

*Economy and Society
in the Age of
Justinian*

PETER SARRIS

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ECONOMY AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF JUSTINIAN

The reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527–65) stands out in late Roman and medieval history. Justinian reconquered far-flung territories from the barbarians, overhauled the Empire's administrative framework, and codified for posterity the inherited tradition of Roman law. This work represents the first modern study in English of the social and economic history of the Eastern Roman Empire in the reign of the Emperor Justinian. Drawing upon papyrological, numismatic, legal, literary, and archaeological evidence, the study seeks to reconstruct the emergent nature of relations between landowners and peasants, and aristocrats and emperors, in the late antique Eastern Empire. It provides a social and economic context in which to situate the Emperor Justinian's mid-sixth-century reform programme, and questions the implications of the Eastern Empire's pattern of social and economic development under Justinian for its subsequent, post-Justinianic history.

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Preface

This work is meant as a short contribution to the study of the political economy of the Eastern Roman Empire in the age of the Emperor Justinian, one of the most extraordinary yet enigmatic rulers to have reigned in Byzantine Constantinople. For reasons that will be explained in the Introduction, however, much of it is concerned with the history of late Roman Egypt. The modern historiography of Egypt from the fourth to the seventh centuries AD is an important topic, which, for reasons of argumentative structure, will not be addressed in detail until chapter [eight](#). It is perhaps worth signalling at the outset, however, for the benefit of those familiar with the topic, where my approach and conclusions stand in relation to the broader field. First, I am largely in agreement with Banaji in regarding the great estates of late Roman Egypt as highly commercialised, monetised, and sophisticated economic enterprises, although I place more emphasis than he does on the role played by coercion in the expansion and maintenance of these estates. I am also unconvinced by readings of the sources that present these great estates as ‘semi-public institutions’, or that are inclined to emphasise co-operative, symbiotic relations between the owners of these estates and the imperial authorities. For most of the period in question, the state only accommodated the interests of great landowners because it had to, and it invariably emerged weaker as a result. It is my contention that the degree of peasant autonomy in late Roman Egypt has been much exaggerated. My approach to the papyrological sources is a ‘bottom up’ one modelled on that of Rathbone, although my sources do not permit anything like the degree of analytical sophistication that has informed his work. In particular, along with others who have turned their attention to the material, I have found that the Apion archive is not really amenable to the sort of deep, structural analysis that has informed some of the best papyrological studies of recent years. Rather, the highly fragmentary nature of the archive (as it stands) invites a more straightforward, procedural technique.

During the course of writing this study, I have incurred many debts of gratitude. It began life as a doctoral thesis written under the supervision of James Howard-Johnston, who, both as undergraduate tutor and doctoral supervisor, was a source of constant encouragement and impeccable advice. John Rea guided me through the papyrological sources with remarkable patience. Both conceptually and substantively I owe a great deal to conversations and communications with Jairus Banaji, Peregrine Horden, John Ma, Cyril Mango, Marlia Mundell Mango, (the late) Geoffrey de Ste Croix, and Chris Wickham (without whose assistance this book really would not have been written), as also to my undergraduate formation at Balliol at the feet of Maurice Keen and (the again late, and much missed) Patrick Wormald. The doctoral dissertation on which this book is based was examined by Alan Bowman and John Haldon, who, along with Cambridge University Press's 'anonymous readers', and my editor, Michael Sharp, I should like to thank. The research on which it is built owes a great deal to the forbearance of Norma Potter of the Codrington Library in Oxford, the staff of Trinity College Library in Cambridge, and the generosity and companionship of the Master and Fellows of Trinity. Turlough Stone provided invaluable support and read the whole in draft. Some older debts need to be repaid. I was first directed to the study of Byzantium as a schoolboy by two of my history masters: Geoffrey Brown and Nigel Williams. To them, and to Gerald Bevan (who taught me how to think) I owe much. Lastly, I thank my parents for encouraging my childhood interest in History and Hellenism in all its forms, and it is to the memory of my late father, Andreas Costas Sarris (1937–2002) that this work is dedicated.

