

## The administration of Egypt in Hellenistic times The rise and fall of the *oikonomos*

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### Abstract

In Hellenistic times, Egypt was governed by the Ptolemies. For this period there is extensive information about the administration system. Examination of the sources reveals a well-coordinated political and financial administration system. A central figure of this system was the post of the *oikonomos* (plural *oikonomoi*). The *oikonomoi* with their agents, the *antigraphais*, *logeutai* and *logistai*, were in charge of the financial matters of the nome. Their main responsibilities including the cultivation of the land, the administration and inspection of the production and oil factories, the collection of taxes and supervision of the trade. They were the people who represented the state to the farmers and vice versa. They were also aware of the problems in the application of the central policy since they were close to the farmers. At the late third and during the second century, the system was characterized by mal-administration incidents. These incidents together with the continuous wars within and outside Egypt led to the decline of the importance of the *oikonomoi* from high order officials (third century) to local administration bureaucrats (second and first centuries). In one respect, the historical development of the *oikonomoi* parallels the rise and fall of a highly buracrautic administration system of Ptolemaic Egypt.

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The essential basis of the administration of Egypt in all of antiquity was the nome, the administrative district. The number and the size of each nome varied from time to time. In the Ptolemaic period, the number stood in the low forties (thirty six). Geographically, Egypt was also divided into the northern (lower) and southern (upper) parts, each part having almost the same number of nomes (Bagnall, 1976, p.3).

There is not much information on the administration of Egypt before the arrival of Ptolemy (Lloyd, 1984). Welles (1949, p.28-29) suggested that in the traditional Egyptian system, below the king, there should have been a "second after the king" to exercise the functions which the Pharaoh theoretically possessed. Below him there were two administrative offices controlling the two parts of the country. The basis of the economy was the land tax, while taxes for other services were also collected. With the extensive military campaigns outside Egypt in the fourth century, there were many military settlers coming into the country whereas one can assume that Pharaohs used the wealth of the country to support their campaigns. The last two characteristics apply also to the early Ptolemaic period. There were many similarities between the Ptolemaic and Egyptian administration systems, the basic difference being that the Egyptian system was simpler compared to the Ptolemaic (Welles, 1949, p.34).

The Ptolemies maintained the organization of Egypt in nomes. However, in addition to the nomarch, there were two other offices: those of the *oikonomos* and *vasilikos grammateus* (royal secretary). In the early Ptolemaic period the nomarch had two subordinates, the *komarchs*, and was in charge of agricultural production of the nome.

The oikonomos with his own agents (antigrapheis, logeutai, logistai) was in charge of the financial matters of the nome. The basilikos grammateus with his subordinates topogrammateis and komogrammateis, kept the necessary records. The oikonomos and the other nome officials reported to the dioiketes in Alexandria, with the dioiketes being the minister responsible for financial and other matters in the kingdom (Austin 235).

The purpose of this study is to examine the role and duties of the oikonomos throughout the Ptolemaic period and through this, the administration of Egypt in Hellenistic times. Particularly, the following issues will be particularly discussed:

1. The duties of the oikonomos during the third century.
2. The fall of the oikonomos in the second and first centuries.

#### *The duties of the oikonomos during the third century*

Egypt was considered by the Ptolemies as their house, «οἶκος». As such, the officials who managed the “οἶκον” were called “οικονόμοι”. The oikonomoi, nomarchs and other nome officials reported to the central administrator, the dioiketes.

Just like most of the bankers, the majority of the oikonomoi, σιτολόγοι, λογευταί and tax collectors bear Greek or Hellenised names (Peremans, 1971, p. 33-45). The positions of komarch and toparch were held mostly by Egyptians (peremans, 1971, p. 33-45). This indicates that at the lower levels of administration Egyptians were preferred, because of their ability to communicate with the majority of the population (natives). Greeks who could not speak Egyptian were obviously not the best men for such positions, because they were not aware of peoples' attitudes and sensitivities. However, the Greeks themselves would not have liked to occupy such a post. For the Ptolemies, this was also a good tactic, because it gave the system the ability to be closer to the production and the workers and thus prevent isolation from the Egyptians. On the other hand, the Ptolemies set limits on the development of natives within the administration system, thus the possibility of an Egyptian occupying the office of the oikonomos was very small.

