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Managing Estates in Roman Egypt: A Review Article[1]

A prospective reader looking at the title of Dennis Kehoe's book on estates in Roman Egypt and considering the series in which it is published might well suppose that this was another typical addition to the monographic literature in which papyrology is rich, which takes the existence of an institution, an office, or a body of evidence as sufficient justification for a detailed exploration of the subject with no particular starting bias. In reality, however, this book is something far more interesting. The author, trained as a Roman historian, has written on Roman social history, particularly on economic and social aspects of agriculture, basing his work on epigraphical, literary, and legal sources, and has never published a papyrus. Moreover, the book springs from a desire to test against the evidence of the papyri a hypothesis formed in the study of other evidence, particularly in the examination of Pliny's letters. In short, this represents a rare attempt by a non-papyrologist to bring the papyri into the mainstream of historical discourse about antiquity. As such it is very welcome. It is also very stimulating reading, and the following pages will attempt to bring out some of the areas in which I found it thought-provoking.

This book appeared not long after Dominic Rathbone's *Economic Rationalism and Rural Society in Third-Century Egypt* (Cambridge 1991) and too close on the heels of that book for Kehoe to be able to use it here (cf. p. 9, n. 16).[2] Kehoe deals with the Heroninos archive and knew Rathbone's preliminary publications in the area, but Heroninos is only one example among several discussed by Kehoe as he tests his hypothesis against Egyptian evidence drawn from the first through fourth centuries. The two books form in effect different axes of the discussion, Rathbone's an intensive study of one archive, Kehoe's a use of many archives to investigate a theory.[3]

[1]Dennis P. Kehoe, *Management and Investment on Estates in Roman Egypt during the Early Empire*. Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen 40. Bonn, Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, 1992. xiv + 188 pp.

[2]But see Kehoe's review of Rathbone in *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 6 (1993) 476-84.

[3]I have reviewed Rathbone's book in *JRS* 83 (1993) 237-39.

The governing hypothesis of the book comes from Kehoe's study of Pliny[4] and may be stated as follows: Wealthy Roman landowners generally sought a secure income from their property, sufficient to support their economic and social standing in society. They preferred land to riskier forms of investment,[5] and they preferred to minimize risk and managerial demands from their landholdings. Faced with a chronic shortage of resources, particularly capital, landowners pursued their risk-management strategy by acquiring as much good land as possible over a wide range of types of property and locations. One result of this tack was a need to exploit properties spread over a large area and in small units; another was a set of managerial challenges and demands for labor not readily met by unified command structures and slave labor. In all of this, landowners sought through the use of tenancy to shift as much of the managerial, labor, and capital needs as possible onto their tenants, in what Kehoe calls "resource sharing." They did so even at the cost of a considerable reduction in the maximum yield that might have been obtained from the properties. In general, Kehoe does not see maximization of profit, let alone true economic rationality, as defining characteristics of the large landowners' operations. In this he disagrees fundamentally with Rathbone's analysis of the Heroninos estate.[6]

Kehoe recognizes the difficulty of attempting to test such a hypothesis against the analytic documentation of the papyri and offers a solution (p. 8): "Isolated leases and other documents concerned with various aspects of agriculture provide significant information about conditions in Egypt, but they can rarely help us to answer broader questions about strategies in achieving economic goals. But we can overcome this difficulty to some degree if, when examining the evidence for private landowning, we continue to look at the needs of landowners themselves rather than conditions within a given estate as the point of comparison with estate owning in the

[4]Notably, "Allocation of Risk and Investment on the Estates of Pliny the Younger," *Chiron* 18 (1988) 15-42; "Approaches to Economic Problems in the Letters of Pliny the Younger: the Question of Risk in Agriculture," *ANRW* II 33.1 (1989) 555-90; "Investment in Estates by Upper-Class Landowners in Early Imperial Italy: the Case of Pliny the Younger," *De Agricultura, in memoriam P.W. de Neeve*, ed. H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg et al. (Amsterdam 1993) 214-37.

