



From Préaux to Property Rights: Changing Views of the Ptolemaic “Royal Economy”

Nico Dogaer

► To cite this version:

Nico Dogaer. From Préaux to Property Rights: Changing Views of the Ptolemaic “Royal Economy”. *Archimède : archéologie et histoire ancienne*, 2023, 10, pp.119-128. <10.47245/archimede.0010.ds2.05>. <hal-04305584>

HAL Id: hal-04305584

<https://hal.science/hal-04305584v1>

Submitted on 24 Nov 2023

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FROM PRÉAUX TO PROPERTY RIGHTS: CHANGING VIEWS OF THE PTOLEMAIC “ROYAL ECONOMY”

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ABSTRACT

The historiography of fiscality in Ptolemaic Egypt is dominated by questions of state control, centralisation, dirigisme, and economic planning, often expressed in terms of the “royal economy”. The idea of such a strictly supervised state economy is rooted in the still fundamental syntheses of the 1930s and 1940s. In the meantime, both the publication of new documents and the adoption of new theoretical frameworks have led scholars to challenge this concept. In this paper, the history of the dirigiste views and the recent developments eroding them are traced. Two core areas are singled out and treated in more detail: land tenure and taxation, and the so-called “royal monopolies”. In addition, some reflections are offered on the concept of the “royal economy” itself, suggesting that there may be more useful ways to approach the Ptolemaic fiscal system.

KEYWORDS

Ptolemaic Egypt,
Papyrology,
Political economy,
Taxation,
Markets.

DE PRÉAUX AUX DROITS DE PROPRIÉTÉ : NOUVELLES APPROCHES DE L’« ÉCONOMIE ROYALE » EN ÉGYPTE LAGIDE

L’historiographie de la fiscalité dans l’Égypte lagide est dominée par les questions d’étatisme, de centralisation, de dirigisme et de planification économique, souvent exprimées en termes d’« économie royale ». L’idée d’une économie d’État étroitement contrôlé par les rois est ancrée dans les synthèses encore fondamentales des années 1930 et 1940. Depuis cette époque, la publication de nouveaux documents et l’adoption de nouveaux cadres théoriques ont conduit les chercheurs à mettre en question ce paradigme. Dans cet article, l’histoire de ces vues dirigistes, aussi bien que les progrès récents qui les ont érodées, sont retracées. Deux domaines principaux sont traités plus en détail : le régime et la fiscalité foncières, et les prétendus « monopoles royaux ». De plus, quelques réflexions sont proposées sur l’utilité du concept d’« économie royale » lui-même comme approche pour aborder le système fiscal lagide.

MOTS-CLÉS

Égypte lagide,
papyrologie,
économie politique,
fiscalité,
marchés.

The conflation of economy and fiscality is common in ancient history, inspired in no small part by the nature of our sources. Nowhere is this felt as acutely as in Egypt, with its papyrological record dominated by administrative documents. This is especially true for the Ptolemaic period (305 – 30 BCE), where the dominant model for the study of fiscality is that of the “royal economy”. With roots going back to the 19th century, the paradigm is associated above all with Claire Préaux, who described it in 1939 as “*une économie conçue pour servir l’intérêt royal*”. [1]

The “royal economy” is not an extremely clear concept. It is expressed in terms of the income and the expenditure of the kings, the management of the royal “household”, or the exploitation of the country’s resources for the benefit of the royal house. As such, the “royal economy” is (ideally) not to be understood as a model for the Egyptian economy. Nevertheless, it is strongly associated with state centralisation and dirigisme. In addition to taxation and monetary policy, core pillars of the paradigm are extensive royal claims to land and labour, the latter reflected in so-called “royal monopolies” in industry and trade. As a result, the “royal economy” is at times equated with the Egyptian economy as a whole.

