

Egypt under the Roman Empire

Source: Strabo, *Geography*, XVII.i.52-53, ii.4-5; XVIII.i.12-13. In *The Geography of Strabo: Literally Translated, with Notes*, trans. H. C. Hamilton, esq., & W. Falconer (London: H. G. Bohn, 1854-1857), pp. 266-267, 272-274. The Oxyrhynchos Papyri. William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: Rome and the West, pp. 172-174, 244-247.

Strabo: *Geography* XVII, XVIII

Roman rule was established in Egypt after Octavian (Augustus) displaced the last ruler of the Ptolemaic line, the famous Cleopatra VII. It proved to be a great and rich province for Augustus, who organized the country not so much as a Roman Province but as the emperor's own special domain land. In Egypt, the Emperor was considered the successor of the ancient Pharaohs; his deputy—the prefect—ruled the country with an authority permitted to few other governors.

At present¹ Egypt is a Roman province, and pays considerable tribute, and is well-governed by prudent persons sent there in succession. The governor thus sent out has the rank of king. Subordinate to him is the administrator of justice, who is the supreme judge in many cases. There is another officer called the Idologus whose business is to inquire into property for which there is no claimant, and which of right falls to Caesar. These are accompanied by Caesar's freedmen and stewards, who are entrusted with affairs of more or less importance.

Three legions are stationed in Egypt, one in the city of Alexandria, the rest in the country. Besides these, there are also nine Roman cohorts quartered in the city, three on the borders of Ethiopia in Syene, as a guard to that tract, and three in other parts of the country. There are also three bodies of cavalry distributed at convenient posts.

Of the native magistrates in the cities, the first is the "Expounder of the Law"—who is dressed in scarlet. He receives the customary honors of the land, and has the care of providing what is necessary for the city. The second is the "Writer of the Records"; the third is the "Chief Judge"; the fourth is the "Commander of the Night Guard." These officials existed in the time of the Ptolemaic kings, but in consequence of the bad administration of the public affairs by the latter, the prosperity of the city of Alexandria was ruined by licentiousness. Polybius expresses his indignation at the state of things when he was there. He describes the inhabitants of Alexandria as being composed of three classes, first the Egyptians and natives, acute in mind, but very poor citizens, and wrongfully meddling in civic affairs. Second were the mercenaries, a numerous and undisciplined body, for it was an old custom to keep foreign soldiers—who from the worthlessness of their sovereigns knew better how to lord it than to obey. The third were the so-called "Alexandrines," who, for the same reason, were not orderly citizens; however they were better than the

mercenaries, for although they were a mixed race, yet being of Greek origin they still retained the usual Hellenic customs.

Such, then, if not worse, were the social conditions of Alexandria under the last kings. The Romans, as far as they were able, corrected—as I have said—many abuses, and established an orderly government—by setting up vice-governors, nomarchs, and ethnarchs, whose business it was to attend to the details of administration.

Herodotus and other writers trifle very much when they introduce into their histories the marvelous, like (an interlude) of music and song, or some melody; for example, by asserting that the sources of the Nile are near the numerous islands, at Syene and Elephantine, and that at this spot the river has an unfathomable depth. In the Nile there are many islands scattered about, some of which are entirely covered, others in part only, at the time of the rise of the waters. The very elevated parts are irrigated by means of screw pumps. Egypt was from the first disposed to peace, from having resources within itself, and because it was difficult of access to strangers. It was also protected on the north by a harborless coast and the Egyptian Sea; on the east and west by the desert mountains of Libya and Arabia, as I have said before. The remaining parts towards the south are occupied by Troglodytae, Blemmyes, Nubians, and Megabarzae Ethiopians above Syene. These are nomads, and not numerous nor warlike, but accounted so by the ancients, because frequently, like robbers, they attacked defenseless persons. Neither are the Ethiopians, who extend towards the south and Meroë, numerous nor collected in a body; for they inhabit a long, narrow, and winding tract of land on the riverside, such as we have before described; nor are they well prepared either for war or the pursuit of any other mode of life.

At present the whole country is in the same pacific state, proof of which is that the upper country is sufficiently guarded by three cohorts, and these not complete. Whenever the Ethiopians have ventured to attack them, it has been at the risk of danger to their own country. The rest of the forces in Egypt are neither very numerous, nor did the Romans ever once employ them collected into one army. For neither are the Egyptians themselves of a warlike disposition, nor the surrounding nations, although their numbers are very large.

Cornelius Gallus, the first governor of the country appointed by Augustus Caesar, attacked the city Heroöpolis, which had revolted,² and took it with a small body of men. He suppressed also in a short time an insurrection in the Thebaïis which originated as to the payment of tribute. At a later period Petronius resisted, with the soldiers about his person, a mob of

¹ In Augustus's time.

² in 28 BCE.

myriads of Alexandrines, who attacked him by throwing stones. He killed some, and compelled the rest to desist.

To what has been said concerning Egypt, we must add these peculiar products; for instance, the Egyptian bean, as it is called, from which is obtained the ciborium, and the papyrus, for it is found here and in India only; the perseae [peach] grows here only, and in Ethiopia; it is a lofty tree, and its fruit is large and sweet; the sycamine, which produces the fruit called the sycomorus, or fig-mulberry, for it resembles a fig, but its flavor is not esteemed. The corsium also (the root of the Egyptian lotus) grows there, a condiment like pepper, but a little larger. There are in the Nile fish in great quantity and of different kinds, having a peculiar and indigenous character. The best known are the oxyrhynchos [the sturgeon], and the lepidotus, the latus, the alabes, the coracinus, the choerus, the phagrorius, called also the phagrus. Besides these are the silurus, the citharus, the thrissa [the shad], the cestreus [the mullet], the lychnus, the physa, the bous, and large shellfish which emit a sound like that of wailing.