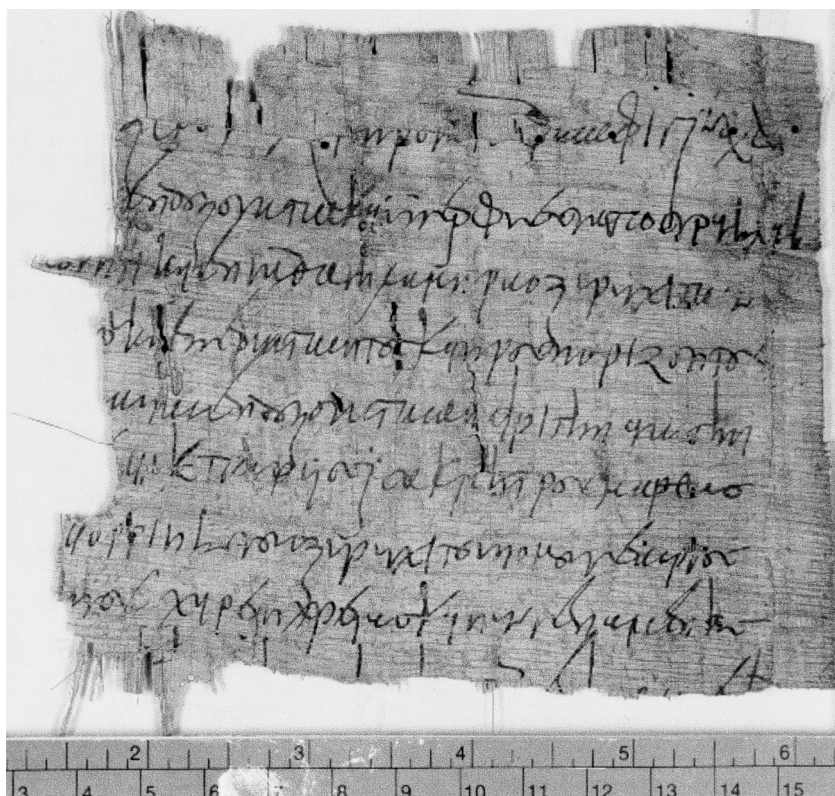


Figure 1 *P.Oxy. LVII 4616* – receipt for part of an irrigation machine issued by the Apion household to an estate labourer in September 525. Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society

