

Regionalisation and the Integration of the Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity

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Abstracts

Peter Sarris, Trinity College Cambridge: Aristocratic Households and Economic Integration in the Late Antique East – The Papyrological and Legal Evidence

This paper focuses primarily on the papyrological evidence from late antique Egypt, and seeks to place that evidence in a broader context provided by the legal and archaeological sources. Egypt in late antiquity provides a striking example of a highly sophisticated self-sustaining regional economy which engaged in long-distance trade but was not structurally dependent upon it. As a result, the main role played by Egypt in late antiquity in the context of broader inter-regional networks of exchange would appear to have been as a centre of consumption, drawing in goods and merchandise from across the Mediterranean world as a whole. Indeed, the role of ‘middling-level’ imports within the Egyptian economy seems to have decreased over the course of the region’s late antique phase of expansion, as locally produced wines and ceramics drove out rival commodities from elsewhere. Although the fiscal demands of the East Roman state served to tie Egypt into a broader Mediterranean economy, the breaking of the fiscal tie to Constantinople in the seventh century can be seen to have had no discernible impact on the region’s economy. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the late Roman state inhibited Egyptian agricultural development. Within the Egyptian agrarian economy in particular, a crucial role was played by highly commercialized great estates owned by members of the late antique imperial aristocracy of service. Landowners and their agents produced for the market, but also, through the demands generated and the credit offered by magnate *oikoi*, supported and catalysed the ‘peasant sector’ of the economy, without the exertions and ambitions of which economic expansion on the scale discernible archaeologically for late antiquity might not have been possible. The expansion of the regional economy of Egypt from the fourth to sixth centuries, whilst causing problems for certain of those who sought to sell their goods to Egyptian markets, is nevertheless likely to have made a positive contribution to the broader Mediterranean economy. For Egypt provided a source of steady and reliable profit which Egyptian landowners, merchants and producers could then invest in trade or production elsewhere, such as by investing in merchant shipping. As a result, the dense and intense patterns of local production and exchange evident in Egypt provided a bedrock that helped to sustain higher levels of economic complexity and sophistication across the empire. Moreover, the trans-regional interests of the wealthiest members of the late antique aristocracy of service are likely to have further facilitated the re-distribution of Egyptian profits to other parts of the late Roman world, both in Constantinople and beyond.

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