Although such views were developed before the second world war, they remain influential into the twenty-first century. [2] In part, the explanation lies in the prominent position *L’économie royale des Lagides* continues to hold. The book still has many merits, not least in its detailed discussion of sources available at the time, and some of the more radical ideas are actually Rostovtzeff’s or even those of later authors (cf. *infra*), but significant challenges to its overarching conception of the economy have arisen. Such developments have intensified in the last decades, concomitant with a renewed interest in the economy of Graeco-Roman Egypt.

The aim of this contribution is not to offer a new synthesis of the Ptolemaic economy and fiscal system. Even a new monograph would probably be too limited for this purpose today. Rather, this study of recent developments in Ptolemaic fiscal history explores two inter-related issues: state intervention in the Ptolemaic economy and the aptness of the historiographical concept of the “royal economy”. Not only is the latter sometimes extended to the economy as a whole, but even if we adopt a stricter definition relating it solely to the royal revenues, disentangling “private” and “royal” aspects is often problematic. [3] The article starts with an analysis of changing views of the Ptolemaic political economy. Then, advances in the study of two core areas of the “royal economy” are treated in more detail: land tenure and taxation on the one hand, and “royal monopolies” in industry and trade on the other. Together, they show how the model of the “royal economy” overemphasizes the essentially fiscal role of the state in the economy.

OLD AND NEW PERSPECTIVES ON STATE CONTROL AND INTERVENTION IN PTOLEMAIC EGYPT

Ptolemaic fiscal and economic historiography is dominated by Préaux’ magisterial synthesis *L’économie royale des Lagides*. It is to this work that we owe the concept of the Ptolemaic “royal economy”. Although she never explicitly says so, Pseudo-Aristotle’s late fourth century BCE *Oikonomika* was clearly the inspiration for this. [4] In book II of the work, we find a discussion of the management of several household (*oikonomia*) levels: that of the king, that of the satrap, that of the city and that of the individual. [5] The “royal economy” of the Ptolemies should thus not be understood in the modern sense of the “economy”, but refers to fiscal administration, and it is only one of several levels. These nuances have sometimes been lost in later works.

[1] PRÉAUX 1939, p. 25.

[2] See e.g. RATHBONE 2000, HABERMANN & TENDER 2004 or HUSS 2012.

[3] Cf. also MANNING 2010, p. 121.

[4] For discussion of this work, see DESCAT 2003, who rightly stresses that the “royal economy” is originally an

ancient Greek concept. See also MANNING 2010, p. 121 for a similar ancient Egyptian conception of the state as a large household among other households.

[5] PRÉAUX 1939; DESCAT 2003. For a fuller account of twentieth century views of the Ptolemaic state and economy, see MANNING 2010, p. 29-72.

In any case, Préaux' image of the "royal economy" does have far-reaching consequences for state control of the economy at large. Her Ptolemies are absolute monarchs backed up by a centralised bureaucracy, who aim to maximise their revenues and outsource the risks to tax farmers. They were especially in need of cash, and their fiscal system was geared towards recouping as much of these coins for the treasury as possible. Partly because of the novelty of coinage, "*l'économie dirigée s'impose*". [6] Ptolemaic policy in her view was mercantilist: limiting imports while exporting as much as possible, for which purpose agricultural and industrial production in the interior was actively stimulated. On the international stage, the Ptolemies behaved as Greek "capitalists". [7] The kings were in the position to undertake such policies because they owned most of the land and part of the workshops, livestock, etc. Other land was merely "conceded" by the king to religious institutions, soldiers, officials and private individuals. On the other hand, in the sections on individual revenues, Préaux often recognised the limits of royal control, for instance when discussing the free market in agricultural products, and she stressed the practical rather than theoretic reasoning of the kings. In this way, Préaux was rather more nuanced than some of her predecessors. [8]

