probably a more accurate assessment.<sup>64</sup> Do note that this is just the surplus that was able to be collected, and does not count other crops that were grown on Egyptian soil. It is little wonder that Egypt would become the breadbasket of the Roman Empire, supplying the grain necessary to feed the largest city of the ancient world.

Certainly a large population and access to an abundant natural resource would make any ancient state prosperous. That is, of course, if that entity had sufficient logistical and coercive capabilities to do so. The wealth of the pharaohs was indeed legendary, and they had managed to operate with great success for the better part of three millennia. However, the taxation system by which the Ptolemies extracted wealth from the countryside was far more rigorously developed (or exploitative) than anything ever before seen in Egypt.<sup>65</sup> In simplified terms, the Ptolemaic state has been described as a Greek fiscal system imposed over and through Egyptian agricultural and political organizations, making it neither wholly Greek nor wholly Egyptian.<sup>66</sup>

To better understand the taxation process, we also need to understand land tenure, the legal categorization of land ownership.<sup>67</sup> In Ptolemaic Egypt, there is a general tripartite organization: the first is what is known as Royal or Crown Land. This refers to the land that is explicitly owned by the king, and its residents or tenants paid a rent directly to him, accounting for approximately half of all land within Egypt.<sup>68</sup> Even after centuries of having leases exchanged between families and occupants, royal land always officially remained the personal property of the monarchy. In contracts that relate to the transfer of ownership of royal land from one party to another, the expression "sold" is almost never used.<sup>69</sup> The Fayyum is a particularly unique situation: its status as new or virgin soil meant that it the Ptolemies could claim it by right (along with all associated revenues).<sup>70</sup> Next is Temple Land, owned by the priesthood and the hereditary families who comprised its ranks.<sup>71</sup> Donations of land to the temples was a common feature of pharaonic rule, their expressions of piety rewarded the recognition and legitimization by the priestly class, who could become quite powerful from the amount of land and revenues they possessed.<sup>72</sup> The last is Cleruchic Land, and as we discussed earlier it was given to the soldiers of the Ptolemaic army in order to establish their roots and provide a stable income while they

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<sup>63</sup> Jerome, *Daniel*, 11.5

<sup>64</sup> Manning, J.G. "*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*" Pg. 126

<sup>65</sup> Manning, J.G. "*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*" Pg. 53

<sup>66</sup> Manning, J.G. "*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*" Pg.

<sup>67</sup> Monson, A. "*From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*" Pgs. 76-78

<sup>68</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.73.6

<sup>69</sup> Lewis, N. "*Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt*", Pg. 35

<sup>70</sup> Wilkinson, T. "*The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*" Pgs. 453-454

<sup>71</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.73.2-5

<sup>72</sup> Manning, J.G. "*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*" Pg. 83

served.<sup>73</sup>

Like all good accountants, the Egyptian government was always keeping tabs on the status of the land and its inhabitants, as well as how the land was being used. Though it might have not been as rigorously organized as its Roman counterpart, census-taking and documentation did indeed play an important role in providing tax assessments.<sup>74</sup> Households would register the number of individuals, the amount of livestock they possessed, the types of crops that were grown on the fields, etc. As I mentioned before, the government required village leaders to take two annual measurements of the amount of arable land during the flood period so that they could adjust the tax accordingly in times of plenty or hardship. Following the measurement of arable land, the scribes (who would be responsible for ensuring that it took place) would provide a tax receipt indicating the area of cultivation, usually in the form of an ostraca. This essentially dictated what the recipient was expected to pay, but it also placed an upper limit on what actually could be taken, and may have even been a way to protect the taxpayer from overzealous collectors.<sup>75</sup>

