

*Egypt and the political economy of empire*

## EGYPT WITHIN EMPIRE

The centrality of Egypt to the wider political economy of the Eastern Roman Empire in the early sixth century cannot be overstated.<sup>1</sup> On one level, the significance of the region can be gauged in straightforwardly demographic terms. The cultural and administrative focal point of Egypt in late antiquity was the city of Alexandria, which, with Constantinople and Antioch, was one of the great *metropoleis* of the eastern Mediterranean, with a population of perhaps some 200,000–300,000.<sup>2</sup> The lands of the Nile Valley beyond Alexandria may have supported a further five million souls, up to one third of whom, it has been estimated, may have lived in urban centres, a density of population which was not to be seen again in the Mediterranean world until the early modern period.<sup>3</sup> While such figures can never be anything more than rough estimates, to suggest that perhaps one-quarter of the inhabitants of the Eastern Empire in about 500 lived in Egypt would not be wildly misleading.<sup>4</sup>

The demographic contribution of Egypt to the Eastern Roman Empire was as nothing, however, in comparison to its economic significance. Egypt was the economic powerhouse of the late antique Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> On a recent analysis, it has been postulated that the ‘gross provincial product’ of

<sup>1</sup> For a useful introduction to pre-Islamic Egypt, see Bagnall and Rathbone 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See most recently Haas 1997: 45–7. For Constantinople, see Mango 1985; for Antioch, Liebeschuetz 1972 and Kondoleon 2001.

<sup>3</sup> See Bagnall and Frier 1994: 55–6 for an estimate of about five million inhabitants for Egypt in the early imperial period. The population may have been somewhat higher than this in the fifth and early sixth centuries, which are generally agreed to have constituted a period of demographic expansion, and probably somewhat lower in the second half of the sixth century, in the aftermath of the advent of bubonic plague. See also Alston 2002: 330–4, whose work posits a larger population for Alexandria (c. 500,000) but a lower level of urbanism overall, with the urban population comprising perhaps 20 to 25 per cent of the population.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Treadgold 1997: 137: ‘the probability remains that between 284 and 457 the population [of the Eastern Empire] remained within the range of 15 to 20 million’.

<sup>5</sup> I owe the phrase to Professor C. Wickham.

sixth-century Egypt amounted to a minimum of some 20 million *solidi*.<sup>6</sup> For the same period, it has been estimated that the region contributed three-eighths of all fiscal revenues collected by the imperial authorities from the eastern provinces.<sup>7</sup>

This wealth was the result of Egypt's unique natural resources, and in particular, the Nile flood. The author of the fourth-century gazetteer of the empire, the *Expositio Totius Mundi et Gentium*, described how the annual inundation of the River Nile covered 'the entire surface of the land, and effortlessly brings forth all the fruits of the earth'.<sup>8</sup> The Nile inundation, combined with the irrigation systems, canals, and technological innovations that further facilitated agriculture beyond the Nile valley, blessed Egypt with a fecundity unrivalled in the Mediterranean world. In particular, Egypt grew wheat on a vast scale. As a result, it served as the breadbasket of the empire. In the early sixth century the imperial authorities shipped over 240 million kilograms of grain a year from Egypt to Constantinople, in what was known as the 'happy shipment'. This was used to supply the imperial capital, other cities of the east, and the imperial army on campaign.<sup>9</sup> As the author of the *Expositio* put it, albeit with some exaggeration, 'no other province could subsist without divine Egypt'.<sup>10</sup>

The extraordinary wealth and high population density of late antique Egypt meant that very substantial profits could be derived from internal, localised patterns of production and exchange. This may have acted as a disincentive to any long-distance export trade save in the case of a small number of exceptionally high-value goods, or items in which Egypt possessed an effective monopoly. The author of the *Expositio*, for example, noted the abundance of viticulture within the region, an assertion amply supported by the documentary papyri.<sup>11</sup> Yet comparatively little wine would

<sup>6</sup> Banaji 2001: 65.    <sup>7</sup> Hendy 1985: 172.

<sup>8</sup> *Expositio Totius Mundi et Gentium* chapter 34: 'Habes ergo omnem Aegypti regionem coronatam fluvio qui sic vocatur Nilus, qui veniens rigat omnem faciem terrae, et fructum fert omnem sine oleo.'

<sup>9</sup> For the annual corn shipment to Constantinople of 8 million artabas of grain, see *J.Edict* 13.8. For the rough rate of conversion of artaba to kilogram, see Bagnall 1993: 332. Jones 1964: II, 698 estimates the sum shipped to have been sufficient to have supported 600,000 individuals. The usual estimate is that one person could live on 10 artabas of wheat a year – see Pestman 1990: 49. Note also Teall 1959: 122–46.

<sup>10</sup> *Expositio Totius Mundi et Gentium* chapter 36: 'non posse aliam provinciam sufficere nisi divinum Aegyptum'. In his *Secret History* Procopius records an interesting account of the praetorian prefect Peter Barsymes, which suggests that it was common practice for grain sent from Egypt that was surplus to the needs of Alexandria and Constantinople to be assigned to and be compulsorily purchased by 'the eastern cities' – Procopius, *Anecdota* 22.14–17. For the role played by the state in the feeding of cities in general, see Durlat 1990a.

<sup>11</sup> *Expositio Totius Mundi et Gentium* chapter 34. For discussion of papyrological evidence for viticulture, see Banaji 2001 and Hickey 2001.

appear to have been exported: the main amphora (or jar) type produced in late antique Egypt (LR7 – in which wine would have been most commonly conveyed) is found in relatively small quantities along the sea-lanes leading to Constantinople and along the Palestinian littoral.<sup>12</sup> Rather, Egypt is most conspicuous from the ceramic record as a centre for consumption on a grand scale, drawing in imports from throughout the eastern provinces and beyond, catalysing and sustaining commodified production throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>13</sup> In the documentary and literary sources Egypt and Alexandria are recorded to have provided a market for goods ranging from Spanish olive oil, Gallic soap, and Rhodian wine to Arabian frankincense, Ethiopian hippopotamus tusks, and pickled fish from Gaza.<sup>14</sup>

The significance of the ceramic evidence should not, however, be overstated, and almost certainly gives a misleadingly lopsided impression of the ‘balance of trade’ of late antique Egypt. The export market for Egyptian wine was probably curtailed by the fact that the wines of Palestine, especially those of Gaza, were reputed to be infinitely superior.<sup>15</sup> Rather, Egyptian merchants seem to have specialised in archaeologically less visible, durable, or ‘sourceable’ commodities than wine-filled amphorae, many of which are likely to have travelled ‘piggyback’ along with the imperial grain shipments.<sup>16</sup> As Harris has noted:

Some impression of precisely how ‘mixed’ a late antique cargo could be is indicated by the description given in two fifth-century Alexandrian horoscopes. These tell us that ships left Egypt with cargoes composed of a mixture of small birds, papyrus, camels, high quality textiles, objects of bronze and kitchen utensils, silver, (and) dried goods . . . Identifying the components of such cargoes in archaeological terms would be extremely difficult. It is salient that in this example only the bronze and silver (and possibly the ‘kitchen utensils’, assuming that these were not wooden)

<sup>12</sup> See Kingsley and Decker 2001: 4–5 and Banaji 2001: 158–9 for discussion and extensive bibliography. Banaji notes that the export trade in Egyptian wine would appear to have expanded somewhat over the course of the sixth century. The same pattern is evident with regard to trade with the west, where finds of LR7 become more common in the late sixth century, before petering out in the seventh. The scale of the sixth-century expansion should not, however, be exaggerated: see Harris 2003: 58, figure 11.

<sup>13</sup> See Kingsley and Decker 2001: 4, where they note that ‘recent archaeological research is demonstrating that . . . early Byzantine Egypt was a massive market for a cosmopolitan range of East Mediterranean staple foodstuffs and other products. Wines from Gaza and Ashkalon in Palestine seem to have almost monopolised those imported in amphorae through the port of Alexandria . . . An estimated 80% of LR 1 amphorae from Alexandria, Middle Egypt and the Fayum are of Cypriot origin and 15% derive from Cilicia . . . Manufactured commodities, represented in the archaeological record by Phocaeen, Cypriot and African red slip ware, are also common within the province.’

<sup>14</sup> Johnson and West 1949: 107–51.

<sup>15</sup> For Gaza in late antiquity, see the fascinating hagiography of Porphyrius written by Mark the Deacon. For the Palestinian wine trade, see Kingsley 2001: 87–106.

<sup>16</sup> See McCormick 2001: 98 note.

would be visible in the archaeological record. This is a sobering thought, especially as the organic material may have been the most valuable.<sup>17</sup>

The exportation of vast quantities of papyrus is further mentioned in the *Expositio*.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Egypt was a renowned source of aromata and spices and was further characterised by its wealth of mineral resources beyond those already mentioned, such as red porphyry and gold.<sup>19</sup> Many of these commodities travelled far to the north and west: in sixth-century Francia, for instance, ‘we hear of Egyptian textiles being used in the Church of Tours, as well as of a hermit who ordered herbs from Egypt’.<sup>20</sup>

Egypt also served an important role as an *entrepôt* and transit point for long-distance trade. Egypt in general, and Alexandria in particular, stood at the nexus of a series of inter-regional trade routes that traversed much of the known world. The *Life* of the seventh-century Patriarch of Alexandria, John the Almsgiver, written by Leontius of Neapolis c. 641–2, describes trading vessels belonging to the patriarchate visiting not only Palestine, but also the Adriatic, Sicily, and Marseilles. In one episode, a merchant ship is recorded to have travelled as far as Britain.<sup>21</sup> Nor were trading contacts limited to the Mediterranean and the west. In the mid-sixth-century *Christian Topography*, the Alexandrian merchant Constantine (more commonly known to posterity as ‘Cosmas Indicopleustes’) wrote of how an acquaintance of his by the name of Sopatros had visited the island of *Taprobane* – thought to be modern Sri Lanka.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the *Itinerarium Antonini Placentini*, written c. 560–70, describes ships from as far afield as India docking at the Red Sea port of Clysma.<sup>23</sup> Such trading contacts with the east are well attested numismatically.<sup>24</sup> Given the role played by

<sup>17</sup> Harris 2003: 56, who draws her information from Mundell Mango 2001: 98. The camels, we should note, were conveyed to Alexandria from Cyrenaica, but the rest of the cargo was Egyptian. For the texts of the horoscopes, see Dagron and Rouge 1982: 117–33.

<sup>18</sup> *Expositio Totius Mundi et Gentium* chapter 36. <sup>19</sup> Johnson and West 1949: 107–51.

<sup>20</sup> Harris 2003: 68. For the routes taken by much of this northern trade see 64–72.

<sup>21</sup> Monks 1953: 356. Whilst the writings of Leontius are somewhat unreliable, Mango has concluded that the *Life of John the Almsgiver* ‘can be used with some caution as a source for social and economic history’; Mango 1984: 40–1.

<sup>22</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography*, book XI, chapters 17–19; see *La topographie chrétienne de Cosmas*, ed. Wolska-Conus: III, 348–50. For the date of composition, see Wolska-Conus’ Introduction: I, 15.

<sup>23</sup> *Itinerarium Antonini Placentini*, see Milani edn: 216 – Clysma is described as a ‘civitas modica . . . ubi etiam de India naves veniunt’. Ships from India are also mentioned as docking at Abila (= Aila) on the Red Sea; ‘In Abila, autem, descendit navis de India cum diversis aromatibus’ (212). In the sixth-century sources, India at times would appear to indicate any region beyond the empire bordering onto the Red Sea or the Indian Ocean, so some circumspection is required in relation to these accounts. See Crone 1987: 31.

<sup>24</sup> Narasmahamurthy 1985: 3, and Ghosh and Ismael 1980: 16.

Egypt in inter-regional trade, it should come as little surprise that it was the first region of the empire to suffer from the advent of bubonic plague in 541–2.<sup>25</sup>

We should also note the active role played by individuals of Egyptian origin in imperial government and politics throughout the late antique period: a role that, in a sense, mirrored the economic and fiscal significance of the region. From the late fourth century to the sixth, Egypt produced at least two urban prefects of Constantinople, and at least seven praetorian prefects of the east. This number increases to eight if we include the perhaps romanticised figure of the honorary praetorian prefect Eulogius, who, it is claimed, emerged from obscurity in the early sixth century after discovering a treasure-trove.<sup>26</sup> One of these praetorian prefects – Flavius Anthemius Isidorus – demonstrated a particular concern for Egyptian affairs, his eastern prefecture, dating from 435–6, witnessing the promulgation of numerous extant constitutions relating to the region.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Egyptians held a number of the highest gubernatorial offices within their homeland – providing a minimum of six augustal prefects of Alexandria for the period between the 460s and 602.<sup>28</sup> As will be seen in chapter six in relation to the region of the Thebaid, the grip of Egyptians on Egyptian governorships beyond Alexandria was apparently even tighter.