Some of the more radical ideas about the Ptolemaic state and economy that came to be associated with the "royal economy" concept were expressed by her contemporary Rostovtzeff. In a 1920 article, he claimed that "the whole economic organisation of Egypt was built up on the principle of centralisation and control by the Government, as well as the nationalisation of all production in agricultural and industrial life." [9] Although he relaxed these views over the next decade, [10] he reiterated some of them in his great synthesis *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*. [11] In addition, he fully developed the idea of a planned Ptolemaic economy. [12] He also started referring explicitly to the "royal economy" in these volumes. [13] As in earlier work, the Ptolemies were mercantilist, and

the main idea behind their state economy was royal ownership of land (part of which was "conceded") and the labour of the people. Whereas Préaux stressed the haphazard organisation of the Ptolemies, Rostovtzeff envisaged a more systematic and rational approach to the reorganisation of production, which he ascribed to the "Greek genius". [14]

The inspiration for these views is to be sought beyond Hellenistic Egypt. A first significant influence was the distant Egyptian past, in the form of the perceived absolute power of the Pharaohs. The Ptolemies, in this orientalist view, simply inherited royal ownership of the land and the people from their predecessors, and they more (Préaux) or less (Rostovtzeff) kept these structures intact. In addition, comparisons with 17th and 18th century European states informed the idea of a mercantilist Ptolemaic policy. Préaux draws comparisons with France at the end of the *Ancien Régime*, [15] Rostovtzeff with Russia, [16] and Wilcken with Prussia. [17] A third important factor was contemporary events: the influence of the Russian revolution and subsequent developments in the Soviet Union on Rostovtzeff's work have often been pointed out. It should be stressed, however, that these authors also sought and found confirmation for their views in the papyri. The most famous example is the so-called "Revenue Laws" papyrus, which outlines impressive state control of the oil industry (*cf. infra*). At the time, the text was moreover interpreted as a comprehensive codification of laws relating to the royal revenues.

In the second half of the twentieth century, economic history was put on the back foot by the social and cultural history of Graeco-Roman Egypt. [18] The insistence of the influential Finley that there was no such thing as a "Hellenistic" economy and that the period was thus uninteresting for study, did not help either. [19] The Ptolemaic economy, in his view, was part of the ancient "Oriental" sector dominated by the state. It is no wonder, then, that scholarship relying on Préaux and Rostovtzeff became less attentive to the nuances those scholars expressed. Polanyi, for instance, wrote that "Ptolemaic Egypt produces,

[6] PRÉAUX 1939, p. 61-62.

[7] E.g. p. 433.

[8] Especially MASPERO 1905 and BOUCHÉ-LECLERQ 1906. WILCKEN 1912, on the other hand, was also more cautious than them.

[9] ROSTOVITZEFF 1920, p. 164. Similar ideas are expressed in ROSTOVITZEFF 1922.

[10] In particular in ROSTOVITZEFF 1931/1932.

[11] ROSTOVITZEFF 1941. See e.g. his remarks on p. 316, p. 1101 or p. 1205.

[12] Already hinted at in ROSTOVITZEFF 1922, p. 128.

[13] Again, similar ideas were already foreshadowed in ROSTOVITZEFF 1922, p. 128.

[14] E.g. ROSTOVITZEFF 1920, p. 162; ROSTOVITZEFF 1922, p. 128; ROSTOVITZEFF 1941, p. 1080.

[15] PRÉAUX 1939, p. 428.

[16] ROSTOVITZEFF 1922, p. 86 and 144. Cf. also ANDREAU 2021.

[17] WILCKEN 1912, p. 266.

[18] On this period in Ptolemaic scholarship, see BAGNALL 2007.

[19] See discussion in MANNING 2010, p. 8.

under Macedonian Greek rule, the most complete system of a marketless, centrally planned economy the world has ever seen”, [20] while Fraser insisted that “most of the economic life of Egypt was dominated by the monopolistic system.” [21] This is one of the dangers of seemingly easy and straightforward concepts like the “royal economy”.