The sheer number and variety of taxes is quite exhaustive, and they ranged in description and practice. The “salt tax”, for instance, was introduced during the time of Ptolemy II and would end up becoming one of the most important revenue streams during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. We actually don’t know what the tax exactly entailed, but it was a rather small sum placed on every head in Egypt and functionally similar to a poll tax.<sup>76</sup> The *apomoira* tax was placed on vineyards and orchards, accounting for 1/6<sup>th</sup> of their harvest, and would go directly to furnish the cult of Arsinoe II.<sup>77</sup> Unlike other land taxes, the *artabeia* tax was not based on productivity of the field, but rather a fixed rate that was dependent on the number of *auroras* of land you owned.<sup>78</sup> These kinds of taxes seem to have been instituted as a sort of “fiscal safety net”, providing an income that was not hanging on the necessity of a good harvest season.<sup>79</sup>

Certainly the king was keen to garner as many revenues as he possibly could, but not all subjects were treated the same when it came to the application of taxes. This may seem obvious, since a poor family living in Alexandria was probably not going to incur the same variety or amount as a wealthy owner of a vast orchard. The registration of households would provide the assessment of things like the salt tax, but your career dictated the types of taxes that needed to be paid: farmers involved in animal husbandry could be expected to pay per every head of livestock, whereas potters and weavers faced fees depending on the amount of pots and cloth they sold.<sup>80</sup> But the taxation system also allowed for several

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<sup>73</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.73.7-9

<sup>74</sup> Manning, J.G. “*The Ptolemaic Governmental Branches and the Role of Temples and Elite Groups*” in “*A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*” Pg. 113; Chaveau, M. “*Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*” Pg. 55

<sup>75</sup> Manning, J.G. “*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*” Pg. 129

<sup>76</sup> von Reden, S. “*Monetization of the Countryside*” in “*A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*” Pgs. 222-223; Manning, J.G. “*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*” Pg. 133

<sup>77</sup> Monson, A. “*From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*” Pgs. 162-163; Chaveau, M. “*Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*” Pg. 36; Manning, J.G. “*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*” Pg. 133

<sup>78</sup> Monson, A. “*From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*” Pgs. 172-174

<sup>79</sup> von Reden, S. “*Monetization of the Countryside*” in “*A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*” Pg. 223

<sup>80</sup> Thompson, D.J. “*The Infrastructure of Splendour: Census and Taxes in Ptolemaic Egypt*” in “*Hellenistic Constructs: Essays in Culture, History, & Historiography*” Pgs. 251-252

exemptions, whether they were donatives made by the monarchy or as part of one's legal status. A remission on taxes of any kind could be a useful tool in securing the loyalty of their followers. The famous Rosetta Stone was dedicated on behalf of Ptolemy V in 196 BC, and it celebrates the king gifting the temples an exemption on the *artabeia* tax – which was more than likely an attempt to restore goodwill between the crown and the priests following the conclusion of the great revolt that same year. One controversial aspect of the Ptolemaic taxation system was that it categorized subjects by origin, such as Greek or Egyptian. In turn, these individuals would be placed in different tax brackets, with those in the “Greek” bracket given tax privileges and an overall reduced burden when generally compared those in the Egyptian one. To clarify: the use of such designations was not wholly centered on ethnicity. As we will see in later episodes, ethnic identity can be quite fluid when it comes to Hellenistic Egypt, and some of the categories defy normal convention. “Persian” is one of those unique examples, because though it appears in the tax records and censuses, it may refer to Hellenized Egyptians or Greeks communities that resided in Egypt before the arrival of Alexander rather than those of actual Persian descent.<sup>81</sup> There are many examples of individuals who were not ethnically Greek, but were placed in the Greek tax bracket because they adhered to or identified with Greek cultural norms.<sup>82</sup> Ptolemy II specifically provided tax exemptions for doctors, tutors, and athletes as an incentive for them to immigrate to Egypt to encourage the spread of Greek culture. Of course, the supposition that cultural superiority is more acceptable than racial superiority is a bit of a moral quagmire anyways, and not one I really want to get into at this exact moment.