<sup>25</sup> Allen 1979: 5–20, and Sarris 2002a: 169–82.

<sup>26</sup> Martindale 1980 (hereafter *PLRE* II): 420–1, Eulogius 9. The somewhat better-attested praetorian prefects include the figure of Cyrus of Panopolis PVC 426, PVC II and PPO (east) 439–41 (*PLRE* II: 336–9, Fl. Taurus Seleucus Cyrus 7), Hadrianus PPO (Italy) 401–5, 413–14 (Jones, Martindale, Morris 1971 (hereafter *PLRE* I): 406, Hadrianus 2), Anthemius PPO (east) 405–14 (*PLRE* II: 93–5, Anthemius 1), Erythrius PPO (east?) 466, 472, 474/491 (*PLRE* II: 401–2, Erythrius 1), Anthemius' son Isidorus PPO Illyricum 424, PPO (east) 435–6 (*PLRE* II: 631–3, Fl. Anthemius Isidorus 9), Apion PPO (east?) 518 (*PLRE* II: Apion 2) and Hephæstus PPO (east) 551–2 (Martindale 1992 (hereafter *PLRE* III): 582–3, Fl. Ioannes Theodorus Menas Narses Chnoubammon Horion Hephæstus). In addition to Cyrus of Panopolis, Iulianus served as PVC in 491 (*PLRE* II: 639, Iulianus 14). Of the some eighty-five praetorian prefects of the east who we know to have existed between 392 and 616, the origin of the vast majority (61) is unknown. Of the remainder, six were Egyptians, four were Syrians, three were Cappadocians, and two were Phrygians, whilst the following regions would appear to have produced one each: Gaul, Persia (?), Osrhoene (?), Greece, Lycia, Phoeniciae, Lydia, Apamaea, and Euphratensis. See the *fasti* contained in *PLRE* II and III. Thus, of praetorian prefects of the east for whom we possess sufficient information, one-quarter were Egyptians. If one accepts the estimate of Bagnall and Frier, that after the third-century crisis the population of Egypt was some three to five million, and the estimate of Treadgold that the overall population of the empire was between fifteen and twenty million, this proportion would be demographically representative. See Bagnall and Frier 1994: 55–6, and W. Treadgold 1997: 137.

<sup>27</sup> *Codex Theodosianus* 14.26.2; 12.1.190; 12.1.191; 14.27.2; 11.5.3.

<sup>28</sup> Flavius Alexander 468–9 (*PLRE* II: 59, Fl. Alexander 23), Fl. Strategius 518/23 (*PLRE* II: 1034–6, Fl. Strategius 9), John Laxarion c. 542 (*PLRE* III: 642, Ioannes *qui et* Laxarion 31), Hephæstus 545–6(–551?) (*PLRE* III: 582–3, Fl. Ioannes Theodorus Menas Narses Chnoubammon Horion Hephæstus), possibly Julian in the mid sixth century (*PLRE* III: 733–4, Iulianus 12) and Peter in 602 (*PLRE* III: 1011, Petrus 56).

Egyptians also made a fundamental contribution to the development of Byzantine intellectual and literary culture in its formative late antique phase. Alexandria maintained a formidable reputation as a seat of philosophical and scientific learning, whilst, in terms of the literary arts, the fifth century has been characterised as an era of Egyptian poetic dominance.<sup>29</sup> Literary talent was in many ways if not quite a prerequisite, then at least a distinct advantage for those entering imperial service in this period. Through one's literary skills it was possible to attract and maintain a patron, and without patronage, preferment was almost impossible. In the early stages of his career, for example, John Lydus describes how he derived great benefit from the panegyric he wrote in honour of his patron Zoticus.<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy that of those Egyptians who advanced through the imperial bureaucracy in the fifth and sixth centuries, several had something of a reputation as *littéraires*. Cyrus of Panopolis, who twice served as urban prefect of Constantinople in the early fifth century, was a distinguished poet, whilst Olympiodorus of Thebes, in addition to his career as a diplomat, wrote a twenty-two-book secular history covering the period from 407 to 425 dedicated to Theodosius II.<sup>31</sup> In the late fifth century there would appear to have existed a network of politically involved Egyptian men-of-letters associated with the household of the Emperor Anastasius. Egypt was a hotbed of resistance to the Christological formula established at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and the association between leading figures of Egyptian origin and the person of the Emperor Anastasius may in part have been in response to the latter's known anti-Chalcedonian sympathies.<sup>32</sup>

Certainly, the Egyptian poets Christodorus and Colluthus of Lycopolis are identifiable as members of an Anastasian literary *salon*, whilst a number of Egyptians such as Julian the Alexandrian and Erythrius are recorded as holding high office under him.<sup>33</sup> The honorary praetorian prefect Eulogius is recorded to have been a supporter of Anastasius' nephew Hypatius amid the abortive coup against Justinian associated with the Nika riots of 532, whilst Julian the Egyptian, who served as praetorian prefect from 530 to 531, was commissioned to write a number of epigrams associated with members of Anastasius' household, including two *epitymbia* for Hypatius

<sup>29</sup> Alan Cameron 1965: 470–509. Thus Cameron states 'in the Later Roman Empire Egypt, not for the first time in its history, became the home of Greek poetry' (470).

<sup>30</sup> Lydus, *De Magistratibus*, see Bandy edn: ix–xvi.

<sup>31</sup> *PLRE* II: 336–7 – Fl. Taurus Seleucus Cyrus 7, and (798–9) Olympiodorus I. See Alan Cameron 1965: 473 and 497. See also Matthews 1970: 79–97.

<sup>32</sup> In general, see Frend 1972.

<sup>33</sup> *PLRE* II, Christodorus: 293, Colluthus: 304, Iulianus 14: 639, and Erythrius I: 401–2. See also Alan Cameron 1978: 259–62.

himself.<sup>34</sup> It is perhaps instructive that the emasculation of the Anastasian dynasty in the wake of the events of 532 can be seen to have coincided with a waning of Egyptian poetic dominance within the empire. It would seem that the defeat of the Nika insurrection destroyed a well-placed nest of Egyptian politicians, poets, and poetasters, whose political allegiances and Christological sympathies were deemed suspect by the Justinianic regime.

