

Dictionary of the Middle Ages

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POLEMICS—SCANDINAVIA

Disguised as Roger Frogg, mild-mannered professor at a great metropolitan university, he fights a never-ending battle for Truth, Justice, and the Patraclian Way.

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ROMAN DE TOUTE CHEVALERIE

ROMAN DE TOUTE CHEVALERIE. An Anglo-Norman version of the Alexander legend, but independent of the continental *Roman d'Alexandre*, the *Roman de toute chevalerie* is attributed to Thomas of Kent and was probably composed between 1175 and 1185. The *Roman de toute chevalerie* is based on English Latin sources and is itself the source of the Middle English *Kyng Alisaunder*.

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BRIAN MERRILEES

[See also *Alexander Romances*; *Anglo-Norman Literature*.]

ROMAN EGYPT, LATE

LAND AND PEOPLE

Land. Separated from its neighbors by barriers of water and desert, and defined by a remarkable interplay of those factors, Egypt was always distinctive. Most of its surface is desert, with cultivation limited to a narrow strip along the Nile until the river broadens into its delta, at which point most of the land down to the Mediterranean is usable either for farming, for pasturage, or (in antiquity) for swampy crops like papyrus. Rainfall is scanty throughout the country; the climate is mild in winter, hot and dry in summer, and comparatively constant. In these circumstances, agriculture depended entirely on the Nile, and the size of harvests on the adequacy of the rise of the Nile in a given year (either too much or too little was harmful). Bad years occurred, but in normal years Egypt produced a surplus of cereals large enough to make a major contribution to feeding the rest of the empire, particularly the capitals, Rome and, later, Constantinople. The dependence on irrigation required constant attention to the extensive network of canals and basins which are a feature of the Egyptian countryside to the present time.

People. The bulk of the population of Egypt was made up of indigenous, Egyptian (Coptic) speakers. The country also contained the descendants of Greek settlers (most, but not all, immigrants in the Hellenistic period), whose relative numbers cannot be estimated, as well as smaller numbers of other

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groups. Many Egyptians had over the course of time learned Greek and hellenized themselves, while some Greeks had certainly become Egyptianized. The relatively clear lines which can be drawn in the third century B.C. are no longer easily visible by late antiquity, though the distinction between a hellenized upper class and the more purely Coptic lower classes is clear enough. Many of these hellenized aristocrats, however, were either of Egyptian extraction (partly or entirely) or had Egyptianized themselves substantially, and even among those who played a considerable role in the culture of the imperial court there are indications of close involvement in traditional Egyptian priestly activities.

POLITICS, GOVERNMENT, AND ECONOMICS

Political history. Deserts to the east and west have protected Egypt from invasions, and only occasionally has Nubia produced a power strong enough to threaten Egypt. The Mediterranean coast is difficult for hostile landings. Egypt was therefore largely spared the barbarian incursions that occupied so much of the empire's attention in the third century and later, though occasional raids from the desert Blemmyes, from the mid third century on, caused damage, with particular problems in the earlier and middle fifth century. There were occasional Egyptian revolts (one ill-known one around 293–294), and Egypt was the locus of the revolt of Domitius Domitianus in 297–298. On the whole, however, Egypt was politically and militarily calm. Partly for this reason it was little visited by emperors (apart from those two revolts, no visits between 284 and 337 are securely attested).

On the other hand, in the shrunken Eastern or Byzantine Empire Egypt was more important than it had been in the full Roman Empire of the second century, with its food resources and comparative wealth. It therefore played a large role in the ecclesiastical disputes of the period and, as time went on, contributed from its Greek aristocracy a significant number of influential figures in the empire. After the split of the Egyptian Monophysite church from the main body of the orthodox church following the Council of Chalcedon (451), relations between Egypt and Constantinople deteriorated. There was a revolt in the delta under Emperor Maurice (r. 582–602), and Egypt supported Heraklios in his revolt against Phokas in 608–609. The Persians took Egypt without great difficulty in 619 after cutting it off from the rest of the empire; it was retaken a decade later when Heraklios forced a

Persian retreat. While Egypt did not, as has often been claimed, welcome the Arabs as liberators in 640–641, neither did it have the capacity for a prolonged and successful resistance without better support from the central government.