However, around the same time, several scholars began to criticise the anachronistic conceptions of the Ptolemaic state underlying the idea of a centralised and planned “royal economy”. The most prominent was Préaux’ pupil Bingen, who rejected the notion of an active economy policy pursued by the Ptolemies, stressing instead their fiscal aims. [22] His deconstruction of the “Revenue Laws” as a compilation showing work in progress rather than a comprehensive codification and attempt at economic organisation challenged dirigiste interpretations. Private entrepreneurs played a more prominent role in his view of the Ptolemaic fiscal system, even if large parts of the country were still believed to be royal domain. [23] The contemporary work of Samuel also shows a less interventionist Ptolemaic state: despite lofty ideals, the bureaucracy was not capable of extensive state control of the economy because it was perpetually understaffed, prone to abuse and “irrational”. [24] The Ptolemies themselves were not interested in maximising production, but were rather occupied with the stability of their revenues and their rule. [25] Another rejection of the idea of a highly centralised state with a planned economy can be found in the work of Turner, who was influenced by Bingen, but added to this the Egyptian material. [26]

Building on these studies, the last few decades have witnessed great progress in the study of the Ptolemaic state. With Manning’s *The Last Pharaohs*, Ptolemaic history finally received an up-to-date synthesis of state formation. [27] In his view, rather than “centralised”, the Ptolemaic state was “bureaucratic”, and the goals of the bureaucracy were not necessarily aligned with that of the king. The latter required

the support of “key constituent groups” in society, for which Manning adopts the model of “bargained incorporation” and the idea of a ruling coalition. The aim of the Ptolemies was to create and capture revenues by diverting “free floating resources” away from the local to the central level. He awards a more potent role to local actors. Manning’s book is also in some sense a rehabilitation of the Ptolemies: their bureaucracy was not “irrational”, but “merely more limited in its reach and effect than the modern mind might conceive.” [28]

At the same time, renewed interest in Hellenistic economies has caused a boom in scholarship on Ptolemaic economy and fiscality. In general, most progress has been made in the areas of land and agriculture, where more nuanced assessments of essentially fiscal Ptolemaic state control have arisen (cf. *infra*). In addition, specific institutions relevant to fiscal issues have received book-length treatments, prime among which that of money. [29] The same is true for financial officials, such as the royal scribe. [30] Several taxes have become the subject of specific studies as well: from the general (capitation taxes, [31] the harvest tax, [32] the *apomoira*, [33] etc.) to the highly specific (e.g. pigeon house taxes). [34]

Such progress has been made possible by the edition of new sources, and in particular the combined analysis of Greek and Demotic documents has proven fruitful in integrating the central administration with local and temple perspectives. [35] In addition, long-term perspectives incorporating Saite and Persian Egypt have allowed for a better contextualisation of the Ptolemies’ activities than comparisons with much earlier Pharaohs. The Ptolemaic state is now interpreted in a more sophisticated way as a careful integration between old and new elements, using existing structures and networks. Finally, a greater opening of papyrology to the social sciences has allowed for more refined theoretical frameworks. In particular the *New Institutional Economics* have

[20] POLANYI 1977, p. 273.

[21] FRASER 1972, p. 134.

[22] Préaux herself adopted a different perspective in this period as well, see PRÉAUX 1978, p. 376.

[23] Many of these ideas are expressed in BINGEN 1978. On the importance of Bingen, see also BAGNALL 2007.

[24] SAMUEL 1966 and SAMUEL 1989, p. 51-65.

[25] SAMUEL 1983, p. 39-61.

[26] TURNER 1984. On the other hand, his Ptolemies still have quite extensive capabilities to intervene in the economy. His model II, for example, closely corresponds to the old conception of “royal monopolies” (cf. *infra*).

[27] MANNING 2010.

[28] MANNING 2010, p. 150.

[29] REDEN 2007.

[30] ARMONI 2012.

[31] E.g. MUHS 2005 and MONSON 2014.

[32] E.g. VANDORPE 2000, MONSON 2012b and MONSON 2016.

[33] CLARYSSE & VANDORPE 1998.

[34] VANDORPE & VANOPPRÉ 2020.