The eclipsing of one faction, however, opened up opportunities to others. Of Egyptians who prospered in imperial service in Constantinople under the Emperor Justinian, two above all stand out from the sources. Both are recorded in the writings of John Lydus. The first, a former augustal prefect of Alexandria, *dux Thebaidis*, and praetorian prefect of the east, possessed the full name, redolent with aristocratic pride, of Flavius Ioannes Menas Narses Chnoubammon Horion Hephaestus.<sup>35</sup> John Lydus noted of Hephaestus that he was ‘a good man whose very name alone displayed the nobility which was his, for he was reputed to be a descendant of that Hephaestus, who, according to the Sicilian, had reigned as first king of Egypt’.<sup>36</sup> The second, a landowner from the Middle Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus, Flavius Apion, had held high office under Anastasius, with whom, as John put it, he had shared the imperial dignity: a reference to his having held the titular rank of praetorian prefect of the east. The same Apion was described by Procopius as ‘an extremely efficacious man of eminence among the patricians’.<sup>37</sup>

Flavius Apion had been accorded the titular rank of praetorian prefect c. 503/4, when he had played a vital part in the Eastern Roman Empire’s crushing counter-attack against the forces of Sasanian Persia at Amida, overseeing the provision of grain from Edessa and then from Alexandria, to one of the largest armies ever mobilised for a single campaign in the Eastern Empire’s history.<sup>38</sup> Given the vital role played by the Egyptian grain supply in feeding the imperial field army, the choice of an Egyptian landowner for this post would have made sense. Between 508 and 510 Flavius Apion is recorded to have been present in Constantinople, where he received the dedication of Severus of Antioch’s *Contra Eutychem*, indicating that his theological sympathies at this point were staunchly anti-Chalcedonian. In 510, however, Apion fell from favour at court. As a result of this, he was exiled to Nicaea by Anastasius, denounced as a ‘pederast and heretic’ and,

<sup>34</sup> *PLRE* II: 420–1, Eulogius 9, and Alan Cameron 1977: 47.

<sup>35</sup> *PLRE* III: 582–3, Fl. Ioannes Theodorus Menas Narses Chnoubammon Horion Hephaestus.

<sup>36</sup> Lydus, *De Magistratibus* 3.30.

<sup>37</sup> *De Mag.* 3.158. Procopius, *de Bello Persico* 1.8.5. See also *PLRE* II: 111–12, Apion 2.

<sup>38</sup> Greatrex 1998: 96. See also Howard-Johnston 1995: 157–226.



along with one of his sons, Heraklides, was forcibly ordained.<sup>39</sup> It was only upon the accession of Justin as emperor in 518 that Apion was rehabilitated, a political development associated with his, perhaps pragmatic, conversion to a pro-Chalcedonian doctrinal stance. Indeed, according to Innocent of Maronea, Apion underwent this change of heart in direct response to a personal intervention by the Emperor Justin himself, backed up by his nephew, the future Emperor Justinian. Under Justin, Apion was appointed praetorian prefect of the east in full, in place of the *ad hoc* prefecture he had held during the Amida campaign.

Although nothing is known of the economic resources and actual ancestry that underpinned the authority and pretensions of Flavius Hephæstus, Flavius Apion, his ancestors, heirs, and estates are amply attested in the papyrological record. In fact, of all the papyrological dossiers detailing aristocratic estates in late antiquity, the 'Apion papyri' represent by far the most coherent and extensive body. As such, for present purposes, they constitute the single most important surviving collection of documentary sources for any region of the late Roman world. They reveal not only the history of a family, but also the contours of a society.

#### THE APION FAMILY

In naming its children, Apion's family adhered to the tradition of papyronymy that was relatively common at the time.<sup>40</sup> Thus Flavius Apion's, presumably eldest, son was named Strategius, who in turn named his son Apion, who named his son Strategius. On the basis of this pattern, it is possible to identify Flavius Apion's father as the Strategius recorded as *comes domesticorum* in 497, and his grandfather as the 'most magnificent and all-praiseworthy former *ex-consul*' recorded papyrologically in the same year (hereafter Strategius II and Apion I respectively).<sup>41</sup> This would suggest that

<sup>39</sup> Theodore Anagnostes, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, see Hansen edn: 137. It is normally supposed on the basis of John Lydus that Apion suffered confiscation of property, but there is no trace of this in the papyri, and the text of the *De Magistratibus* is not entirely clear on the point. Lydus informs us that Anastasius moved against Apion during the prefecture of Leontius, and he goes on to write of leading men suffering confiscation at this time, see *De Magistratibus* 3.17. As the *Chronicle* of John Malalas informs us, others were exiled at the same time as Apion, and thus the reference to confiscations need not necessarily have applied to him. An account of the return of a number of senators from exile upon the accession of Justin I, including Apion, is also recorded in Theophanes *anno mundi* 6011.

<sup>40</sup> Gagos and van Minnen 1994: 19; Jones 1964: II, 530.

<sup>41</sup> *PLRE* II: 1034, Fl. Strategius 8, and 110–1, Apion 1. For the prosopography of the family up to Fl. Apion's sons, I am convinced by the arguments presented by Martindale and unmoved by the objections of Gascoü 1985: 61–75.



Flavius Apion's great-grandfather may be identified with the Flavius Strategius first attested in the currently transcribed papyri in March 439, later recorded as a *curialis* of Oxyrhynchus, *comes sacri consistorii*, and *curator* of the Oxyrhynchite estates of Eudocia, wife of the Emperor Theodosius II (hereafter Strategius I). This Strategius was father to a daughter by the name of Flavia Isis.<sup>42</sup> It is highly likely that this Flavia Isis should be identified with Apion I's wife, in which case Apion I would have been Strategius I's son-in-law, rather than son. If so, Apion I was probably drawn from the land-owning aristocracy of the neighbouring region of the Herakleopolite, where he is known to have possessed property.<sup>43</sup>

Prior to the mid fifth century, the history of the Apion family is rather obscure. Nevertheless, it is possible that the Flavius Strategius I of the mid-fifth-century papyri is to be identified with the Strategius recorded in the correspondence of Isidore of Pelusium, to whom Isidore wrote to congratulate upon his accession to the office of *dux* of the province of Augustamnica. Isidore praised Strategius for possessing a 'soul suited for rule, despising wickedness since youth'.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, it is tempting to identify this early Flavius Strategius as either the grandson or great-great-grandson of the Flavius Strategius recorded in an inscription of 349 as *vir perfectissimus et praeses Thebaidos*.<sup>45</sup>