Government. Egypt is often seen as an isolated area in the Roman Empire, and it is true that the emperors notoriously sought to keep it apart to protect the security of the grain supply of Rome (and thus their own safety). But even in earlier times there were many links between Egypt and other provinces. In the fourth century and later, with the assimilation of Egyptian administration to the rest of the empire by Diocletian and his successors, the remaining barriers broke down, at least for the Greek upper class. We find members of the municipal aristocracy in imperial service as bureaucrats, and we find them (sometimes the same people) as rhetoricians and poets at the imperial court and traveling throughout the empire.

Diocletian increased the Roman military presence in Egypt and spread the available troops more evenly across a larger number of garrisons. He also provided a close link between the need for provisions of the military and the structure of the system of taxation in grain and other foodstuffs. Various emperors reorganized the civil administration into different provinces, but these changes are not likely to have made much difference to most of the population, which continued to look to the prefect, or *praeses*, as an ultimate source of justice, while ordinary concerns were handled by more local officials. The majority of the latter were local residents serving in liturgical positions for limited periods (though many of them held enough different offices over the course of time that they spent large parts of their lives in part-time government service). Many of these were part of the municipal government of the chief towns of the nomes, which had been given municipal charters by Septimius Severus at the start of the third century. Others were village-level tasks, filled by moderately prosperous farmers who lived in the villages. These unpaid and temporary jobs often involved less time than they did risk of exposure to financial ruin if some obligation to the imperial government were not met. Though imperial officials as such (career appointees) are met with often enough in the papyri, there do not seem to have been many of them in proportion to the population governed. At the local level, it was the military that was the more noticeable presence.

Economy. The Egyptian nomes retained their traditional structure, with many small villages and a central town serving as market and service center and as place of residence for the wealthier classes. Ever since Ptolemaic times the towns (*metropoleis*) had been the favored home of the propertied Greek and hellenized population, and with the municipalization of the nome *metropoleis* under Septimius Severus, a period of efflorescence of this class began. The fourth century was perhaps the acme of this stratum, the wealthier and abler members of which began, virtually for the first time, to play an important role on the Mediterranean scene as members of the elite of government and culture.

In the villages, most of the land continued to be owned by small farmers, though considerable amounts were owned by residents of the *metropoleis* and farmed by the villagers on lease, as had been the case for hundreds of years. There are some signs that such dependent relations increased in the course of the fourth and, even more, the fifth century, but the so-called “large estates” of the metropolitan aristocracy still consisted mainly of small farms dispersed over a wide area and rented out to local tenants, rather than large tracts of adjacent land. In the sixth and seventh centuries we find much more obvious dependence on the “great houses,” but it seems from recent studies that this relationship involved the responsibility of the great landowners for the collection of the taxes of the peasantry who depended on them, rather than outright ownership of huge tracts by them; in effect, the system replaced much of the liturgical system of the fourth century by a more permanent set of responsibilities for the rich.

RELIGION

Egypt was famous in the Greek and Roman worlds for its animal-form divinities, but it became equally well known in the late Roman period for the vigor and violence of factional Christian strife. The Christian church got an early start in Egypt, but large-scale conversion apparently did not come until the early fourth century, after which it proceeded rapidly. The Egyptian church was much involved in the doctrinal disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries, and the bishops of Alexandria became prominent players in ecumenical councils. The most famous, Athanasius (bishop, 328–373), was often in exile for his staunch orthodoxy, and Cyril (bishop, 412–444) played a critical role in the fight against Nestorianism. The Egyptian church split after the

Council of Chalcedon (451), with the majority (largely Coptic) supporting a Monophysite view of Christ's nature; the orthodox (Melchite) church also survived in Egypt, however, and both had their own bishops of Alexandria. The conflict between the two was closely linked to imperial politics for the remainder of Byzantine rule in Egypt.

Egypt was also renowned as a primary locus of the development of monasticism, especially for the work of St. Anthony (ca. 250–ca. 350) and St. Pachomius (ca. 290–346), the latter of whom was a pioneer in creating a cenobitic rule for his monks. At the same time, many monks lived in the towns and villages rather than separately in monasteries, and they were frequent figures in the streets of communities.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Egypt was the source of many prominent figures in the cultural life of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. At a local level, it witnessed a remarkable revival of Egyptian culture. The use of the earlier form of written Egyptian, called demotic (essentially a cursive form of the old hieroglyphs), had practically disappeared by the second century both from literary use and from documents. When the language was again written, it was in an alphabet derived mostly from Greek with some additions (for non-Greek sounds) from the demotic alphabet. In the fourth century, with the Christianization of the country, there was an efflorescence of writing in Coptic, both translation from other languages (especially Greek) and original composition; this revival continued for several centuries. Many entire genres are missing from what survives of Coptic literature, and in some cases we do not know if they ever existed. Theology and hagiography are prominent among the surviving remains.

