

Labour status and economic stratification in the Roman world: the hierarchy of wages in Egypt

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The hierarchy of workers' incomes and wages in the Roman world has long drawn the attention of scholars. The series of workers' wages we have at our disposal comes mostly from Roman and Byzantine Egypt: account books, labour contracts, and orders or receipts of payment on papyri and ostraca. Since the 1930s, lists of wages and prices have been compiled, firstly, to study the purchasing power of the working population¹ and, secondly, to classify the trades according to the workers' qualifications and to the location of employment.²

Recently, W. Scheidel tried to calculate the real wages of the workers. He demonstrated that the remuneration of unskilled rural manpower were remarkably consistent and stable during Egypt's first three Roman centuries: evaluated against the curve of prices, the real wages of a hay-binder appeared similar in different account books from diverse regions. For him, this was the sign of a pre-industrial economy, one that lacked a true labour market where employees could bargain for their wages.³ This consistency and stability of wages data, however, was interpreted differently by the economist P. Temin, who understood it as a sign of a labour market that harmonized the wages at the scale of the whole empire.⁴ The global consistency of nominal wages that these two authors have pointed out cannot be denied: on a macro-economic scale, the papyri offer a fairly consistent view of the range of incomes for hired workers for the whole country of Egypt. However, these authors did not consider some divergent data in other types of sources, and especially the labour contracts.

The aim of this article is twofold: to explain the global consistency of the data, but also to interpret the discrepancies by focusing on the individual and local levels of the place of hiring.⁵ I will introduce new keys for interpretation, such as the context of employment,

1 For Roman Egypt, we have the old survey of the data in A. C. Johnson, *Roman Egypt to the reign of Diocletian* (Baltimore, MD 1936), and, more recently, the list compiled by H.-J. Drexhage, *Preise, Mieten/Pachten, Kosten und Löhne im römischen Ägypten bis zum Regierungsantritt Diokletians* (St.-Katharinen 1991); H. Cuvigny ("The amount of wages paid to the quarry-workers at Mons Claudianus," *JRS* 86 [1996] 139-45) studied the particular case of miners' wages. For the later period, see the detailed studies of R. Bagnall, *Currency and inflation in fourth century Egypt* (BASP Suppl. 5, 1985) and F. Morelli, *Olio e retribuzioni nell'Egitto tardo* (V-VIII d.C.) (Florence 1996).

2 On this topic see D. Rathbone, "Earnings and costs: living standards and the Roman economy (I-III c. AD)," in A. Bowman and A. Wilson (edd.), *Quantifying the Roman economy* (Oxford 2009) 229-326.

3 In his study of the long term, W. Scheidel ("Real wages in early economies," *JESHO* 53 [2010] 425-62) analyzed in particular the real wages of unskilled rural workers of Roman Egypt. In a previous article ("A model of demographic and economic change in Roman Egypt after the Antonine plague," *JRA* 15 [2002] 97-114) Scheidel thought that wages increased in the 3rd c. more than the prices of foodstuffs; this was answered by R. Bagnall, "The effects of plague: model and evidence," *ibid.* 114-20.

4 P. Temin, *The Roman market economy* (Princeton, NJ 2013) 118-19.

5 Workers' incomes and wages can be analyzed in a complementary fashion either on a macro-economic basis — that is at a national level — or on a micro-economic basis — at the individual level of a company. This classical opposition in economics will be a useful conceptual tool for the present study.