The history of the Apion family in the early and mid sixth century is rather less opaque. In addition to the Heraklides who was forcibly ordained in 510, the praetorian prefect Flavius Apion II is known to have fathered a second son, as noted, presumably the elder of the two, named Flavius Strategius (III), who succeeded his father in imperial service. In his edict on Alexandria and Egypt, Justinian praised Strategius III for the efficiency with which he had organised the grain shipment from Egypt during his period of office as augustal prefect. An honorary *consul*, *magister militum*, and *patricius*, Strategius III represented the emperor in negotiations with the Persians in 531 and 532. In 532, he also presided over a meeting of Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian or 'Monophysite' bishops. Strategius III re-emerges in the historical record in 535 as *comes sacrarum largitionum* – chief finance minister – whilst also attempting to settle a dispute between the empire and its Arab – and, we should note once more – Monophysite allies. As a member of a family that had defected from an anti-Chalcedonian

<sup>42</sup> *POxy.* LXIII 4389 and note 1. For Flavia Isis recorded in 469 – see *POxy.* LXIII 4390.

<sup>43</sup> See Gonis 2004: 175–8. <sup>44</sup> *PLRE* II: 1033, Strategius 4 for letter.

<sup>45</sup> *PLRE* I: 858–9, Flavius Strategius 5.

Christological stance *c.* 518, Strategius III's representations on behalf of the emperor in such Monophysite milieux are highly suggestive.<sup>46</sup>

Flavius Strategius III would appear to have died in the opening years of the 540s, but his son, Apion III, is recorded in the *fasti* as *consul* in 539 and, in the same year, as *comes domesticorum*.<sup>47</sup> By the late 540s he is described as *patricius* and, by *c.* 550, *dux Thebaidis*. In 556 Apion III can be seen bearing the titles of *magister utriusque militiae* and pagarch of Arsinoe in the Fayum. Such provincial responsibilities should not be read to imply any narrowing of political horizons on the part of the family. Apion III is recorded in the *Chronicle* of John Malalas as a leading figure of the Constantinopolitan senate, the servants of whose residence in the imperial city hurled insults at members of the Green faction. In 565/6 the papyri record preparations for the celebration of the birthday of Apion III's wife – the 'most magnificent woman of consular dignity'.<sup>48</sup> This wife has been identified as a daughter of Praeiecta, niece to the Emperor Justin II, grand-niece of the Emperor Justinian, and a great-granddaughter of Hypatius.<sup>49</sup> The Apion recorded in an imperial constitution of 539 as *vir spectabilis et advocatus fisci*, that is, during the consulship of Apion III, cannot be directly identified with the family, but was perhaps a child of Flavius Apion II's son Heraklides, an identification which would make sense papyronymically.<sup>50</sup> In addition to a daughter, named Praeiecta after her imperial grandmother, Apion III fathered a son, whom, entirely predictably, he named Strategius (IV). Apion III may also have had another son, who seems to have predeceased his father (see below). Apion III died *c.* 577–9.<sup>51</sup> His heir, Flavius Strategius IV, held patrician rank before he too passed away, an event which can only be dated to within the broad range of the period from 579 to 587. His wife would seem to have outlived him.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup> For Fl. Strategius III see *PLRE* II: 1034–6, Fl. Strategius 9, and *PLRE* III: Strategius. In the latter, Martindale cites a late and unreliable source that nevertheless records some factual information – the *Narratio de Aedificatione Sanctae Sophiae* – which describes Strategius III as Justinian's 'spiritual brother' (πνευματικός αδελφός). For a controversial interpretation of this see Boswell 1995: 229. I am indebted to Cyril Mango for discussion of the *Narratio*. For the meeting of Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian Churchmen, see Brock 1981: 87–121.

<sup>47</sup> He would appear to have been only ten or eleven years old when appointed *consul* – see Beauchamp 2001: 165–78.

<sup>48</sup> *PLRE* III: 96–8, Apion 3.

<sup>49</sup> See the convincing argument proposed by Beauchamp 2001: 165–78. In the light of this, the genealogical table proposed by Alan Cameron (who provides the link to Hypatius) needs to be amended – see Alan Cameron 1978: 274. On this model, Praeiecta, the mother of Apion's wife, married John, a grandson of Hypatius (via Hypatius' son, Pompeius) in the mid-to-late 540s. She was a daughter of Justinian's sister – Vigilantia – and sister to the future Emperor Justin II.

<sup>50</sup> *PLRE* III: 96, Apion 2. <sup>51</sup> Mazza 2001: 64. <sup>52</sup> Gascou 1985: 68.

At this point the genealogy becomes extremely difficult to reconstruct. Essentially, the papyri point in two directions. The most straightforward reading of the evidence is that Strategius IV left behind him two sons named Apion (IV – presumably the first-born) and George. The alternative is that Apion IV and George were in fact the sons of Strategius IV's sister Praeicta.<sup>53</sup> The basis for the latter claim is a recent hypothesis that the Strategius IV of the Apion papyri is to be identified with a Flavius Strategius recorded in the papyri from the region of the city of Arsinoe (where, as we have seen, Apion III had connections), who died at some point between 578 and 584 (that is to say, at roughly the same time as Strategius IV) and whose heirs are recorded to have been his widow, Flavia Theophania, and their daughters.<sup>54</sup> Yet, as Mazza, a supporter of the hypothesis acknowledges, the identification of the Arsinoite Flavius Strategius with Strategius IV is far from certain.<sup>55</sup> One might reasonably ask, for example, why, if Apion IV was born of Praeicta and a non-Apion father, he took the name of his maternal grandfather rather than his paternal one, as would have been common though not uniform practice at the time (although note the counter-example of Strategius I above)?<sup>56</sup> Until more conclusive evidence is forthcoming, caution is to be advised.

