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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 (ὀλιγανθρωπία). I 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, *Euboean 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, not surprisingly, 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.¹ 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 *Euboean Discourse* quoted above, are frequently riddled with political and moralizing *topoi*, 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.² The conclusions reached, however, are only as good as the original evidence,

1 Though for Achaia see M. H. Crawford, "Rome and the Greek world," *Economic History Review* 30 (1977) 42-52; J. Day, *An economic history of Athens under Roman domination* (New York 1942); U. Kahrstedt, *Das wirtschaftliche Gesicht Griechenlands in der Kaiserzeit* (Bern 1954); J. A. O. Larsen, "Roman Greece," in T. Frank (ed.), *An economic survey of ancient Rome* 4 (Baltimore 1938) 259-498; M. Rostovtzeff, *The social and economic history of the Hellenistic world* (Oxford 1941) and *The social and economic history of the Roman empire* (Oxford 1957). Although boundaries varied through time, Achaia can be equated roughly with modern Greece, with the exception of Crete, Macedonia and possibly Thessaly.

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 (ἀπαίδια) 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. Orac.* 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*