[35] E.g. the land surveys published in MONSON 2012a and CHRISTENSEN, THOMPSON & VANDORPE 2017, the census registers of CLARYSSE & THOMPSON 2006, or the tax receipts of MUHS 2005.

been influential. [36] Building on these developments, recent work has highlighted a much greater variety of fiscal and economic practices in Ptolemaic Egypt, which had more flexible institutions than allowed for in the older interpretations. In the following two sections, we will see how this plays out in two core areas of the economy, both pillars of the “royal economy” interpretation.

LAND AND AGRICULTURE: THE ROYAL DOMAIN AND PRIVATE PROPERTY RIGHTS

Royal control over the land is one of the pillars of the Ptolemaic “royal economy” interpretation. Egypt, after all, was dominated by the Nile, and agriculture was the main source of wealth for the king and the country. In the past, it was often assumed that the Ptolemies inherited ownership of all of Egypt’s land from the Pharaohs. A considerable part was administered by the state directly as royal land (*basilikè gè*) and farmed by royal farmers, whereas other plots were conceded by the king to the gods (*iera gè*) high officials (*gè en doreai*), military settlers (*gè klèrouchikè*) and private individuals (*gè idiok-tètos*), corresponding to the major Ptolemaic land categories. [37] Since concessions could in principle be revoked, the main issue is the perceived absence of private property rights on land. It should be stressed, however, that it was again the scholars preceding and succeeding Préaux and Rostovtzeff who made the more radical claims. [38] The latter group in this case often argued from the Roman side for a privatisation under Augustus. [39]

The study of land tenure was long based on Greek sources from the Fayum region, where royal, *dorea* and cleruchic land indeed dominated. However, this region was largely made up of new settlements on land reclaimed through intense royal efforts, home to many Greek military settlers. It would seem only natural that state supervision was more intensive there, and land was directly controlled by the king. Vandorpe and Manning have provided a fuller picture, drawing on Demotic evidence from the Nile valley, in

particular the Thebaid. [40] There, private property rights clearly did exist, often on land nominally under the control of temples. This situation predated the Ptolemies, who respected these rights, even if they did introduce fiscal control by way of the bureaucracy and tax farmers (as opposed to the older view that a weakening of royal control over time led to private property rights). Owners sold, leased, mortgaged, inherited, ceded, and transferred their land. [41] As Manning reminds us, we should see property rights as a “bundle”, and he speaks of “relative” ownership, as indeed in many historical societies: “An individual held land to the exclusion of other individuals, but institutional claims to the land remained.” [42]

These institutional claims have been the subject of much analysis by Monson. [43] He argues that, in line with traditional practice in Egypt, royal sovereignty over the land was ideological in nature, and the term “royal land” (and “sacred land”) had fiscal rather than legal implications. A reference to “private royal land” suggests that the royal domain consisted of both royal land under direct administration, cultivated by the royal farmers who paid rent (the dominant form of tenure in the Fayum), and privately owned plots paying a harvest tax to the treasury, just like temple land could be privately owned or institutionally cultivated. In other words, private property rights to land existed, even if the plots were nominally considered royal or temple land from a fiscal point of view because they were liable to harvest taxes benefitting the state or the temple.

Monson further deemphasizes the distinction between rents and harvest taxes, stressing that the methods of assessment (by way of a land survey) and the rates charged were similar on royal and private land. [44] While land tenure was thus more complex than assumed in earlier scholarship, the taxation of land was fairly uniform. Not only does this further complicate a distinction between a “royal economy” and a “private” sector, it also has interesting implications for the status of the Fayumic land regime and the logic of the Ptolemaic state. According to Monson, royal land under direct administration was

[36] MANNING 2003, MANNING 2010 and MONSON 2012b.

[37] For a recent discussion of the different land categories and the revenues associated with them, see CHRISTENSEN, THOMPSON & VANDORPE 2017, p. 12-29.