So far, we've seen how taxes were assessed, and what kind of taxes could be imposed. Now we need to talk about how they were collected. Ultimately, the Ptolemaic taxation process was rooted in the practices of 4<sup>th</sup> century Athens, and tax collection was derived from two main methods.<sup>83</sup> The first would be through the use of state-appointed agents, who would personally oversee the collection of taxes and rent.<sup>84</sup> Often times we find various groups of officials working together, such as scribes and the police who operated down the local level. The other is what is known as “tax farming”, a system by which private bidders would pay for the right to collect a specific tax for that fiscal year.<sup>85</sup> Essentially, the farmer would guarantee a set amount of money or tax that would be collected. At the end of tax season, the state would be able to claim that guaranteed amount, whether the tax farmer managed to meet the quota or not. But any residual collections would be directly pocketed. Farming was mainly used for taxes that imposed high transactional costs and weren't as well documented, which could create more work than what it may be worth. By doing this the state is guaranteed an income of some variety, but it may also have led to predatory behaviors and abuses inflicted upon the population by representatives

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<sup>81</sup> Chaveau, M. “*Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*” Pgs. 158-159; Fischer-Bovet, C. “*Army and Society in Ptolemaic Egypt*” Pg. 187

<sup>82</sup> Clarysse, W. “*Ethnic Identity: Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans*” in “*A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*” Pgs. 304-305

<sup>83</sup> Manning, J.G. “*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*” Pg. 153

<sup>84</sup> For instance, Polycrates collecting the revenues of Cyprus for King Ptolemy in Polybius, *Histories*, 18.55.5

<sup>85</sup> For a direct example, see Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.4.4; Monson, A. “*From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*” Pg. 233-234; Manning, J.G. “*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*” Pgs. 152-153

looking to make a killing.<sup>86</sup>

When it came to finally paying up, there were also two mediums of payment: in coin, and in kind. The introduction of large-scale usage of coined money in Egypt was a major economic reform instituted by the Ptolemies. For the vast majority of its history, Egypt did not have access to an easily portable form of currency, and its financial system can be described as a "staple economy".<sup>87</sup> Payments were primarily made in kind, which simply means material goods themselves acted as the mediums of exchange - taxes or wages could be compensated in the form of grain or beer, to name but a few major staple goods that Egypt was well known for.<sup>88</sup> Precious metals like gold or silver were certainly used during the Middle and New Kingdom, and coins were circulated within immigrant Greek and Jewish communities living in Egypt before being fully introduced during the Persian period.<sup>89</sup> However, it would be under Ptolemy I and II that the Egyptian economy would truly become monetized to any significant degree.

Coins possess many advantages that items in kind do not. Unlike goods such as food or organic materials, precious metals are not subject to spoilage and degradation to any comparable degree. Bulk goods or silver and gold bullion lack the portability of coins, which can be subdivided into smaller units and allow for flexible spending. One other benefit that straddled the line between tangible and intangible was how standardized coinage directly bolsters the prestige and power of a ruler. If a monarch was able to guarantee the purity of a coin's silver or gold content, stamped with his own dynastic portrait or seal, then this inherently kept the value much higher as it was seen more reliable by merchants and anyone whose hands they would pass through. In turn, because they're able to guarantee its value and stability, the purchasing and symbolic power of the monarchy is enhanced precisely because they had quality currency. Contrary to the title of the episode, Egyptian coinage was largely based on the silver denomination, created through a series of trial and error during the reign of Ptolemy I.<sup>90</sup> The purchasing power of the currency eventually hit its peak just before the reign of Ptolemy IV, before undergoing a seemingly endless spiral of inflation and debasement. Thanks to the costs of warfare and instability, the amount of silver per coin gradually declined, and bronze increasingly became the preferred unit of exchange. But this also drove up prices, and attempts to combat it just resulted in a greater reduction of silver purity.<sup>91</sup>