Many residents of Egypt were bilingual, and some even composed in both languages, as did, for example, Dioscorus of Aphrodito in the sixth century, well known because of the discovery of his archives on papyrus. With other authors (such as Athanasius), versions of some works exist both in Greek and in Coptic, but it is difficult to know if the author wrote in both, wrote in one and translated it into the other, or had someone else do the translation. There was also some use of Latin, mainly in the imperial army and bureaucracy, but even there Greek was the main working language from day to day.

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ROMAN EMPIRE, GERMAN

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[See also Athanasius of Alexandria, St.; Byzantine Church; Church, Early; Coptic Art; Copts and the Coptic Church; Cyril of Alexandria, St.; Egypt, Islamic; Melchites; Monasticism, Origins; Monophysitism; Roman Empire, Late.]

ROMAN EMPIRE, GERMAN. See Germany: Idea of Empire; Holy Roman Empire.

ROMAN EMPIRE, LATE. "Not everything which has taken place among uncultured people is worthy of narration," proclaimed the fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus. Recently Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie announced his lack of sympathy with this attitude: for a preindustrial society of the sort that Ammianus treated, the accomplishments of elites are less significant than those of "the enormous mass of rural humanity, enmeshed in its Ricardian feedback." By Ammianus' canon a familiar history of the late Roman Empire from the accession of Diocletian to the death of Heraklios (284–641) is possible. Ladurie points in another direction, and the purpose of the present essay is to outline the present and to envisage some future states of knowledge of this period of the Roman Empire.

THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

Of all the seas the Mediterranean is the most enclosed. Between the Strait of Gibraltar, its only natural opening, and the Syro-Palestinian seaboard stands a complex network of small seas delineated by islands, peninsulas, and straits. The Adriatic and Ionian seas together with the Libyan coastline form the boundary between the eastern and western halves of the basin. The narrows of Gibraltar protect the littoral from the surging tides of the Atlantic, making possible fertile deltas at the estuaries of such rivers as the Ebro, Rhône, Tiber, Po, and Nile. Behind the coastline marked by roadsteads and harbors stand the often mountainous interiors of Europe, the Near East, and Africa.

Many typical features of life in this great cross-

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roads had evolved centuries before the accession of Diocletian in 284. Pastoralism and agriculture had long been the foundations of the economy. Since the end of the second and dawn of the first millennium B.C., Phoenician and Greek seafarers had extended urban living from its Near Eastern and lower Balkan center throughout the coastline. A composite Mediterranean urban society had emerged, fostered by the constant maritime traffic. In general, cities, which attracted much of the harvests of fields and flocks, grew up near river estuaries, natural harbors, and straits—all necessary stopping places for the small craft that seldom sailed beyond the sight of land. Behind this urban core stood villages and camps of farmers, shepherds, and overland traders. Of the three hinterlands of the Mediterranean, only the Near East (including Egypt) had been urbanized. The other two, Europe and North Africa, did not experience a noticeable urbanization until the Roman conquests of the first century B.C. and the first century A.D.

Before the time of Diocletian and Heraklios the Mediterranean world had evolved a composite society that formed the base of many state systems. Despite ethnic and linguistic differences, local communities from Gibraltar to Egypt resembled one another in the manner in which they practiced agriculture or commerce. In a typical community, town- or city-dwelling elites became patrons of the exploited rural folk. The urban elites withdrew often excessive amounts of produce from the countryside, risking the starvation of the growers, but bettering their own social and economic status as they fostered exchanges of harvests along the harbors, roadsteads, and straits of the coast. Such patronage had become and would remain for centuries a part of everyday life.

Two fundamental aspects of the Mediterranean environment of the Roman Empire are difficult to determine: the distribution of the population and the climate. In studying the latter, scholars need data that can be quantified, and the existence of this information for all but the most recent past is unusual. Of late, researchers such as Bryson and Simkin have undertaken promising investigations of volcanic eruptions of the past. Departing from the present consensus that volcanoes cast tiny particles into the stratosphere and therefore cause short-term cold spells by obscuring the sun's rays, they have posited for the northern hemisphere peaks of volcanic activity and hence cold weather north of 30° N around 800 and 1400. According to