[38] See the cautious remarks of PRÉAUX 1939, p. 460 and ROSTOVITZEFF 1941, p. 289 and 1200. Both recognise (at least the possibility of) ancient private property rights and warn us not to extrapolate the Fayum to Egypt.

[39] See discussion in MONSON 2012b, p. 9 and 12-14.

[40] VANDORPE 2000 and MANNING 2003.

[41] See in particular MANNING 2003, p. 182-225.

[42] MANNING 2003, p. 195. The work of MONSON too benefits from a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes property and property rights, which are rarely if ever absolute.

[43] MONSON 2012a, MONSON 2012b and MONSON 2016. See also VANDORPE 2000 and CHRISTENSEN, THOMPSON & VANDORPE 2017.

[44] And, in fact, on cleruchic land, at least in the third century BC. See MONSON 2016.

not the dominant type of land there because it was more profitable to the king, nor because the state preferred direct control, but because of demographic and ecological conditions unfavorable to the development of private property rights, even if the peculiar political and military circumstances of this region cannot be ignored. [45]

The state exercised most extensive control over the royal land under direct administration, and it is worth noting that in this domain too, centralisation and dirigisme have been downplayed. First, the most common form of tenure by royal farmers turns out to have been a local communal organisation headed by village elders, in which the peasants divided and transferred the land among themselves. This was essentially a customary form of management, which was rarely upset by royal officials. [46] Second, although those officials in theory decided on what crops were to be sown, the instrument that was used for this, the so-called "sowing schedule", has been shown to have been drawn up locally rather than imposed centrally from Alexandria. [47] Third, we now know that the status of royal farmer was a privileged one providing access to land and capital, rather than that of the unfree exploited peasants they were once believed to be. [48] In reality, they came from different backgrounds, including priests, soldiers, and cultivators who combined their royal land with other plots (once more muddling "royal" and "non-royal" sectors). Their tenancy was relatively secure, and compulsory cultivation, once seen as widespread in the later Ptolemaic period, appears to have been exceptional.

All of this is not to say that the king played no role at all. The Ptolemaic state clearly captured and redistributed or exported a considerable part of Egypt's agricultural produce. It moreover asserted its authority in very visible ways, for instance through land and crop surveys. The reclamation of the Fayum and the shift from emmer to durum wheat testify to extensive royal control over land, labour, and resources. In exceptional circumstances, the state could turn to requisitioning of beasts of burden, [49] and even divert the destination of grain in the open

market towards the capital, [50] both very direct interventions. It is also worth pointing out that the market for land always remained underdeveloped in Ptolemaic Egypt. [51] Nevertheless, it is now clear that structural royal control of the land was less extensive than once believed, and for many plots of a fiscal nature.

INDUSTRY AND TRADE: ROYAL "MONOPOLIES" AND MARKET ACTIVITIES

The role of the Ptolemaic state in industry and trade is in equal need of re-consideration. In these sectors, the "royal economy" is reflected in the idea of so-called "royal monopolies". [52] This model rose to prominence after the publication of the "Revenue Laws" in 1896. As outlined below, this papyrus shows extensive state involvement in the vegetable oil industry, and the regulations of the "oil monopoly" were subsequently extrapolated to other industries. This has led to long lists of "monopolies" in the major works on Ptolemaic fiscality, which, even if scholars are usually careful to stress that these sectors were not all organised in the exact same way, evoke a strong sense of state intervention to the exclusion of private and market activities. [53] Part of the problem is the lack of an exact definition of what constitutes a "royal monopoly", and even Préaux and Rostovtzeff already expressed reservations about the use of the term. [54] Despite further objections formulated in the second half of the twentieth century, [55] the idea of "royal monopolies" is still very much alive. [56]

A short glance at the "Revenue Laws" papyrus immediately explains why: even if the fiscal intent of the regulations is now generally accepted, they do evoke a strictly state controlled vegetable oil sector. [57] The entire harvest of the main oil crops, sesame and castor, was to be sold to officials, who delivered it to royal workshops, which in turn supplied state-sanctioned oil sellers holding a local monopoly. The state fixed the oil price. Revenues were underwritten by tax farmers, who were also tasked with supervising the operations. The import of foreign oil was restricted,

[45] MONSON 2012b.