One of the peculiar aspects of the Ptolemaic monetary economy is how it was an epichoric or closed system.<sup>92</sup> Coins minted by the Ptolemies were meant to stay within Egypt, or at the very least within their geographic spheres of influence. Anyone looking to deal with foreign currency was subject to high

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<sup>86</sup> Manning, J.G. "The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC" Pg. 153; Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pgs. 88-90; Lewis, N. "Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt" Pgs. 18-19

<sup>87</sup> Colburn, H.P. "The Role of Coinage in the Political Economy of Fourth Century Egypt" in "Ptolemy I and the Transformation of Egypt, 404-282 BCE" Pgs. 73-76

<sup>88</sup> Wilkinson, T. "The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt" Pgs. 341-342

<sup>89</sup> von Reden, S. "Monetization of the Countryside" in "A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt" Pgs. 217-218

<sup>90</sup> von Reden, S. "Monetization of the Countryside" in "A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt" Pgs. 220-222

<sup>91</sup> Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pgs. 84-87

<sup>92</sup> Thonemann, P. "The Hellenistic World: Using Coins as Sources", Pgs. 121-123

exchange rates and scrutiny from government officials, and to do business in Alexandria they needed to acquire Ptolemaic currency.<sup>93</sup> In theory, this would increase the value of exports from Egypt and reduce spending on imports. However, it was more likely because there are almost no natural silver deposits in Egypt, and the government didn't want its currency to be sent abroad and out of circulation.<sup>94</sup> Like I mentioned in the last episode, the implementation of Ptolemaic coinage was invariably Greek in nature. Unlike statues or royal iconography, coins never deviated from their intended cultural audience in the larger Mediterranean world. The Seleucids sometimes used Iranian or Syriac imagery to appeal to their subjects, but you never see indigenous Egyptian elements emblazoned on the coin portraits, which communicated power and royal authority through a Greek language (both literally and symbolically).<sup>95</sup>

Because of the closed monetary economy and the various means of paying taxes, there needed to be a reliable and reasonably accessible way to exchange currency – therefore, banks became this means of exchange. Banking in Egypt worked in two forms: royal and concessionary. Royal banking was government operated with one or more branches located in each major city, and it was mainly focused on processing taxation-related affairs, such as taking deposits on taxes or holding on to tax receipts. Concessionary banking handled your day-to-day operations, privately-run institutions that could be used as middlemen for transactions between two parties or providing loans and personal accounts. One could even place jewelry and precious metals as a guarantee on a loan or to get a quick buck if desperate enough, leading one scholar to suggest that they were as much pawn shops as banking institutions.<sup>96</sup> To a certain extent temples could also act as banks as well.

Despite the introduction of coinage, most taxes continued to be paid in kind.<sup>97</sup> For taxes related to agriculture, this case wheat, the delivery would be made in the following manner: the peasant or farmer would harvest the grain, and divided up the lot based upon what they needed versus what they owed and what they could sell. Everything beyond the keep of the farmer would be sent to state-run granaries for storage and distribution, where it was either exported for sale to the wider Mediterranean world or to feed the populations of big cities like Alexandria or Ptolemais.<sup>98</sup>

The annual revenue brought in by the Ptolemaic government must have been staggering. Ancient authors provide us with few clues, but it is suggested that they acquired 14,800 silver talents a year during the reign of Ptolemy II, and “only” 12,500 silver talents a year during the reign of Ptolemy XII.<sup>99</sup> In order to better illustrate the magnitude of these amounts, let's provide some comparisons. Ptolemy II's

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<sup>93</sup> Thonemann, P. “*The Hellenistic World: Using Coins as Sources*” Pg. 123

<sup>94</sup> Thonemann, P. “*The Hellenistic World: Using Coins as Sources*”, Pg. 123

<sup>95</sup> Manning, J.G. “*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*” Pg. 134

<sup>96</sup> Lewis, N. “*Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt*” Pgs. 46-49; von Reden, S. “*Monetization of the Countryside*” in “*A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*” Pgs. 222-223