[5]Kehoe argues (p. 6) that land was the *only* option for a safe, long-term income. This is certainly not true from an economic point of view; a diversified portfolio of loans, or participation in loans, was certainly possible. Such a strategy was used by many members of the Athenian upper class in the fourth century: see E. E. Cohen, *Athenian Economy and Society: a Banking Perspective* (Princeton 1992). It is certainly true that this was not an option for a Roman senator, but that was for social, not economic, reasons.

[6]On this point see the review in *JRA* cited above (n. 2), 483-84, and pp. 117-18 of the book. Kehoe argues instead for viewing landlords' behavior as "bounded rationality" (a term borrowed from H. A. Simon), i.e., a pattern looking to sufficient but not economically optimal outcomes.

empire as a whole." Whether in fact these assemblages offer much help with owners' needs seems to me dubious. They almost never offer an equivalent to Pliny's musings about his estates and tenants. The procedure followed actually is to examine how a particular "estate" seems to have been operated, and to work backward from that to what the owners must have been trying to do. This is not an unreasonable way to proceed, but I am not at all certain that it is quite what Kehoe presents it as being.

After the opening chapter, with its statement of the problem, hypothesis, and Plinian parallel, chapter II (pp. 16-57) is devoted to the management of *ousiai* in the Julio-Claudian period. Both *a priori* probabilities (landowners permanently absent from Egypt) and the procedures recorded in the documents lead Kehoe to characterize these as occupying an extreme on the spectrum of management styles. The beneficiaries of these estates were too distant to be involved, had probably not invested much if any of their own funds in the estates, and were interested only in maintaining productivity at minimal bother and cost. In such a situation, the local procurators for the owners preferred to deal with large-scale contractors (*μισθωταί*), who actually managed the lands and sublet them, providing cash incomes to the procurators to forward to their principals. No one in this system had any incentive for long-term investment, and as a result little took place, productivity declined, and the government resorted to compulsory leasing to secure a continued income. The *ousiai* thus present a kind of boundary case for Kehoe's hypothesis, in which the owners' aims are such an extreme version of those he postulates for normal owners that the balance for which men like Pliny sought came undone and the system failed.

Chapter III (pp. 58-118) is the heart of the book, a discussion of several landowners for whom there is significant evidence. These include Epimachos (*P.Lond.* I 131), L. Bellienus Gemellus, Sarapion and his sons, Aurelius Serenos alias Sarapion, the "descendants of Laches,"[7] and the Appianus estate. A recurring theme of the analysis is the dispersion of the holdings of individual owners over many parcels in different locations. This pattern is not by now a surprise; it was documented in detail in Alan Bowman's study of the fourth-century Hermopolite land registers,[8] but Kehoe has usefully shown how consistent this pattern is across the centuries he studies and the different parts of Egypt from which his examples come. A second theme is the widespread use of tenants for particularly the smaller holdings. This is less clear in the Appianus material than elsewhere, per-

[7]As this body of material has always been identified. See W. Clarysse and C. Gallazzi, *AncSoc* 24 (1993) 63-68, who show that Laches was not a member of the family but a *phrontistes*.

[8]"Landholding in the Hermopolite Nome in the Fourth Century A.D.," *JRS* 75 (1985) 137-63.

haps because the surviving archive comes from the *phrontistes* of a directly-operated unit.[9] In several cases Kehoe argues that landowners demonstrated a concern to minimize their risks by both diversification of crops and the broadest possible extent of control and exploitation of land. Even relatively wealthy landowners tended to lease land belonging to others, even if only to sublease it in turn.

Self-sufficiency, on the other hand, does not appear to have been an important goal. Even in a capital need as basic as animals for plowing, owners bought oxen only where they would be efficiently used (i.e., where there was a sufficient density of landholdings) and hired them elsewhere. All of these landowners seem, as far as one can tell, to have been far more willing to make significant investments in their properties than the absent *ousia*-holders, but they still seek to minimize that investment as far as possible and, Kehoe thinks, try to pass as much of it as possible onto their tenants. In an important footnote (p. 111 n. 119), Kehoe argues that a chronic shortage of resources was common to rich and poor, with the result that the relationship between landowner and tenant displayed a permanent struggle about who would provide the needed capital. Appianus' estate offers an example of an enterprise with a relatively extensive permanent staff, managers, transport workers, and production workers. Kehoe sees this as a function of scale and argues consistently that landowners sought to minimize their standing establishments.