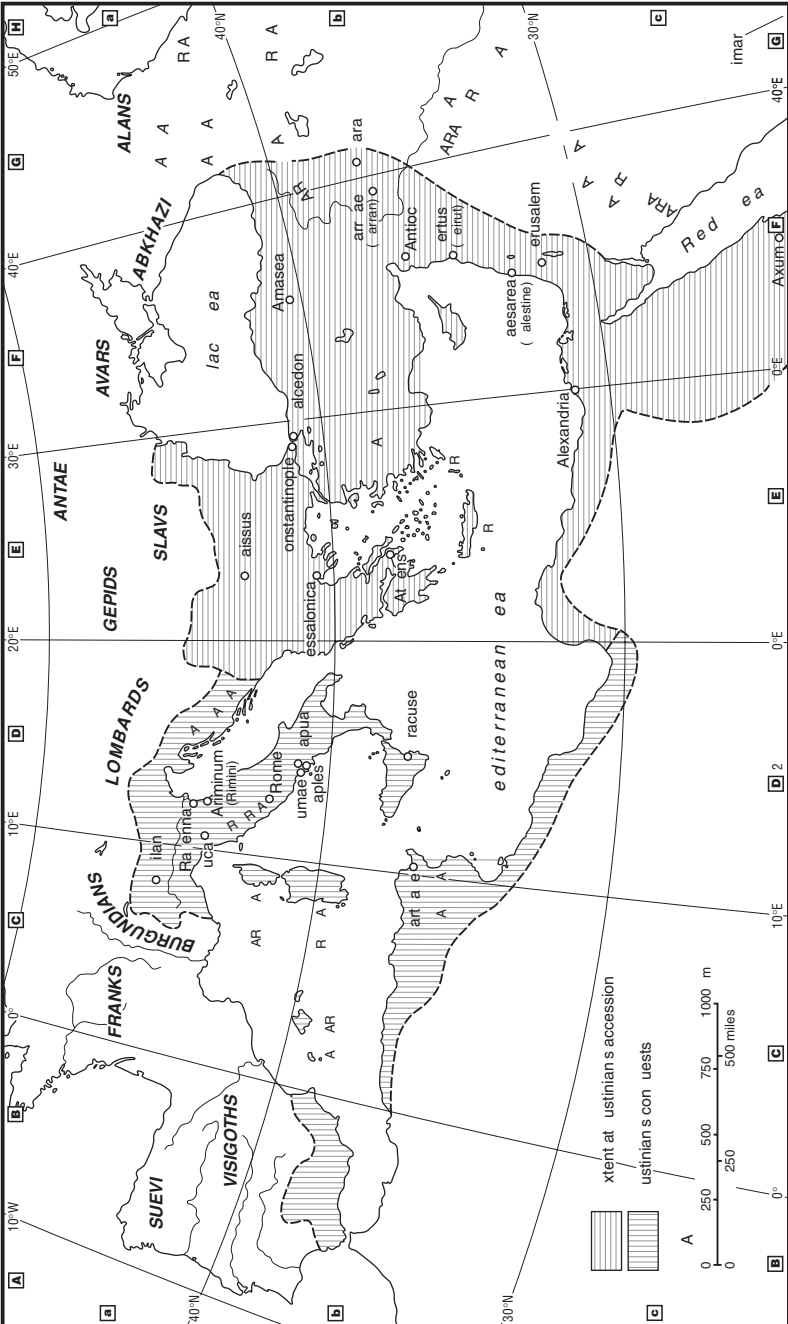


Figure 2 Map of Justinian's empire in 565

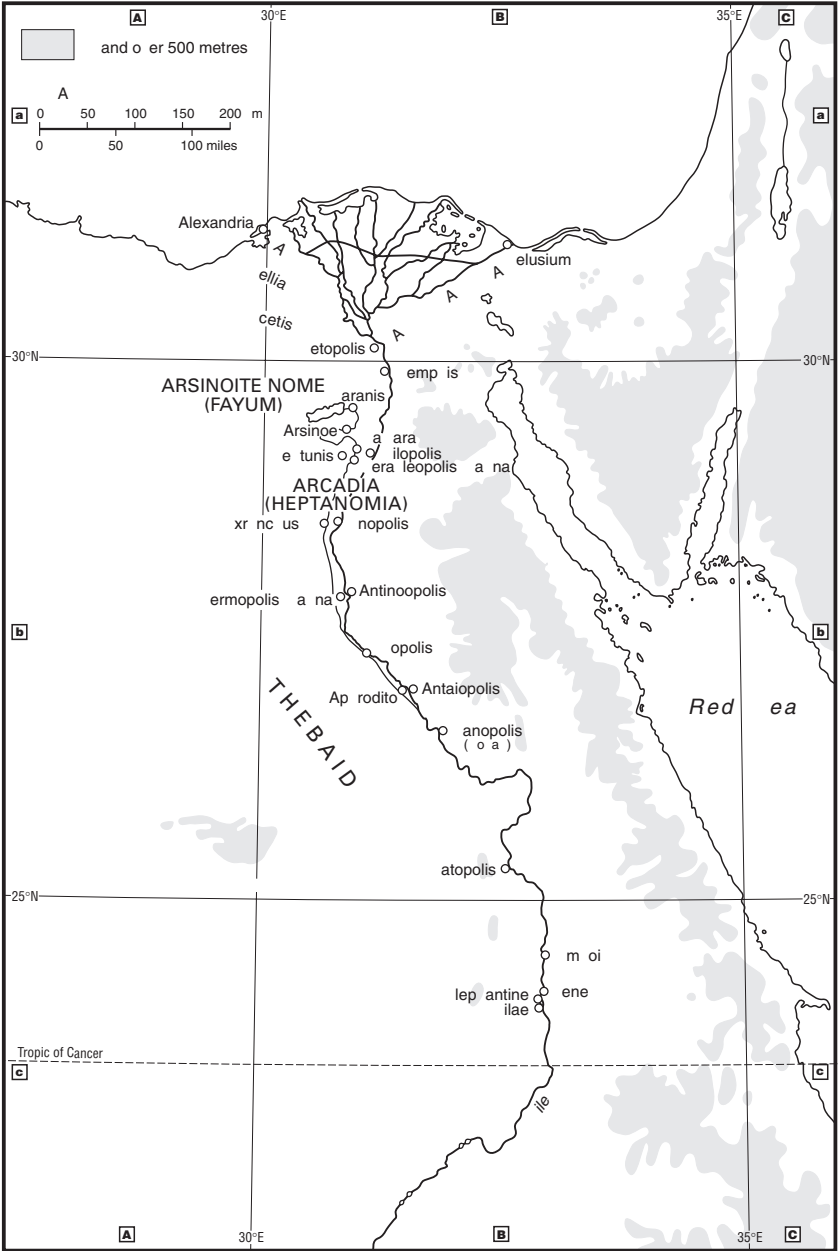


Figure 3 Map of Egypt

Introduction

In the year 565, in the imperial capital of Constantinople, the Emperor Justinian died, bringing to a close a reign that had lasted some forty-eight years. In death, as in life, Justinian left a deep impression on those around him. The Latin court poet Corippus declared that ‘the awesome death of the man showed by clear signs that he had conquered the world. He alone, amidst universal lamentations, seemed to rejoice in his pious countenance.’¹ The memory of Justinian was to loom large in the minds of subsequent generations of emperors, just as the physical monuments built in Constantinople during his reign were long to dominate the medieval city.² The emperor had reformed the civil law of the empire, overhauled its administrative structures, and restored imperial rule to Africa, Italy, and part of Spain; he had engaged in long drawn-out warfare with the prestige enemy of Sasanian Persia and attempted to restore peace to the increasingly fissile imperial Church. In short, through his military exertions, Justinian had done much to restore the Roman Empire to a position of military and ideological dominance in the lands bordering the central and western Mediterranean, whilst at home he had sought to bolster the legal, administrative, and religious authority of the imperial office.³

This attempted restoration of imperial fortunes had been accompanied by a concerted effort to propagandise on behalf of the emperor and his policies. Justinian’s aides and advisers, such as the *quaestor* Tribonian, had sought to convey to the emperor’s subjects an image of active, triumphant, and pious rulership. In an imperial constitution of 533, for example, we find Justinian lionised as the ‘conqueror of the Alamanni, Goths, Franks,