#### *The role of the oikonomos for agricultural policy*

Significant information about the oikonomos is drawn from the papyrus P.Tebt.703, dated in the late third century, which is probably a document of orders that each the oikonomos received from his dioiketes. Particularly, it was the business of the oikonomos and his managers to see that every plot of arable land throughout the country was cultivated to its full capacity and that fresh areas were reclaimed, by irrigation or by draining, wherever that was possible (P. Tebt.703, col. 40-45). The oikonomoi had to ensure that no land remained unsown and that it was sowed with the pre-scheduled crops for the specified area. They also had to ensure an adequate water supply to the fields, by examining the depth of the water-ducts and the quality of the water (P. Tebt.703, col 30-35).

The oikonomoi often inspected the farmers and were responsible for discussing their complaints and take the necessary measures in order to solve them (P. Tebt.703, lines 40-45, 60). Parts of their visit included the weaving and washing houses, with notes being kept on the weaving production and the products needed to be bought for these houses (P. Tebt. 703, lines 90-95). The looms that were not used also had to be collected and deposited in store-houses (P. Tebt. 703, line 110).

The oikonomoi had to test the wine of the cultivators and inspect the product. After the quantity of the product was measured and recorded, the amount of tax that the cultivator had to pay (apomoirā) was determined (P. Revenue Laws). The oikonomoi and their agents also supervised the agreements between the cultivators and the tax-farmers, ensuring that the tax-farmers registered all the products and guaranteed the collection of the taxes in cases where the tax-collectors and the cultivators disagreed (P. Revenue Laws, Col 28). The oikonomoi and antigrapheis received a sixth of the production of the cultivator. But they had to pay the cultivators the price of the pottery in order for them to sell their product to the state. The surplus wines were registered by the agents of the oikonomoi and were sold in favour of the tax-farmers (P. Revenue Laws, Col 33).

The oikonomos had to keep regular archives of the royal and private cattle used in cultivation. They also had to ensure the safe collection of corn, its good quality so that it could be transferred quickly by water (P. Tebt. 703, lines 80-85). Their responsibilities also extended to plant production, having to make sure that all trees were planted and that all planted trees were registered in his accounts (P. Tebt. 703, lines 190-210). These officers were also responsible for building construction and other public works within their area (P. Petr. iii. 43 (2)).

Special attention was given to oil-factories which played an important role in the Ptolemaic economy. The oikonomos had to visit the store-houses and keep accounts of the liquids provided to the factories, also making also sure that the amount of oil produced was equal to the liquid sent to factories for the oil-production (P. Revenue Laws, lines 150-155). The oikonomos also provided the wages of the oil-workers and the tax-farmers when the oil was sold (P. Revenue Laws).

#### *The role of the oikonomos for commercial and financial policy*

It was the oikonomos' responsibility to ensure that the products were not sold at prices higher than the state proposed but for products which did not have a fixed price he had to inspect that the prices were reasonable. The rate of taxes imposed on the imported products was very high and could range from 20% to 50% (p. Cairo Zen. 59012, lines 1-79). The oikonomos had to keep detailed accounts of the products so that the appropriate amount of taxes was collected (P. Cairo Zen. 59012, lines 1-79; P. Tebt. 703, lines 150-160).

He also inspected the accounts of revenues toparchy by toparchy (P. Tebt. 703, lines 120-135) to ensure that the farmers and tax-farmers paid the taxes according to their income (P. Revenue laws, Col 34). After the oikonomos sold the products, he and his agents, the antigrapheis and the tax farmers, met to measure the balance in the accounts with the chief tax-farmer. If there was any profit, the oikonomos had to pay the tax-farmers their share. In contrast, when there was a deficit, the amount was exacted from the tax-farmer. The oikonomos was very often faced with problems in the collection of the taxes either from bad weather conditions, which destroyed the cultivation process, or from other problems related to disputes and he had to pay taxes himself (P.S.I. 402).

The work of the oikonomoi was achieved with the help of collectors and auditors,

such as the logeutai ("collectors") and the antigrapheis. The tax-farmers and other officials were appointed by the oikonomoi (P. Revenue Laws, col 46). The archive of the oikonomoi included detailed accounts on compulsory labour throughout the country (P. Tebt. 703). Lists of dealers and retailers of the city were also kept, in order to estimate everyday production and to make contracts with traders in Alexandria for the monthly sell of the products. This was achieved by registering every factory in the area, including factories inside temples. The oikonomos also had to provide an account of the castor and sesame oil used for the temples and to make sure that only the registered quantity was produced and that any additional production was not sold in the market (P. Revenue Laws, col. 52).