<sup>97</sup> Manning, J.G. “*The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*”; Thompson, D.J. “*The Infrastructure of Splendor: Census and Taxes in Ptolemaic Egypt*” in “*Hellenistic Constructs: Essays in Culture, History, & Historiography*” Pg. 249

<sup>98</sup> Chaveau, M. “*Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*” Pg. 78

<sup>99</sup> Jerome, *Daniel*, 11.5; Strabo, *Geography*, 18.1.13

yearly income was greater than that of the entire wealth of the Athenian empire in the year 430 BC.<sup>100</sup> The Seleucid Empire, which encompassed a much larger territory and had a total population of 15-20 million, collected roughly one and a half talents of silver per 1,000 people taxed.<sup>101</sup> The Ptolemaic tax regime was more than double that figure, calculated to between three and four talents per 1,000 despite possessing a population that was maybe one-third the size.<sup>102</sup> The taxes collected in Egypt by the Romans would only meet about half of the amounts that were acquired during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century under Ptolemy II and III.<sup>103</sup>

With all of these figures and statistics, it would not be surprising to envision the Ptolemaic state as a well-oiled highly bureaucratic powerhouse made up of a mass of dedicated officials. Of course, this doesn't really inspire a positive image. The nature of the Ptolemaic government, that being a small Greco-Macedonian elite ruling over a large body of indigenous subjects bent on extracting as much wealth as possible, has drawn some unfavorable comparisons to colonial empires of the last few centuries. Granting privileges based upon what appears to be ethnic categories does not really help their case either. We will be able to get a greater perspective on the relationships between Greeks and Egyptians in episodes 061 and 062, but sufficed to say that tensions always existed to some degree or another, and the heavy tax regime probably did not do much to engender feelings of mutual goodwill. However, we also need to take a step back and reassess the capabilities of the Ptolemaic government

A common assumption made about Egypt is that all land is technically crown land, and in the context of the Ptolemies we emphasize the term "spear-won land" indicating a personal possession by right of conquest and military prowess.<sup>104</sup> For the previous dynasties, one can use the concept of divine or absolute monarchy to justify the pharaoh's claims of ownership. While I believe that there is a degree of truth in this conceptualization, I also believe it exaggerates the power that we ascribe to ancient monarchies and relies on rather simplified models of despotic regimes. I tend to find myself along the lines of scholar J.G. Manning, who argues that we must also consider the relationships that the monarchy had with its constituency, comprised of either its own local representatives (government officials, local leaders) or the temple and priestly communities.<sup>105</sup>

In order to properly delegate power, the king needed to pay attention to the loyalty of his representatives and subjects, both Greek and otherwise.<sup>106</sup> A passage of the Revenue Laws presents us with the image of a model official, encouraging them to remain cheerful and optimistic while avoiding the company of embezzlers and other criminal enterprises.<sup>107</sup> I imagine that this was a very real fear for

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<sup>100</sup> Manning, J.G. "The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC" Pg. 126; Cartledge, P., E.E. Cohen, and L. Foxhall. "Money, Labour and Land: Approaches to the economies of ancient Greece" (2002); Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 2.13; It must be acknowledged that the Ptolemaic talent was lighter than the Attic talent, but still an impressive amount.

<sup>101</sup> Apherghis, G.G. "The Seleukid Royal Economy: The Finances and Financial Administration of the Seleukid Empire" Pg. 56

<sup>102</sup> Apherghis, G.G. "The Seleukid Royal Economy: The Finances and Financial Administration of the Seleukid Empire" Pgs. 248-251

<sup>103</sup> Manning, J.G. "The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC" Pg. 127

<sup>104</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 18.39.5; 18.43.1

<sup>105</sup> Manning, J.G. "Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Structure of Land Tenure" Pgs. 157-160

<sup>106</sup> Manning, J.G. "The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC" Pg. 82