¹ *Flavius Cresconius Corippus, In Laudem Iustini Minoris, Libri Quattor* 1.239–41: ‘mors veneranda viris signis monstravit apertis. | Ipse videbatur cunctis plangentibus unus | effigie gaudere pia.’ Averil Cameron 1976: 43.

² Mango 1986: 109.

³ For the best recent overview of Justinian’s reign, see Maas 2005. For the extent of Byzantine influence beyond the empire by the end of Justinian’s reign, see Harris 2003.

Germans, Antes, Alans, Vandals, Africans – devout, fortunate, renowned, victorious, and triumphant'.⁴ The constitution goes on to describe how the emperor was determined to stand victorious 'not only over enemies in war but also over troublemakers at home, driving out their wickedness through the paths of law'.⁵ This was an image calculated to inspire both awe and fear. It was advertised throughout the empire through proclamations and inscriptions and was further replicated beyond the world of the court in contemporary writings that drew upon imperial propaganda, such as the *Chronicle* of John Malalas.⁶ The original version of the *Chronicle* records that in Constantinople, in the wake of the quelling of the 'Nika' insurrection of 532, there was 'great fear and the city was quiet'; in response to imperial persecution of pederasty, there was both 'great fear and security'.⁷ Likewise, the early-seventh-century *Chronicon Paschale* records how under Justinian 'there arose great imperial terror'.⁸ Such fear was regarded by Justinian and his entourage as a vital tool of effective imperial government.⁹