The financial minister in most of the years of Ptolemy II was Appolonios who owned a large estate, which he received from the king as "dorea" (P. Col. 54, col 5-10) with Zenon as his own general manager. The archive of Zenon provides information on the function of these administration officials. For example, it allows us to understand how flexible the system was and that the officials were very often put in a difficult position in doing certain favours (P. Cairo Zen. 59192 = Sel. Pap. 92). Knowing someone in the high administration levels, was also important in order to find a kleros in a good location (P. Lond. 2027; Lewis, 1986, p.25). Financial officers, like Zenon, very often had to overcome the control of the state and make personal favours for job seekers or legal matters (P. Mich. I. 87).

In the office of the oikonomos, records were kept for the royal houses, gardens (P. Tebt.703, line 215), the settlement of the soldiers and the unemployed. The toparchs also had to send full lists of the people who worked in their area of control (UPZ IL 157, cols. II-IV). Their records also included the number of slaves that each cultivator owned (C. Ord. Ptol. 22). The billeting of the soldiers and associated problems were also one of the main responsibilities of the oikonomoi (C. Ord. Ptol. 24; P.Petr.ii.12(1); P.Teb. III 772).

As the oikonomos was in charge of financial matters, his communication with the state banks concerning private matters or debates was very frequent (Lewis, 1986, p. 51). He was also responsible for financial differences between civilians (P. Hib. 60). The office of the oikonomos was very busy and a large amount of paper was needed. This was achieved via the bankers (Lewis, 1986, p. 51; P. Hamb. II. 173).

#### *The status of the oikonomos and symptoms of mal-administration*

The oikonomos was acting as a middle man between the king and the peasant. His job was very difficult and this could only be achieved with patience and "good behaviour" (P.Tebt. 703, lines 260-78). Crawford (1976) states that the behaviour of the good official is an amalgam of many exhortations from over three centuries but the same concepts recur so often that they must have represented the ideal. These ideal characteristics do not seem to be significantly different between different officials. A good behaviour and the precise application of the instructions by the oikonomos would be followed by promotion. Although details of the criteria for promotion are not clear, we can assume that the opinion of the dioiketes was a very important factor in this process.

Despite good training and the ideology of a good official the behaviour of officials was not always appropriate (P. Cair. Zen. II 59236; P.Ent.87). This is based on

petitions which may not always represent the truth, because we do not have the opinion of the oikonomos and we do not know whether these incidents were true or not. However, the king and his officials took a certain number of measures in order to prevent maladministration problems. Large fines existed when the rules were not followed. For example, after selling the oil, the oikonomoi had to pay the wages to the workers. But if they failed to do so they had to pay a fine and the wages also doubled. In addition, if they failed to set-up the oil-factories according to the regulations or the factories did not produce a pre-determined amount of crops the oikonomoi had also to pay compensation to the tax-farmers for their loss (P. Revenue Laws, col 46). A fine for the oikonomos also existed when he wanted to harm the tax-farmers or did not provide the appropriate tools to the oil-factories.

A part of the large estate that the dioiketes of Ptolemy Philadelphus owned was cultivated by Egyptians. The creation of many new administration positions, consisting of Greeks (at higher levels) and Egyptians (at lower levels) who, in most cases, were unable to communicate with each other, created a confusing situation which had negative results in the production of this particular estate (P. Lond. 1954). In a papyrus, the peasants claim that the administration of production is so weak, due to the fact that no-one knows anything about it (P. Lond. 1954). This is a direct indication of the distance between the orders and laws produced by the central Greek bureaucrats and their application in practice. Even the appointment of Egyptians at the low administration levels was, in this particular case, insufficient to solve the above problems. It appears that there was a lack of people who were specialised in cultivation or technological matters. Responsible for the cultivation of the whole land was the financial manager of the dioiketes (P. Cairo Zen. 59816, lines 1-8). In real life many officials were wicked and corrupt (Crawford, 1976, p.199). They oppressed the people of Egypt by using force and violence, whips, and torture, knives and cudgels, and accepting bribes from those whom they terrorized (P. London. 1954; P.Col.66; P.Ent 11, 86 and 79; UPZ.I.113). They were also accused of being badly brought up or acting unjustly.