Chapter IV (pp. 119-167) explores the role of tenants in much greater detail, basing the discussion in part on landowners' archives used in Chapter III, in part on archives centered around figures who operated as lessees: Soterichos, Kronion, and Isidoros.[10] Kehoe emphasizes that tenancy arrangements gave owners access to capital, labor, and managerial talent beyond their own and what they could permanently employ. Leasing, he argues, reduced managerial costs drastically and offered landowners great advantages.[11] Subsistence peasants tend to invest more labor per unit of

[9]This argument appears in the next chapter (p. 123): "The absence of lease contracts and other documents concerning tenancies in the Heroninos archive should not prejudice this conclusion. The absence of such documents is to be explained by the nature of Heroninos' responsibilities as an administrator of the property belonging to Appianus." Kehoe argues that the central administration would have been responsible for lease arrangements.

[10]Kehoe has missed my discussion of Isidoros' holdings in "Bullion Purchases and Landholding in the Fourth Century," *Cd'E* 52 (1977) 322-36, where I argue that the apparent fluctuation in Isidoros' holdings he tries to account for (p. 158) is an artifact of contexts and rhetorical strategies, sometimes including the holdings of other family members, sometimes not. See also my remarks in "An Arsinoite Metropolitan Landowning Family in the Fourth Century," *Papyrologica Lupiensia* 2 (1993) 95-101 (on Serenilla and her family).

[11]He frequently cites the important article on this subject by Lin Foxhall, "The Dependent Tenant: Land Leasing and Labour in Italy and Greece," *JRS* 80 (1990) 97-114.

land than larger owners, thus increasing gross productivity. Although the owner receives a lower percentage of the total yield, the maintenance of that yield at a higher level, coupled with lower costs, provides both a good and a stable yield to the owner. Even with chronic arrearages, as in the case of Soterichos, a reliable tenant was worth keeping for long periods. Kronion and his sons maintained one lease relationship with a lessor for more than forty years, although the individual leases were much shorter. Tenants followed as far as possible similar principles of diversification to avoid dependence on any one landlord.

The book concludes with a brief (pp. 168-172) conclusion, in which Kehoe restates his model drawn from Pliny, focused on economic and social security for the landowner, the risks of agriculture, and a shortage of capital and managerial expertise. He recognizes that there must have been considerable variation in where owners stood on the spectrum of goals, with the *ousiai* at one end and more entrepreneurial types toward the other. But he ends with an emphasis upon the limited range of options available to a landowner and the boundaries within which profit-seeking can have taken place.

Although this is a very summary description of the argument, I hope it gives some sense of the interest that the attempt to test a hypothesis of this kind has for the student of Egyptian society and of the ancient world in general. The book is full of many valuable observations about details and will repay a careful reading. I want, however, to turn my attention now to two linked elements in the argument that seem to me questionable and perhaps the key to a less simple conclusion. The first is the coherence of the categories landowner and tenant; the second the plausibility of the view that tenants contributed significant capital, and not just their labor, to the relationship with their lessors.

It is obviously useful to adopt a binary classification of individuals, or families, as landowners or tenants in looking at the range of phenomena studied here. But it seems to me essential to recognize three things about such a classification. (1) Many persons belonged to both categories. The archive of Sarapion is classified by Kehoe among owners (pp. 67 ff.), but despite their own extensive holdings (certainly several hundred arouras) they also leased in numerous small plots (p. 68) and in addition they leased in gross large holdings which they then sublet (p. 70). Kehoe indeed notices this pattern, commenting that "the case of the Sarapion family emphasizes how blurred the lines were in Roman Egypt between the landowner, the large-scale lessee or middleman, and the small-scale tenant responsible for cultivating an individual parcel of land" (p. 70). This insight does not, however, affect the main argument of the book very much.[12] The classifica-

