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Documenting the rural economy of Byzantine Egypt Three papyri from Alabastrine

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The papyri published below were purchased in Egypt in 1921 and sent to Ann Arbor in 1923. Their common interest lies in the fact that, in all likelihood, they come from the same village, Alabastrine in the Antinoite nome on the right bank of the Nile (fig.1),¹ and that their dates can be established within the first half of the 5th c. A.D., a period in the history of Egypt that is comparatively less well-known through papyri.² It is also possible that the papyri are more closely related. At least two of them (nos. 1 and 3) are concerned with the same woman, Aurelia Iuliana, and perhaps also with the same man, a sailor from Alabastrine by the name of Aurelius Serenus.

All three papyri illustrate different aspects of the rural economy of Byzantine Egypt from the village perspective. They were apparently drawn up in Alabastrine itself without the aid of professional, i.e. urban, notaries. For once we find no interference from the metropolis, as usually occurs with papyrus documents and even with the other archive from approximately the same area and date, the so-called Taurinus archive (BGU XII) which deals largely with the exploitation of land owned by an urban family.

In the past, social and economic historians of Byzantine Egypt have been content with the perspective offered by the admittedly important archive of the family of the Apiones, the absentee landlords from Oxyrhynchus. These historians have, as a rule, taken their cue from E. R. Hardy,³ who has come under some heavy criticism lately, mainly through the work of J. Gascou.⁴ There is a growing consensus that refuses to regard the particular version of the Oxyrhynchite scene represented by the Apiones as a specimen of a feudalistic society, let alone as typical for Byzantine Egypt as a whole.⁵ However that may

- 1 On Alabastrine see M. Drew-Bear, *Le nome Hermopolite* (Missoula 1979) 56-61. In the early Roman period the village was known as Ἀλαβαστρῶν πόλις. The alabaster mines in the vicinity of Alabastrine are on record as late as A.D. 325 (see *PSakaoon* 24). The only other document contemporary with or later than ours to mention Alabastrine is PSI XIII 1342. However, Alabastrine may have been known later as ΠΙΜΑΝΘΑΒΙΝ in Coptic. On this possibility see Drew-Bear, *ibid.* 213. By the 5th c. according to the Coptic texts relating to Claudius of Antioch the pagan character of the village had become a mere memory. The few documents show that the village had become thoroughly christianized: PSI XIII 1342 is a letter to an ἀναχωρητής (see on him also *PPrag.* I 45), PMich. inv. 472 (no. 2 here) mentions a μονάζων, and PMich. inv. 455 (no. 1) was written by a Christian priest. On ΠΙΜΑΝΘΑΒΙΝ see also St. Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit* 4 (Wiesbaden 1988) 1975-77.
- 2 The relative scarcity of papyrus documentation for the period that runs from Theodosius to Justinian has been commented on before. See R. S. Bagnall and K. A. Worp, "Papyrus documentation in Egypt from Constantine to Justinian," in R. Pintaudi (ed.), *Miscellanea papyrologica* (Firenze 1980) 13-23, supporting the analysis and the conclusions of R. Rémondon, "L'Égypte au 5e siècle de notre ère: les sources papyrologiques et leurs problèmes," in *Atti dell'XI Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia* (Milano 1966) 135-48. Apparently, when the major finds of papyri were made, the 5th c. was less well represented, and this situation is now beyond repair.
- 3 E. R. Hardy, *The large estates of Byzantine Egypt* (New York 1931). See the general works of A. H. M. Jones, *The later Roman empire* (Oxford 1964) and A. Demandt, *Die Spätantike* (München 1989). The more moderate view of I. F. Fikhtman has recently been summarized in M. Capasso, G. Messeri Savorelli and R. Pintaudi (edd.), *Miscellanea papyrologica in occasione del bicentenario dell'edizione della Charta Borgiana* (Firenze 1990) 159-79.
- 4 See J. Gascou, "Les grandes domaines, la cité et l'état en Égypte byzantine," *Travaux & Mémoires* 9 (1985) 1-90.
- 5 One only needs to be reminded of current research on sixth-century Aphrodito. See e.g. J. G. Keenan, "Notes on absentee landlordism at Aphrodito," *BASP* 22 (1985) 137-69. In the first half of the 20th c. the distribution of landed property was markedly different in the various provinces of Middle Egypt. The area of the ancient Hermopolite and neighboring nomes, nowadays called Minia province, consisted for about 50% of estates 50 feddans (21 ha) large, whereas the area of the other Middle and Upper Egyptian nomes consisted for less than 25% of such estates. See G. Baer, *A history of landownership in modern Egypt, 1800-1950* (London 1962). This should warn us against taking any area in Egypt as typical of the rest without further proof.