<sup>107</sup> P. Tebt. III.1703

the Ptolemaic government, and skimming from the top almost assuredly took place to some extent. Of course, the Ptolemaic government attempted to curb embezzlement by holding agents financially accountable if there was a significant discrepancy between the projected and collected amounts. To a more disastrous effect, the *philoï* that the king surrounded himself with were also capable of abusing their positions or manipulating the ruler, and it would be even worse if they revolted or were involved in acts of palace intrigue. The most famous of these would include Sosibius, who oversaw the Egyptian government for the aloof Ptolemy IV, or the various eunuchs and teachers of the boy-king Ptolemy XII in the time of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar.<sup>108</sup>

There are also misconceptions about the ability of the pharaoh to compel his subjects to work, either to maintain the irrigation system or to supply the manpower necessary to complete imperial projects or monuments. Workers involved in the reclamation of the Fayyum voluntarily took contracts and were paid, not gang-pressed into service – though it must be said that the wages weren't that good and the labor itself must have been back-breaking.<sup>109</sup> Taxes would follow much the same pattern – a good shepherd shears his sheep rather than skinning them, after all.<sup>110</sup> Extenuating circumstances however, such as rapid inflation in conjunction with the financial costs of engaging in decades of endemic warfare with the kings of Syria, would compel the shepherds to shave a little too close to the skin. In turn, the flock could fight back. The Ptolemies faced several period of internal strife, the most famous revolt lasting from 204-196 BC which saw the installation of rebel pharaohs in Upper Egypt, but even during the apogee of Ptolemy III's reign there are hints of discontent.<sup>111</sup> On a smaller scale, farmers and peasants could refuse to till the land outright. The village of Kerkeosiris saw the equivalent of a sit-down strike in the year 118, brought about by high tax demands and poor land quality, which compelled the government in Alexandria to negotiate and lower the rent owed.<sup>112</sup>

Personally, I do not agree that a 1:1 comparison could be made between Ptolemaic Egypt and a colonial state like the British Raj. But to view the Ptolemaic government in the lens of a despotic or absolutist regime is also rooted in stereotypes of eastern or "Oriental" monarchies. New administrative systems derived from the Greek experience continued to function alongside the traditional power structures of Egypt. Life as a peasant was probably just as hard under the great dynasties of Egypt's past as it was under the Ptolemaic one, which is not an attempt to justify or rationalize the behavior of the Ptolemies nor any other great imperial state. We just need to take this behavior in context, and we must try to get a greater understanding of what life was like in Hellenistic Egypt from across all levels; rich and poor, Greek and Egyptian, and everything in between. This is what I plan to do in the subsequent episodes, but I think we have had enough heavy stuff for one day. What the Ptolemies were able to achieve was quite impressive. Their rule of almost 300 years as the longest lasting dynasty in both the context of Hellenistic and Egyptian history indicates that they were able to successfully combine a system that was both Greek and Egyptian in origin. The ability to direct and fund great imperial projects like the city of

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<sup>108</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 77-78; *Life of Cleomenes*, 33-35

<sup>109</sup> Manning, J.G. "Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Structure of Land Tenure" Pg. 107

<sup>110</sup> Suetonius, *Life of Tiberius*, 32.2

<sup>111</sup> Justin, *Epitome*, 27.1; Manning, J.G. "Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Structure of Land Tenure" Pgs 164-171

<sup>112</sup> P. Tebt. I 61b



Alexandria or the reclamation of the Fayyum, in addition to their careful management of the preexisting agricultural system, generated wealth on a scale that was impressive at both face value and relative to other ancient states. It is little wonder that Athenaeus, a Greek writer from Naucratis in Egypt, would comment on the reign of the Ptolemies as such:

*“What monarchy, fellow-banqueters, has ever been so rich in gold?... for it is only the Nile, the river truly called ‘gold-flowing’, that with its boundless crops of food actually washes down unadulterated gold which is harvested with no risk, so that it can supply all men sufficiently.”*<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 5.203c

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