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MANAGING THE ECONOMY OF ROMAN AND LATE ANTIQUE EGYPT

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Cycle de quatre conférences prononcées les 10, 13, 18 et 25 mai 2022 (invitation sur proposition du professeur Jean-Luc Fournet), disponible en audio et vidéo sur le site internet du Collège de France : <https://www.college-de-france.fr/agenda-conferencier-invite/managing-the-economy-of-roman-and-late-antique-egypt>

Management plays a large role in modern economies and societies, which have entire schools in universities devoted to the subject. But it has received little attention from papyrologists or historians of the millennium of Egypt's history from which we have abundant sources in the papyri. A survey of the scholarly literature shows that the words "manager" and "management" occur infrequently, and often from the viewpoint only of the owners of large landholdings. The situation is not different with the other principal languages of the field. Although the English terms reflect the Anglo-American origins of the abstract concept, management today is globalized. These lectures represent an initial attempt to look at the phenomenon of management and managers in the economy and society of Egypt under Roman rule; that is, from 30 BCE to the Arab conquest of 640-642 CE.

Because our evidence for the subject comes almost entirely from written documents, this is also an investigation into the role of written culture in management and particularly the place of literate and numerate education in forming a class of managers. Although some of the relevant skills can be found in educational texts from earlier periods, including in Demotic Egyptian, the enormous development of such texts in the Roman period was not, it is argued, a specious artifact of the survival of papyri but a reflection of changes in society and economy.

CONFÉRENCE 1 - *THE SHAPE OF THE LABOR FORCE*

Le 10 mai 2022

The scarcity of discussion of managers in the literature on Greco-Roman Egypt makes it necessary to say what this abstract term means. Much of this will emerge from the later lectures, where individual managers are discussed. A manager is not a principal, that is, not the owner of an estate or a civic magistrate. The manager works for that principal, running the operations of the enterprise, whether private or public. Managers are, on the other hand, not purely clerical; they have some degree of responsibility for their operations and often work at a distance from an absentee landowner or official. It is not clear that the ancients had any truly abstract concept corresponding to the modern generalized usage of the term.

The first step in assessing the role of management in the economy of Roman and Late Roman Egypt is to have a basic understanding of that economy. This lecture outlined those basics: a country with a high rate of urbanization by ancient standards, but with a labor force still largely engaged in agriculture. Management was required for the larger properties, particularly (but not only) those owned by urban residents, perhaps needing 10,000 managers across the country. It is harder to estimate numbers of managers in craft production, services, and commerce. Public administration demanded several tens of thousands in the cities and villages. Overall, the number of managers may have been around 100,000, or 6% of the adult male workforce. But this static estimate must be seen in the context of a growth in demand throughout the Roman centuries, as the economy became more complex and wealth more concentrated.

CONFÉRENCE 2 - *FORMING THE MANAGERIAL CLASS*

Le 13 mai 2022

Many managers, particularly at lower levels, undoubtedly had no formal education; some, as we shall see, were illiterate. They learned their craft on the job, as most people did. But for a large part of the work of management, literate and numerate skills were essential. Work on ancient education in the past several decades has given us a much better grasp of its stages and the role of surviving written texts in them. All education began with writing the alphabet, and then gradually more complex units, from syllabaries up to long passages. A fraction of those who had elementary education went on to the grammarian's classroom, acquiring a deeper mastery of Greek, both prose and poetry, and learning how to write both. Some subset of these young men—and by this point it was only men—went on to develop greater rhetorical proficiency, which was useful in public life.

But only the civic elite, perhaps a hundred families in each city, could aspire to a political role. Those destined for managerial roles, many of them serving those hundred families, needed a different formation, just as did those who would become professional copyists. Many of the future managers, particularly at higher levels, went some way through the grammarian's teaching, as well as learning more than one type of handwriting, suitable for different genres of expression. Some also had a training that we might, to a limited degree, compare to modern business education. Texts published recently or still being edited have made some of this education clearer. Students needed to know mathematics, particularly geometry, to compute the areas of agricultural fields, to know the volume of earth to be moved for irrigation or drainage, or to place an order for bricks, to mention only a few of the uses for geometry. They also needed to know the relevant units of measurement for length, area, and volume. And they had to be proficient in the Greek system of fractions, which lacked numerators higher than one and thus seems insanely complex to modern eyes.

Some of them also needed to know how to write contracts. Landowners entering into leases with tenants or lending them money did not go to lawyers; they had their own agents write the agreements, which were highly stereotyped in phraseology. In Late Roman school texts we find a number of model contracts, which aspiring managers would practice in order to make the needed verbiage flow almost automatically from their pens when needed. They also needed to be able to write intelligible letters, as the exchange of letters was central to management across even modest distances, communicating the availability of goods and their prices. Accounting, too, was important for many jobs.

Just as interesting is the range of relevant subjects, today central to business school education, that were lacking: strategy, marketing, operations management, labor relations, price negotiation, government regulation, motivation, and finance. These sound abstract or modern, but they refer to daily realities of antiquity too: How do you get tenants to pay their rent? How do you go about collecting money taxes in a village? What is involved in negotiating the sale of a large quantity of wine to a wholesaler? How do you manage a staff including both permanent and temporary workers? Where can you get short-term loans? And so on. These things were apparently learned on the job, not the subject of formal education.