[46] MONSON 2012a, p. 13-18.

[47] VIDAL-NAQUET 1967.

[48] ROWLANDSON 1985.

[49] PRÉAUX 1939, p. 143-144.

[50] BGU VIII 1730 (TM 4813).

[51] MONSON 2012b.

[52] DOGAER forthcoming.

[53] The first was MASPERO 1905, p. 60-92. For a recent example, see HUSS 2012, p. 53-57.

[54] HEICHELHEIM 1933, the standard point of reference for "royal monopolies", is less nuanced.

[55] E.g. BINGEN 1978 on the "oil monopoly" or LEWIS 1974 on the "papyrus monopoly".

[56] See e.g. MUHS 2005, p. 73-82, REDEN 2007, p. 146-147 and 297 or HUSS 2012, p. 50-67.

[57] DOGAER 2021b, p. 316-321.

and illicit production and sale were severely punished. However, these sanctions did not stop individuals from taking advantage of vulnerabilities in the system, leading to the emergence of illicit markets. The scale of shadow economies is always difficult to measure, but the volume of illegal sales was considerable at least in some periods of Ptolemaic history. [58] Although we should clearly consider this strictly supervised industry part of the “royal economy”, the king’s reach was far from absolute. In this case, the concept obscures the shadow part of the economy, which nonetheless was integral to it.

The idea of such a “royal monopoly” was extended to many other sectors. Let us briefly consider two examples: textiles and beer, which were once the subject of two further sections of the “Revenue Laws”, now largely lost. [59] Many reconstructions of the “textile monopoly” exist, with varying degrees of extrapolation from the oil regulations. It has become abundantly clear, however, that older views in which weavers worked mainly or exclusively for the king are no longer tenable. [60] Instead, raw materials could be acquired freely, and weavers owned their own workshops and sold their wares in the market, either directly or through merchants. Weavers were subject to quota to be delivered in kind, but these covered only part of their production, and the artisans were paid for the time and labour spent on them. Moreover, the state did not market the quotas through state-sanctioned dealers like the oil sellers, but rather used, redistributed or exported them. The revenues derived from textile taxes were leased out to tax farmers, who again had broad responsibilities (e.g. furnishing raw materials for the state contributions).

State export brings to mind the mercantilist ideas of Préaux and Rostovtzeff, but state power was insufficient to pursue a true mercantilist policy. Moreover, tariffs on imported textiles were much lower than those charged on oil. The position of the weavers also complicates definitions of a “royal economy”: should we see them as “royal weavers” because they worked partly for the state? All of them were active in the textile market as well, and in fact the “royal” and “private” sectors were inextricably linked. The stable income derived from the state’s (essentially fiscal) demands offset some of the risks involved in production for the market, while increased market production, which was supported by monetisation and state dispute resolution, benefitted

the state in the form of higher tax revenue. The “royal economy” paradigm obscures such complex dynamics.

Another sector traditionally conceived of as a “state monopoly” is the beer industry. Again, numerous models of state control have been suggested, from the leasing of state workshops to exclusive licenses for production and sale. [61] However, even in smaller villages, several brewers performed their craft simultaneously. In larger settlements, beer was sold by dozens of people, often on a part-time basis. The perceived license was rather a tax farming contract, as part of which the farmer (often a brewer himself) levied money from both brewers and beer sellers. In addition, the tax farmer acted as intermediary in the purchase of barley from the state, a way for the latter to turn some of its revenue in kind into cash. The Demotic documents furthermore confound the “royal” nature of the so-called “monopoly”: two out of three extant tax leases were concluded by priests on behalf of a temple rather than by officials on behalf of the state. [62]