The animals peculiar to the country are the ichneumon and the Egyptian asp, having some properties which those in other places do not possess. There are two kinds, one a span in length, whose bite is more suddenly mortal than that of the other; the second is nearly an orguia [six feet] in size, according to Nicander, the author of the Theriaca. Among the birds are the ibis and the Egyptian hawk, which, like the cat, is more tame than those elsewhere. The nycticorax is here peculiar in its character; for with us it is as large as an eagle, and its cry is harsh; but in Egypt it is the size of a jay, and has a different note. The tamest animal, however, is the ibis; it resembles a stork in shape and size. There are two kinds, which differ in color; one is like a stork, the other is entirely black. Every street in Alexandria is full of them. In some respects they are useful; in others troublesome. They are useful, because they pick up all sorts of small animals and the offal thrown out of the butchers' and cooks' shops. They are troublesome because they devour everything, are dirty, and with difficulty prevented from polluting in every way what is clean and what is not given to them.

Herodotus truly relates of the Egyptians that it is a practice peculiar to them to knead clay with their hands, and the dough for making bread with their feet. Caces is a peculiar kind of bread which restrains fluxes. Kiki [the castor-oil bean] is a kind of fruit sowed in furrows. An oil is expressed from it which is used for lamps almost generally throughout the country, but for anointing the body only by the poorer sort of people and laborers, both men and women. The coccina are Egyptian textures made of some plant, woven like those made of rushes, or the palm tree. Barley beer is a preparation peculiar to the Egyptians. It is common among many tribes, but the mode of preparing it differs in each. This, however, of all their usages is most to be admired—that they bring up all children that are born. They circumcise the males, as also the females,³ as is the custom also among the Jews, who are of Egyptian origin, as I said when I was treating of them.

The Oxyrhynchos Papyri

Most of the letters here given explain themselves. They are from papyri of the Imperial period, found at the Egyptian town of Oxyrhynchos, and serve to give a curious and valuable light upon the life of an obscure provincial community, circa late third & early fourth centuries CE.

1. Dioscorides, logistes⁴ of the Oxyrhynchite nome. The assault at arms by the youths will occur tomorrow, the 24th. Tradition, no less than the distinguished character of the festival, requires that they do their uttermost in the gymnastic display. The spectators will be present at the two performances.

2. At a meeting of our body a dispatch was read from Theodorus, recently chosen in place of Areion, the scribe, to proceed to his highness, the Prefect [of Egypt] and attend his immaculate court. In this dispatch he explained that he is victor in the games and exempted from inquiries. We have, therefore, nominated Aurelianus to serve and we send you word accordingly that this fact may be brought to his knowledge, and no time be lost in his departure and attendance upon the court.

3. To Aurelius Theon, keeper of the training school, from Aurelius Asclepiades, son of Philadelphus, president of the council of the village of Bacchias. I desire to hire from you Tisais, the dancing girl, and another, to dance for us at the above village for fifteen days from the 13th Phaophi by the old [Egyptian] calendar. You shall receive as pay 36 drachmae a day, and for the whole period three artabai of wheat, and fifteen couples of loaves; also three donkeys to fetch them and take them back.

4. Chaereman requests your company at dinner, at the table of the lord Serapis at the Serapeum, tomorrow the 15th, at 9 o'clock.

5. Herais requests your company at dinner, in celebration of the marriage of her children, in her house tomorrow, the 5th, at 9 o'clock.

6. Greeting, my dear Serenia, from Petosiris. Be sure, dear, to come upon the 20th for the birthday festival of the god, and let me know whether you are coming by boat or by donkey, in order that we may send for you accordingly. Take care not to forget. I pray for your continued health.

7. To Flavius Thennyas, logistes of the Oxyrhynchite district, from Aurelius Nilus, son of Didysus, of the illustrious and most illustrious city of Oxyrhynchos, an egg seller by trade. I hereby agree on the August, divine oath by our lord the Emperor and the Caesars to offer my eggs in the market place publicly for sale, and to supply to the said city, every day without intermission; and I acknowledge that it shall be unlawful for me in the future to sell secretly or in my house. If I am detected in so doing, I shall be liable to penalty."

8. I married a woman of my own tribe ... a free-born woman, of free parents, and have children by her. Now Tabes, daughter of Ammonios and her husband Laloï, and Psenesis and Straton

³ I.e., cliterodectomy.

⁴ A high local magistrate in Roman Egypt.

their sons, have committed an act that disgraces all the chiefs of the town, and shows their recklessness; they carried off my wife and children to their own house, calling them their slaves, although they were free, and my wife has brothers living who are free. When I remonstrated, they seized me and beat me shamefully.

9. On the fourth of this month, Taorsenouphis, wife of Ammonios Phimon, an elder of the village of Bacchias although she had no occasion against me, came to my house, and made

herself most unpleasant to me. Besides tearing my tunic and cloak, she carried off 16 drachmae that I had put by, the price of vegetables I had sold. And on the fifth her husband, Ammonios Phimon, came to my house, pretending he was looking for my husband, and took my lamp and went up into the house. And he went off with a pair of silver armlets, weighing forty drachmae, while my husband was away from home.