A further complication concerning the prosopography of the Flavii Apiones in the late sixth century concerns a letter that survives concerning the family – *P.Oxy.* XVI 1829 – which, although undated, would appear to refer to the testamentary provisions made in the wake of the death of Apion III. The *verso* to the letter is addressed to 'Flavius Strategius, the most renowned, most excellent, and all-honoured' (*endoxotatos kai hyperphuestatos kai paneuphemos*). The letter is divided, however, into two parts. The first part is clearly addressed to the son of the deceased and refers to the son's sister.<sup>57</sup> The second part is addressed to a second person, in relation to whom the deceased is described as *penethros* or 'father-in-law'.<sup>58</sup> Owing to the grammatical gender of the terms of address used in the second part of the document, the addressee has generally been regarded as a daughter-in-law of Apion III, perhaps the widow of a deceased son. The document also makes mention of a woman by the name of Theognosia, who need not necessarily have been related to the Apion family.<sup>59</sup> On this interpretation, *P.Oxy.* XVI 1829 should be read as addressed primarily to

<sup>53</sup> See the discussion in Mazza 2001: 64–8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 67. The original proponent of the hypothesis is G. Fantoni, editor of *CPR* XIV.

<sup>55</sup> Mazza 2001: 67–8.

<sup>56</sup> Unless Praeicta's father-in-law was also called Apion – which, *a priori*, seems highly unlikely.

<sup>57</sup> *P.Oxy.* XVI 1829 *verso*, lines 3 and 10. <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* line 13. <sup>59</sup> *PLRE* III: 1304 Theognosia.

Strategius IV. The sister referred to in the first part of the document is probably Praiecta. The addressee in the second part is either an unknown daughter-in-law of Apion III whose husband had predeceased the head of the family, or Strategius IV's wife.

Scholars have inevitably disagreed about the precise details of the prosopography recorded in *P.Oxy.* XVI 1829: that described above, for example, differs in certain respects to that proposed by the original editors. Yet most have concurred that the letter primarily concerns Apion III's son Strategius IV and a daughter-in-law. By contrast, a radically different interpretation of *P.Oxy.* XVI 1829 has recently been suggested, whereby rather than a daughter-in-law, the second part of the letter concerns a son-in-law, a supposed husband of Praiecta who is identified as the 'Strategius *paneuphemos*' of the letter's address.<sup>60</sup> The strongest grounds for this challenge to the more 'traditional' approach (as presented above with some modifications) to *P.Oxy.* XVI 1829 is that the grammatical gender of the terms of address used in the second part of the document need not necessarily suggest a female addressee. The word 'highness' used in the letter (*hyperoche*), for example, was commonly used of high-ranking men. The weakest part of the argument is the claim that such terms of address were *only* used of men.<sup>61</sup> As Beauchamp has recently demonstrated, such was not the case.<sup>62</sup> Combined with Beauchamp's other well-founded criticisms of the 'Strategius Paneuphemos' hypothesis, caution is, yet again, advisable.<sup>63</sup>

Ultimately, such issues alter very little of one's overall sense of the history of the family. Apion III's grandson George was honorary consul in 586/7, but was dead by 590.<sup>64</sup> His brother, Apion IV, as well as being an honorary *consul* and *patricius*, acted as pagarch for the region around Oxyrhynchus, a position which the head of the family would apparently have exercised almost by right of birth.<sup>65</sup> Of particular interest is Apion IV's betrothal to Eusebia, daughter of Rusticiana, a Sicilian landowner resident in Constantinople, recorded to have been a correspondent of Pope Gregory the Great.<sup>66</sup> Rusticiana was, moreover, a granddaughter of the western aristocrat, philosopher, and statesman Boethius. By virtue of this Boethian connection, Apion IV's son, Strategius (V), would have been able to claim consanguinity with the distinguished western aristocratic lineages of the

<sup>60</sup> See Palme 1997: 99–125 and 1998: 95–125. His hypotheses are broadly supported by Mazza 2001: Appendix 1 and 47–74.

<sup>61</sup> Mazza 2001: 66: 'riservabili esclusivamente a un uomo'. <sup>62</sup> Beauchamp 2001: 176–7.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 175–7. <sup>64</sup> *PLRE* III: 515, Fl. Georgius 10.

<sup>65</sup> *PLRE* III: 98–9, Fl. Apion 4. He was still a pagarch in 612 – see *P.Oxy.* I 139.

<sup>66</sup> On Rusticiana, see Averil Cameron 1979: 222–32. For Eusebia, see Alan Cameron 1978: 269.

*Anicii* and *Symmachi*. Strategius V was probably born sometime between 594 and 598. No mention is made of him in the currently available sources after 603.<sup>67</sup> His father, however, was certainly still alive in the July of 619, but seems to have been dead by the January of 620.<sup>68</sup> On the basis of the current evidence, Apion IV's death would seem to have coincided with the Persian occupation of Egypt, initiated *c.* 616 and complete by 620.<sup>69</sup>

Irrespective of the complexities of detail, the broad outline of the history of the Flavii Apiones is highly significant. From a background in provincial imperial service, members of the family emerge in the papyrological record in the fifth century as landowners in the vicinity of the city of Oxyrhynchus, intermarrying with other elements of the provincial aristocracy. In the neighbourhood of the city, they were involved in the administration of imperial estates. In the first half of the sixth century, members of the family can be seen to have combined flourishing careers in Alexandria and Constantinople with the careful nurturing and maintenance of the family's interests and connections in Middle Egypt. In the late sixth century the political status of the family was consolidated by means of prestigious marriage alliances. Amid the chaos of the seventh century, however, the main branch of the family disappears from the historical record (see figure 4).

As noted in the 'Introduction', in his *Secret History* Procopius delineates a distinct social elite within the late antique Eastern Empire consisting of members of the Constantinopolitan senate and those 'reputed to be prosperous . . . after the members of the senate'.<sup>70</sup> The Apion family clearly belonged to this class – they were members of the late-antique imperial aristocracy.<sup>71</sup> Procopius further presents the Emperor Justinian as having been locked in conflict with members of this elite. On one level, the history of the Apion family adds a touch of nuance to this picture: it was arguably under Justin and Justinian that members of the family most obviously prospered, at least in terms of the governmental positions they held. On a more profound level, however, the rise of the Apion family from the fifth century through to the sixth enables us rather better to understand the conflictual model of relations between emperor and aristocrat emergent from Procopius, John Lydus, and the imperial legislation. In order to fully appreciate this, however, we must turn to the testimony of the documentary papyri, and in particular, the Apion papyri. For they, more

<sup>67</sup> *PLRE* III: 1203, Fl. Strategius 8.      <sup>68</sup> *P.Oxy.* LVIII 3959.

<sup>69</sup> MacCoull 1986a: 307–13. For the Persian advance of the early seventh century in general, see Howard-Johnston 1999: 1–44.

<sup>70</sup> *Anecdota* II.40.      <sup>71</sup> On which, in general, see Banaji 2001: 134–70.