It is clear from these examples, as well as from the critical grain trade eluding state control, that extreme state intervention in the vegetable oil industry cannot be extrapolated to industry and trade as a whole. [63] Again, we encounter a great variety of economic and fiscal practices obscured by the deceptively simple labels “royal monopolies” and “royal economy”. Although Ptolemaic tax farmers had more elaborate responsibilities and were more directly involved than their counterparts elsewhere (if this is not simply an artefact of the more detailed papyrological evidence), state involvement in industry and trade was primarily of a fiscal nature. The kings were preoccupied in the first place with revenue, both in cash and in kind, which was partly derived from the markets they were once believed to have suppressed. Significantly, in the sectors where they did attempt to do so, illicit markets arose.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My purpose has not been to disparage the massive contributions made by Préaux and Rostovtzeff, and indeed I hope to have shown that they were often more nuanced than they get credit for, but their overall interpretative framework of a mercantilist, dirigiste,

[58] DOGAER 2021b, p. 332-335.

[59] BORRELLI 2017.

[60] DOGAER forthcoming. See also the remarks of THOMPSON 1988, p. 46-47.

[61] DOGAER 2021a, p. 83-88.

[62] DOGAER 2021a.

[63] For the grain trade, see already PRÉAUX 1939, p. 137. Cf. also CRISCUOLO 2012.

centralised, even planned state economy was rather much influenced by their own time, and times have changed. Old documents, like the "Revenue Laws", have received new interpretations. The publication of many Demotic papyri, especially those from the Nile Valley, have provided an insight into local and temple conditions, counterbalancing the perspective of the central administration often found in Greek papyri, as well as the exceptional conditions of the Fayum region. Papyrology has opened up towards the social sciences, and new frameworks have been adopted to study ancient societies, which have proven more useful than parallels with modern European nation states. In looking back to the Egyptian past, the focus has shifted from ideas of timeless Oriental despotism to actual conditions on the ground under the Ptolemies' immediate predecessors.

These developments have led scholars to question ideas of a strongly centralised Ptolemaic state playing an active role in the economic life of Egypt. Although no one will deny that state activities had a considerable impact on the Egyptian economy, scholars are nowadays less optimistic about the ability of the Ptolemaic bureaucracy to actively organise these practices. Nor was this what they intended. It is abundantly clear that the Ptolemies were mainly occupied with revenues and the stability of their rule. Their aims were fiscal rather than economic. Claims of royal sovereignty over land had for the most part fiscal rather than legal implications, and the royal domain directly administered by the state was done so in a less centralised way than has been assumed. Moreover, with the exception of the oil industry, state control over industry and trade

was nowhere near extensive enough to justify the idea of "state monopolies". In those areas too, the Ptolemies were mainly concerned with income and their own strategic interests.

Yet some ideas die hard, including the ill-defined "royal economy" paradigm with its almost inherent conflation of economy and fiscality. The concept certainly has its merits, especially when used in a limited sense of state revenues and expenditures. It is an ancient notion, known to Greeks and Egyptians alike. Moreover, the state did own some workshops and did administer part of the land directly, ultimately deciding on who cultivated what on which plots. Furthermore, Ptolemaic fiscal leases did involve much more elaborate and hands-on responsibilities than those of many other societies.

But, with two of its pillars significantly weakened, it seems legitimate to reflect on the state of the edifice as a whole. We cannot deny the baggage of Préaux' dirigisme and Rostovtzeff's state planning. This all too easily leads to an extension of the "royal economy" to the entire Egyptian economy, thus obscuring the importance of non-royal activities and the complex dynamics linking them to the state. Even if we consider it as only one part of the economy, disentangling the "royal" from the "private" sphere can be problematic. For instance, what about cultivators farming both royal and non-royal land? Or the weavers, who were active in both "royal" and "private" spheres? In any case, whichever terms we decide to use, Ptolemaic fiscal and economic history has made great progress over the past decades, and the field shows no signs of slowing down. ■

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