[12]The same might be said of Kehoe's observation (pp. 4-5) that the high turnover in land ownership documented by the Hermopolite land registers contradicts the low turnover that his hypothesis of aiming at security and predictability would entail. He notes this fact faithfully but does not explore its implications.

tion of Aurelius Isidoros among tenants (pp. 158 ff.) is perhaps the clearest indication. He was a relatively wealthy village landowner (whose land was undoubtedly not nearly so unproductive as he claimed in petitions), who also took land in lease, both largish parcels and smaller ones. He forms a close analogue to the Sarapion family, in fact, although in a village milieu and at a smaller scale. Classifying these families as one or the other is not in fact very helpful to understanding how they operated.

(2) Scale is critical. As Kehoe recognizes in the remark quoted above, a small tenant farmer, planting perhaps seven to ten arouras, is something very different from a larger operator—even a Soterichos, for example, who no doubt leased more land than his family could cultivate with its own labor, from multiple landowners, and who had multiple credit arrangements in place at any given time. Soterichos may have aspired to become someone like Isidoros, or like the sixth-century entrepreneur Aurelius Phoibammon in Aphrodito.[13] It is not merely that one can discern a continuum from one end of the spectrum to the other. There is a fundamental difference between the subsistence peasant tenant and the village entrepreneur in what they can bring to a transaction. And the complexities introduced by the operations of metropolitan residents of varying levels of wealth are also considerable. At the landowner end of the scale, differences are also important. We cannot assume *a priori* that an Appianus would have the same interests and approaches as the "Laches" family, let alone L. Bellienus Gemellus. The categorization of these together tends to make the fit of the hypothesis to the reality seem better than it is.

(3) The social circumstances of the relatively wealthy impose some differentiation. It should not be forgotten that the model being tested comes from the writings of a Roman senator, with an active career in public life and, as Kehoe has shown in his other writings, many demands on his funds for both public and private generosity. His interest lay in his public life, not in the economic underpinnings. Social expectations below the senatorial level were certainly very different, and not only in scale. That does not mean there were none, and the members of the class that filled the magistracies and later the councils of the cities of Egypt had their own expenditures to make for public purposes. But there is no reason to think that Aurelius Appianus or Sarapion of Hermopolis had the same balance of goals as Pliny, the same unwillingness to devote more time than necessary to their properties, the same propensity to trade income for security. Kehoe downplays Appianus' involvement in his estates (p. 104), but Rathbone seems to me to have shown decisively that Appianus was a very different quantity from Pliny. Perhaps few senators with an active public career

[13]On whom see James G. Keenan, "Aurelius Phoibammon, son of Triadelphus: A Byzantine Egyptian Land Entrepreneur," *BASP* 17 (1980) 145-54.

could afford to make choices much different from Pliny's, but below their level the options were less hemmed in by social constraint.

This then brings us to the second of my main points. All of these considerations seem to me to call for a more differentiated picture of the role of capital in lease transactions. It is certainly true that entrepreneurs like Aurelius Isidoros had capital, and his advance payment of rent in his involvement with Kastor and Ammonianos (p. 162) shows his effective use of it to create a relationship of dependency on their part, leading in the end perhaps to the loss of their land.[14] But there is no reason to think that peasant cultivators had much capital to contribute. On the contrary, they typically borrowed from year to year, often from their landlords, just in order to be able to sow the land. Indeed, they appear most clearly as an opportunity for landlords to invest their surplus in profitable loans, making tenants do double duty as debtors. The yield on loans in kind was typically 50 percent. Though it is true that slightly larger operators like Soterichos were able to borrow from several sources, often in cash, and avoid the trap of dependence on one landlord, the same is most unlikely to have been true of small farmers. Kehoe recognizes this reality: "Clearly the Kronion family, like other small-scale cultivators in the Roman empire and in other preindustrial agricultural societies, regularly required credit in order to survive the agricultural year" (p. 153).[15]