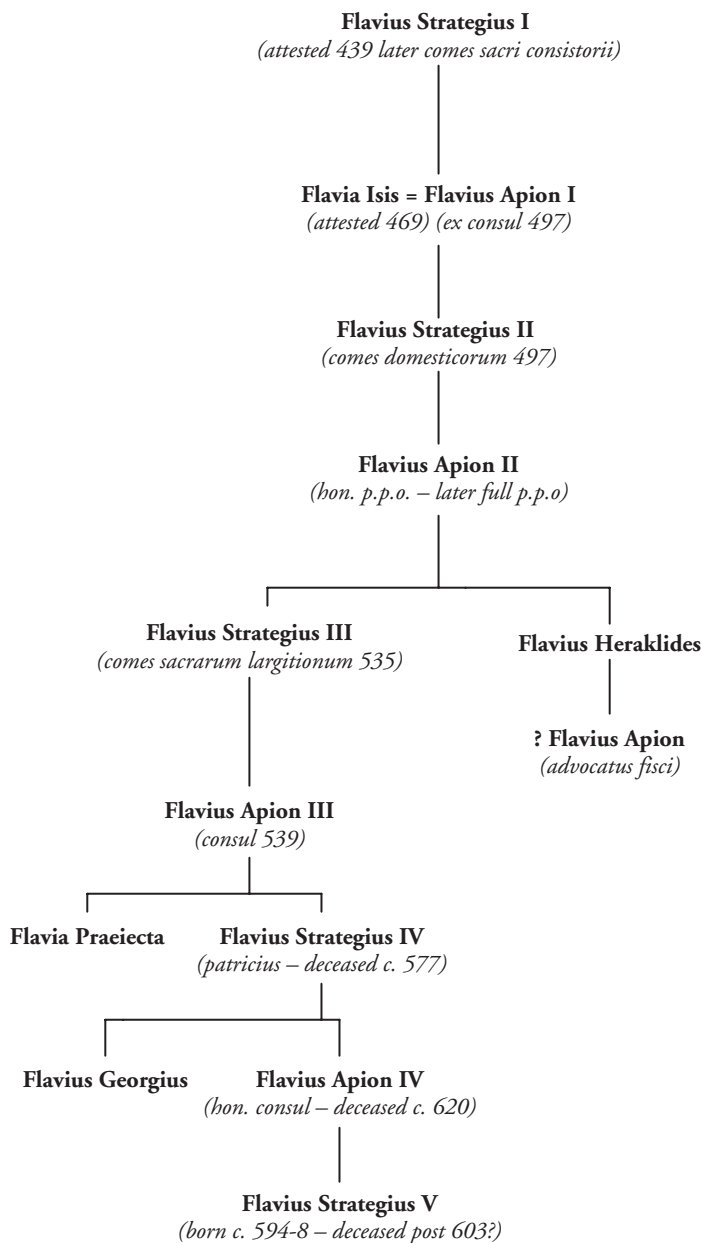


Figure 4 The Apion family

than any other source, convey the full extent of aristocratic dominance of social and economic life in the provinces of the empire in the Justinianic era, a dominance to which we can see the emperor responding through his programme of imperial reform.

THE OXYRHYNCHUS PAPYRI AND THE APION ARCHIVE

On 20 December 1896 two young English classicists, B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, arrived at the site of the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus, some 120 miles to the south of Cairo 'at the point where an ancient route from the Bahariya Oasis reaches the Nile Valley'.<sup>72</sup> There they were met by the distinguished Egyptologist Flinders Petrie, who had recently completed a preliminary survey of the site.<sup>73</sup> As Grenfell wrote in his report:

I had for some time felt that one of the most promising sites in Egypt for finding Greek manuscripts was the city of Oxyrhynchus, the modern Behnesch. Being the capital of the Nome, it must have been the abode of many rich persons who could afford to possess a library of literary texts and . . . neither town nor cemetery appeared to have been plundered for antiquities in recent times. Above all, Oxyrhynchus seemed to be a site where fragments of Christian literature might be expected of a date earlier than the fourth century, to which our oldest manuscripts of the New Testament belong; for the place was renowned in the fourth and fifth centuries on account of its number of churches and monasteries.<sup>74</sup>

Grenfell and Hunt were essentially engaged on a salvage mission funded by the London-based 'Egypt Exploration Fund'. It had long been known that the sands of Egypt had preserved vast numbers of Greek texts written on papyrus dating from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. These papyri had generally been treated by educated visitors as curios and souvenirs. The expansion of Egyptian agriculture in the 1880s, however, threatened the continued existence of many of the sites where papyrological finds were most plentiful – the locals, quite understandably, regarding the papyri as a convenient source of mulch.<sup>75</sup> In response, a series of increasingly concerted efforts began to be made by western scholars to excavate and preserve the papyri, above all, as Grenfell's comments reveal, those pertaining to Greek literature and the New Testament.

In spite of Grenfell's initial optimism, the excavation of Oxyrhynchus had an inauspicious start. The Roman cemetery that Flinders Petrie had

<sup>72</sup> Bagnall and Rathbone 2004: 158.      <sup>73</sup> Grenfell 1897: 1.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>75</sup> See Turner 1982: 161–78.



identified yielded little. The only reason, it turned out, why the site had not been looted by treasure hunters in recent years was that there was nothing left to loot. The standing remains of the city were pitiful – the *fellahin* of the abutting village had stripped the houses of their very stonework. At other sites, the floor space of such houses had proved a fruitful source of papyri. Not so at Oxyrhynchus. As if to make matters worse, the visitors even found themselves raided by the local Bedouin.