But why did this happen ? Was it so easy for an official to act on his own and not to follow the rules ? Crawford suggests that despite the changes imposed by the Ptolemies, Egypt remained a traditional peasant society in which primary social relations, those of a family, friend, common nationality or origin, remained of supreme importance. This is evident when examining how many times Zenon was required to make favours to different people for a wide range of reasons (mentioned above). The focus of loyalty was the village and within the village community there were traditional groupings and ties, obligations and expectations. Those in charge of an area offered protection to their people in order to receive their support in return. In this way the oikonomos or other officials could avoid serious consequences, resulting from petitions written from the locals to the dioiketes or the king. Furthermore, from such activities he gained personal profits in kind or money.

#### *The oikonomos in the second and first centuries*

By the end of the third century and especially after the battle of Raphia in 217 B.C. the resistance of the Egyptians increased. In the years of Ptolemy IV Philopator (221-203 B.C.) Egypt started to gradually lose its prestige, because of the influence of the supreme officials to the king (E. Bevan, 1914, p.220-222). For this period (210-190 B.C.) we have very limited evidence and consequently the changes that occurred in

the administration of Egypt are not clear.

With the passing of time, especially in the second century, the power of the oikonomoi declined and many of their responsibilities passed onto the strategoi (Austin, 231:155-185; C.Ord. Pto1.24). The rivalries that occurred within the royal house (C.Ord. Ptol. 53), certainly influenced the economic and political situation in Egypt and, consequently, affected the office of the oikonomos. The fact that native resistance did not stop throughout this century and that civil wars were very often indicates that the kingdom was in a condition of war throughout this period. This may be an important factor responsible for the enforcement of the office of strategos as administrator of the nome and also for the decline and disappearance of the power of the oikonomoi and nomarchs respectively. Another important factor is that, unlike the first kings, the Ptolemies of this period became kings at a very young age, a fact which may have given free space for opportunists to act, and certainly did not guarantee a centralised, well controlled economic policy (as known in the third century). Closely related to this, is the fact that with all this confusion there must have been free space for mal-administration from royal officials of any category. Even when the Ptolemaic administrative system was at its peak we had many problems of bad behaviour by the oikonomoi and other officials. This may have been another reason for the king to trust more his military rather than the civil officers. In addition to the above, the days where the kingdom enjoyed a state of wealth were over. On the other hand, in this century there were significant cuts in the taxes that the civilians had to pay. Debts, to a large amount, owing to the royal treasury were remitted. These factors certainly had an effect on the administration of the chora of Egypt.

The oikonomos was still involved with the protection of the crops and the cultivation of the land in general (P. Tebt. 776) while he still had his own office and agents (C. Ord. Ptol. 53). The collection of the taxes was one of his responsibilities (P. Tebt.39). However, the oikonomos at this stage was not directly appointed by the dioiketes, as happened in the early Ptolemaic times, but from the subordinates (P.Teb. I 27).

BGU 2370, published in 1980, is a report about tax collection in various districts of the Heracleopolite nome in the years of Soter II, 84/3 B.C. Disruption was noted in official documents which show the general economic decline of the Egyptian economy and administration in the first century. We can hypothesise that this may refer to the general anarchy and maladministration which followed the rebellion of 90 to 88 B.C. in upper Egypt (BGU 1760; BGU 1835). As revealed by the documents of this period, there was an increase in taxation which resulted in depopulation of many areas (Maehler, 1983, p.6-7).

The administration system of Ptolemies was a highly bureaucratic one, as evidenced by the numerous documents of the mid-third century. It appears that the oikonomos was the central figure of this administration system as he was the link between the state and the citizens. His duties were mainly financial as he had to organize and oversee the production of the crops, to oversee the trade, to collect the taxes, to deal with any problems that may arise. This system worked well for most of the third century B.C. Some of the policies we can also meet in now days, such as the registration of all areas of production, tax collection through comparison between products sold and potential income for the tax payer as well as the existence of a banking system. Even symptoms of mal-administration that we can occasionally see

today, seem to be frequent phenomenon in Hellenistic Egypt. During the second and first centuries, Egypt started to lose power and it appears that the decline of the administration system accompanied the fall in importance of the oikonomos.

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