CONFÉRENCE 3 - IDENTIFYING THE MANAGERS

Le 18 mai 2022

The papyri preserve an extensive set of titles used for managers. A developed hierarchy using many of these Greek titles can be described for the management of imperial estates in Late Antiquity. At the top was the *epitropos*, with responsibility for multiple areas. Perhaps just below the *epitropos* was the *curator*, the Latin equivalent

of the word, and below him the *phrontistes*, with provincial responsibility; then comes the *dioiketes*, in charge of one of Egypt's nomes, or administrative divisions. Finally, the *pronoetes* was in charge of a local unit, usually corresponding to a village, called a *prostasia*.

These terms mostly had a long history in Roman Egypt in the private sphere. Except for *curator*, they are good Greek words, many dating back to classical times. But it is surprising to discover that they do not emerge as terms for managers until the Roman period, even *phrontistes*, first attested in an administrative role in the early decades of the reign of Augustus. *Pronoetes* does not become prominent until the third century. That is also the period when *epitropos* begins to be important, typically referring to a higher level of supervision. All of these terms seem to reflect the Roman concept of *cura*, a domain of responsibility. There are also lower-level positions that can be seen as managerial, such as chiefs of groups of shepherds or managers of transport animals on larger estates.

The third century provides us with our best known and most extensively studied example of such a large estate, that of Aurelius Appianus, known from the documents accumulated by one of his *phrontistai*, Heroninos. We find a well-developed hierarchy, as we might by now anticipate. Less expected is the fact that many of the higher-ranking managers, at the level of central management of the estates in the Arsinoite nome, belong to the municipal elite, having held important civic offices. This archive defines clearly a characteristic we can also identify elsewhere, the tendency for the highest managers to come from the ranks of large landowners who themselves had managers working for them.

In private estates, our documentation tends to foreground the managers. In public administration, the reverse is true: the names and titles of the civic magistrates or tax officials are given, but only occasionally those who did the actual work for them. And even when we do have their titles, they are uninformative and given little sense of hierarchy. Finally, there are managers for whom we have no titles because of the nature of their documentation, who must be identified from their activities. These activities are discussed in the final lecture.

Even below the level of civic aristocrats, managers were mainly free persons. The Roman habit of using slaves or freedmen to manage enterprises, which is well known from the legal sources and epigraphy, does not seem to have been adopted in Egypt.

CONFÉRENCE 4 - THE MANAGER AT WORK

Le 25 mai 2022

A first case study involves a metropolitan family that used a substantial village landowner to manage their modest holdings in the village. Although the villager,

Aurelius Isidoros of Karanis, was (he says) illiterate, he could keep track of the metro-politans' transactions and balances in the village. Interestingly, one member of the more elite family himself worked in a managerial position for a still more important civic magistrate.

The account of the estate of Epimachos, which stands on a roll later reused to copy the Aristotelian *Constitution of Athens*, is more professionalized. Here, a central vineyard/orchard was directly operated by the manager, with hired labor, but there were also smaller, scattered properties part of the manager's charge. The account book of a *pronoetes* of scattered holdings around Kellis, in the Dakhla Oasis, also shows how one individual had to collect rents, document his receipts, disburse commodities to meet expenses of the estate, and account for the whole operation. His principal was four days' travel away, in another oasis, but he was only one of several such agents for this principal, Faustianus, who were located in Dakhla. There may have been a higher manager in Dakhla to whom the *pronoetai* reported; such a figure may be a city councillor in Trimithis, another Dakhla settlement, named Serenos. Even if he was not Faustianus' *epitropos* in Dakhla, Serenos did have a relationship with him, and we know that he had managerial duties other than for his own properties.

Another well documented relationship is that between the Roman veteran Lucius Bellenus Gemellus and his manager Epagathos. The manager seems to have been well enough educated to have an interest in Homer, although he may have started out as a slave and then been manumitted.

A much larger enterprise was the large assemblage of scattered properties, amounting perhaps to 500 arouras over more than 160 holdings, owned by a family in the Arsinoite nome known as the descendants of Patron. Most of our documents from this estate seem to come from files kept by their *phrontistes*, Tourbon. He offers an excellent instance of a manager capable of writing long legal documents, mostly leases, in a clear hand, as well as accounts, also very long.

In conclusion, I stress the Roman character of what we find in looking at the managers. There was little specialization, but a well-developed hierarchy. Managers were mainly men, but there is some evidence for women in such roles. The system rested on a delicate balance of experience and expertise with the Roman affection for amateurism. The relationship of management to writing is visible in the close match between levels of education and levels of management. It is in the Roman period the more specialized technical education seems to have been added to the options available to youths. Management did not, however, become a learned profession like law or medicine, nor did it develop a professional literature.

Management as practiced in Roman Egypt allowed larger-scale enterprises, with more salaried staff and increased capital investment. It thus facilitated the increasing economic inequality visible in our texts.