Grenfell and Hunt were forced to turn their attention to the rubbish mounds that surrounded the site, which proved to be, as Grenfell commented pithily ‘nothing but rubbish mounds’.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, it transpired that these mounds contained vast numbers of papyri. Although most were ‘hopelessly fragmentary or defaced’, Grenfell noted in his report, ‘the total find of papyri was so enormous that even the small residue of valuable ones forms a collection not only larger than any one site has hitherto produced, but probably equal to any existing collection of Greek papyri’.<sup>77</sup> In particular, large numbers of papyri were unearthed dating from the sixth and seventh centuries:

By far the greatest find, that of the Byzantine archives, took place on March 18th and 19th, and was, I suppose, a ‘record’ in point of quantity. On the first of these two days we came upon a mound which had a thick layer consisting almost entirely of papyrus rolls. There was room for six pairs of men and boys to be working simultaneously at this storehouse, and the difficulty was to find enough baskets in all Behneseh to contain the papyri. At the end of the day’s work no less than thirty-six good sized baskets were brought in from this place, several of them stuffed with fine rolls three to ten feet long, including some of the largest Greek rolls I have ever seen.<sup>78</sup>

Within eleven months the first volume of the ‘Oxyrhynchus Papyri’ appeared in print, its contents chosen ‘to illustrate the scope and variety of the collection’.<sup>79</sup> The published texts revealed that amongst the vast numbers of sixth- and seventh-century papyri excavated in 1896–7 were documents belonging to the private archive of the Apion family, detailing the administration of the family’s estates in the vicinity of Oxyrhynchus. The volume included letters exchanged between the Apion family’s estate managers, contracts detailing the terms on which the estate labour force was employed, estate accounts and receipts for seed-corn and irrigational machinery issued by the household to local peasants.<sup>80</sup> Since that date,

<sup>76</sup> Grenfell 1897: 3.      <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 8.      <sup>79</sup> *P.Oxy.* I: page v.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, *P.Oxy.* I 158, 135, 136, 154, 133, and 137.

many more documents belonging to the Apion archive have been published and continue to be published almost annually.<sup>81</sup>

The Apion archive is of inestimable value. The papyri provide illuminating insights into the day-to-day realities of life in what was, economically, the most important, productive, and highly developed region of the entire Eastern Empire. Crucially, the documents also reveal the extent and character of the economic resources that underpinned the social authority and political role of members of the late-antique imperial aristocracy.

Interpreting the Apion papyri, however, presents enormous challenges, in many ways comparable to those faced by historians of late-antique literary texts. In recent years, historians have become ever more alert to the complexity of the problems posed by reading ancient and medieval sources. This awareness has been particularly apparent with regard to historical writings, of which late antiquity has bequeathed many. The historian, we have learned, must be constantly aware of the limitations placed on the scope of such texts by the generic demands of the traditions in which late-antique authors operated.<sup>82</sup> A similar sensitivity is required when handling documentary sources. For the thematic concentration, quality of description and, crucially, the terminological form of late-antique documentation varied enormously between private but actionable legal contracts, personal correspondence, estate accounts, and petitions. The expectations and concerns of the historian must alter as he moves from one form of document to another.

It is for this reason that, whilst it is tempting to draw upon the Apion archive to piece together a synthetic overview of life on the family's estates as a whole, this temptation must be avoided. In order to appreciate the full significance of the testimony provided by the sources, the material must be examined type by type. Such an approach has the further advantage of conveying to the reader the ambiguities and limitations of the primary evidence itself. For although the Apion archive is extensive, its contents are nevertheless highly fragmentary. Approaching the Apion papyri typologically prevents the historian from eliding the difficulties posed by the sources. It also enables the reader to appreciate what is hypothesis, what is guesswork, and what is actually there.

<sup>81</sup> Between 1898 and 2004 over 260 items belonging to the Apion Oxyrhynchite archive were edited and published. See the checklist of Apion papyri in Mazza 2001: 20–38, to which should be added *P.Mert.* II 96 and 98 and *P. CrYber Inv.* 4357. This would bring to a total of 255 the number of 'documentazione ossirinchiite, prodotta e/o conservata dagli uffici della sede amministrativa centrale della tenuta, situata nelle capitale del *nomos*' (Mazza 2001: 18). Two further unpublished papyri (Texts I and II) are referred to in Hickey 2001.

<sup>82</sup> See Averil Cameron 1985 and Whitby 1988: 3–51 and 311–58.

Accordingly, the four chapters that follow proceed on the basis of a typological study of the major documentary components of the Apion archive, dealing in turn with estate accounts (chapter two), contracts (chapter three), letters and petitions (chapter four), and documents of a more fiscal character (chapter five). The aim is to reconstruct on the basis of each a picture of the structure of the Apion estates as a social and economic institution. A clear set of criteria are applied in order to attempt to define what documents may be regarded as belonging to the Apion collection. Documents are classified as constituting part of the Apion archive if they make explicit mention of the Apion household, refer to members of the family, or involve individuals or locations attested in other papyri to have belonged to the estate. In so far as possible, the meanings of individual words are elucidated primarily on the basis of the context in which they are deployed within the Apion papyri. By applying a strictly minimalist set of criteria to define the archive, we may be reasonably confident that the impression derived of the Apion estates from the papyri is not confused through an admixture of sources relating to the estates of other families.

The methodology adopted herein thus might be summarised as being that of sticking as closely as possible to the sources, and, terminologically, of considering Apion matters as specifically Apion.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, rather than attempting to provide a total picture of life on the Apion estates in all its complexity, the Apion archive is examined solely with a view to delineating certain key features of the estate that are central to our understanding of its social and economic character. Accordingly, relatively little attention will be paid to what might be termed the 'technical mode of production' on the Apion estates – the practical basics of cultivation and production in a physical sense.<sup>84</sup> Rather, the main concern will be the social and economic modes of production. The estate accounts, for example, are examined primarily with a view to assessing the structure of the family's landholdings and the uses to which the estate labour force was put. On the basis of the contractual papyri, an attempt will be made to ascertain with somewhat greater clarity the terms on which the Apion workforce and its supervisory staff were employed. The letters that survive from the archive will be examined with a view to reconstructing the administrative regime of the household,

<sup>83</sup> As such, I subscribe to the methodology set out by Lemerle when he wrote of how one should 'hold fast to the two principles which must serve as guides in a field as new, despite appearances, perhaps, and as incompletely explored as the agrarian history of Byzantium: to stick as closely as possible to the sources, which for the most part still need to be properly edited or properly interpreted; to consider Byzantine matters as specifically Byzantine, with the terminology proper to them. Only thereafter can comparative studies be undertaken in safety'; Lemerle 1979: viii.

<sup>84</sup> For which see Bagnall 1993 and Schnebel 1925.

whilst the fiscal documents will serve as the basis for discussion of the comparative scale of the family's properties in the vicinity of Oxyrhynchus. An attempt will then be made (in chapter five) to connect the testimony of the Apion archive to that of the still more fragmentary papyrological collections relating to other aristocratic properties in the Oxyrhynchite and beyond. The central question that chapters two to five seek to address is how the governing elite of the late Roman Eastern Empire, as represented in the Egyptian papyri, structured and valorised the economic resources off which its members lived.