Roman imperialism in the Greek landscape
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Introduction

‘At this moment, sirs,’ he said, ‘almost two thirds of our land is a wilderness because of neglect and lack of population (ἀκυρωσθεὶς). | too own many acres, as I imagine some others do, not only in the mountains but also on the plains, and if anybody would till them, I should not only give him the chance for nothing but gladly pay money besides. For it is plain that they become more valuable to me, and at the same time the sight of land occupied and under cultivation is a pleasing one, while waste lands are not only a useless possession to those who hold them, but very distressing evidence of some misfortune to their owners.’ (Dio Chrysostom, Euhoean Discourse, Oration 7.34-36)

Certain effects of the Roman conquest of Greece have long been the focus of scholarly interest: for instance, new styles of artistic and literary production, legal implications, and imperial cult activity. Most attention, however, has been paid to the changes wrought by this contact within the conquering power itself — that is, with the ‘reverse acculturation’ neatly summed up by Horace’s line: Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis intulit agresti Latio (Epist. 2.1.156). Yet the more material consequences of imperial activity in the eastern Mediterranean, and specifically the impact of imperial incorporation upon newly subordinate territories, have not received the systematic study they demand. One vital topic in particular has remained largely unexplored. There exists overwhelming cross-cultural evidence to show that, as societies are brought within the orbit of an imperial power, major changes in the distribution and utilization of economic resources may be expected. In the Roman case, the key element is obviously the relationship of people to the land, the guarantor of both subsistence and status. This article considers two very basic questions as a first step towards a more rigorous examination of change in Greek economic and social systems during this crucial period of transition. In ‘Old Greece’, the Roman province of Achaia, what changes in land tenure and what variations in land use took place following the inception of Roman influence and control?

Some useful observations, of course, have been made about these subjects before, and general trends have been identified in Greek landholding and agricultural regimes; but they are based almost entirely upon the available documentary evidence for the period. Such sources are invaluable in the reconstruction of politico-administrative units and socio-economic conditions, but the nature of much of this testimony, particularly for the kinds of questions addressed here, is far from being unproblematic. Literary works, among others the Euhoean Discourse quoted above, are frequently riddled with political and moralizing topos, yet they have often been accepted at face value as an accurate picture of Greece in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In a nutshell, these sources combine to argue for a desolate, depopulated, under-cultivated Greek landscape. The conclusions reached, however, are only as good as the original evidence.


2 The most oft-cited references include: Polybius 36.17.5-9: ‘In our time the whole of Greece has been subject to lack of children (ἀκαταστάσεα) and a general decrease of the population owing to which cities have become deserted and the land has ceased to yield fruit...; numerous passages in Strabo (e.g. 8.8.1, 8.4.11, 9.2.25) and Pausanias (e.g. 8.24.11, 10.4.1); Plutarch, De Def. Crac. 413F-414A; Dio Chrysostom, Or. 7 and Or. 33.25; Cicero, Flac. 16. 62-64 and Ad Fam. 4.5.4; Seneca, Ep. 14.3(91).10. On these sources generally, see N. Petrochilos, Roman