Even dealing with a middle stratum of entrepreneurial types, the evidence that they contributed much capital is not strong. Kehoe cites the original lease underlying the transaction at stake in *P.Oxy.* IV 707, which he summarizes as follows: "Philinos entered into a six-year lease for a vineyard and orchard belonging to Demetria; under the terms of this contract, his principal responsibilities were to make certain improvements needed to restore the tenancy to full productivity. He undertook to plant new vines on the empty land within the vineyard, as well as to raise the walls of the vineyard and of the orchard to a specified height (col. ii.22-26). In exchange for making these improvements, Philinos was released from the obligation to pay rent during the first four years of the six-year lease; during this initial period he was only required to pay the taxes due on the land (col. ii.20-22). In addition, Philinos was to restore the irrigation facilities in the vineyard by building a compartmented water-wheel with a brick substructure. To allay some of the costs for this project he received the sum of 2,000 drachmae from Demetria (col. ii.26-28); this sum included 460 drachmae to cover the costs of two oxen (col. i.8-9)" (p. 136). This Kehoe interprets as meaning that "Demetria avoided taking all the costs of investment upon herself, but instead entered into a partnership with a tenant who had resources of his own to contribute" (p. 137). That

[14]See my remarks on this case in *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993) 119-20.
[15]The phenomenon is hardly limited to preindustrial societies, for that matter.

seems to me anything but obvious. Demetria gave up her entire return on the property (remember that there was an orchard, presumably producing) for four years and additionally invested 2000 drachmas, a sizable sum. Unless we know the cost of the improvements and the yield that the orchard would have given Demetria, it is impossible to determine who is investing in the project. There is no evidence that Philinos was contributing anything except presumably expert labor and management.

Similarly, in the discussion of the "Laches" archive Kehoe reaches a conclusion that appears to contradict his thesis. He infers from the accounts that "the Laches family seems to have maintained more direct control over its farms and crops requiring the most substantial investment of labor and resources, in particular viticulture" (p. 90). That is, this family used leasing predominantly for lands planted in field crops, where the capital needs were minimized, and concentrated its own efforts precisely where capital resources were most intensively needed.[16] From this, one would logically conclude that these wealthy landowners were not in the least short of capital. They employed leasing because it was the most cost-effective way to exploit some of their land, particularly dispersed parcels, not because they could not find the capital to farm it themselves.

More generally, then, I cannot see that the case has been made for a shortage of capital in the hands of the possessing class. No doubt like most landowning upper classes they tended to be short of cash a good deal of the time. But Kehoe notes expressly that Pliny did not expect any difficulty in coming up with three million sesterces to buy an estate he was interested in; he would just raid his mother-in-law's strongbox.[17] That he had misgivings about borrowing money from her to improve the position of his prospective tenants—as opposed to for purchasing the property—does not show that he was short of capital, only that he was skeptical about the probable return on the investment. Nor does the reluctance of landowners in general to invest in improvements in their estates suggest some broad failure to embrace a strategy of rationality. If Rathbone's study of the Heroninos archive showed anything, it was the almost obsessive concern of Appianus and his lieutenants with costs. Kehoe is at pains to argue (e.g., p. 10) that Roman landowners' income depended on the physical productivity of the land, but this is only half of the equation. Two owners with the same output will have different net incomes if one controls costs better than the other. Nothing in the record seems to me to show that investment strategies of landowners did not reflect entirely rational appreciations of which investments would and would not produce returns commensurate with their costs.

The utility of the model Kehoe has examined in his book seems to me more its ability to throw into relief the complexity of the situation reflected

[16]And see p. 106 for Appianus' willingness to invest heavily in vineyards.

[17]"Investment in Estates" (above, n. 4) 218.

in our evidence than its full congruence with that situation. But that is no mean accomplishment, and we can only hope that both Kehoe and others will take up the range of responses that persons spread all along the spectrum of Roman landowners, entrepreneurs, and cultivators deployed in response to the diverse conditions they faced.

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