The official representation of Justinian's personal rule, as expressed through the medium of the imperial edicts and constitutions promulgated during his reign, was not couched solely in terms of imperial omnipotence, however.¹⁰ Rather, particularly from Justinian's provincial and administrative legislation, there emerges the picture of an imperial office obliged to contend with what are presented as highly powerful and deeply insidious vested interests amongst elements of the imperial bureaucracy and the governing classes of the empire. This sense is conveyed with particular clarity in an imperial edict issued in the year 538–9 concerning the fiscal, civil, and military administration of Alexandria and the provinces of Egypt.¹¹ The contents of the 538–9 edict are highly informative, for they present a picture of the Emperor Justinian rounding angrily on his praetorian prefect, John the Cappadocian, claiming that the imperial authorities in Constantinople and Alexandria had shown themselves largely incapable of supervising the

⁴ Cn. Imp. Maj.: 'In nomine domini nostri Jhesu Christi imperator caesar Flavius Iustinianus Alamanicus Gothicus Francicus Germanicus Anticus Alanicus Vandalicus Africanus pius felix inclitus victor ac triumphator.'

⁵ Ibid. *proemium*: 'ut . . . princeps Romanus victor existat non solum in hostilibus proeliis, sed etiam per legitimos tramites calumniantium iniquitates expellens'.

⁶ Scott 1981: 12–31 and 1996: 23.

⁷ Scott 1985: 103.

⁸ *Chronicon Paschale* (sub anno 531) – once again, in the aftermath of the Nika riots. The entry is misplaced chronologically. The *Chronicon Paschale* is itself highly dependent upon Malalas' account.

⁹ Scott 1985: 104.

¹⁰ For the rhetoric of imperial power, see Kelly 1998: 139–50.

¹¹ *J. Edict* 13: Περὶ τῆς Ἀλεξανδρέων καὶ τῶν Αἰγυπτιακῶν Ἐπαρχιῶν. For the date of the edict, see Malz 1942/3: 135–41. The suggestion that the edict should be dated to 554 is almost entirely unconvincing. See Rémondon 1955: 112–21.

collection of taxes from Egypt – the wealthiest region of the Eastern Roman Empire. As Justinian declared:

the tax-payers insisted absolutely that everything had been exacted in its entirety, but the pagarchs and *curiales* and collectors of the public taxes and the various governors at the time used to so administer the business hitherto that it was impossible for anyone to become at all acquainted [with its workings] and they alone profited.¹²

Justinian thus singled out for criticism a select body of imperial officials: tax-collectors; those responsible for fiscal districts; civic councillors; and provincial governors; that is to say, individuals holding imperial office, many of whom would also have belonged to the highest echelons of imperial and provincial land-owning society. It was the corruption and avarice of members of this clearly identified group that Justinian held responsible for the failure of the imperial authorities to receive the expected tax revenues from Egypt. The emperor represented himself as locked in conflict with lawless elements amongst the empire's social and administrative elite, whose activities, Justinian declared, threatened 'the very cohesion of Our state itself'.¹³ Likewise, in 536, Justinian had issued a constitution concerned with the governance of the province of Cappadocia: the temerity shown by the leading magnates of the region, whom the emperor described simply as the 'mighty' (δυνατοί), had, he declared, made him go red with anger.¹⁴

This image of an imperial office beset with internal foes was, of course, no less propagandistic in intent than the rhetoric of imperial triumph. There was nothing inherently novel in the concept of the emperor as ever-watchful defender of the integrity of the Roman state and the guarantor of peace within it. Similarly, the rhetoric of imperial antipathy towards the ruses of the 'mighty' and, by inference, of imperial concern for the wellbeing of the 'humble and meek', was evidently derived from Holy Scripture, and the well-established concept of the emperor acting in emulation of God.¹⁵

However, the sense conveyed by much of Justinian's provincial legislation, that his reign witnessed a bitter struggle between the person of the emperor and elements within the political and social elite of the empire,

¹² *J. Edict* 13 *proemium*, lines 13–15: ἀλλ' οἱ μὲν συντελεῖς καθάπαξ ἰσχυρίζοντο πάντα εἰς ὁλόκληρον ἀπαιτεῖσθαι, οἱ παγάρχοι δὲ καὶ οἱ πολιτευόμενοι καὶ οἱ πράκτορες τῶν δημοσίων καὶ διαφερόντως <οἱ> κατὰ καιρὸν ἄρχοντες οὕτω τὸ πρᾶγμα μέχρι νῦν διετίθεσαν, ὥς μηδενὶ δύνασθαι γενέσθαι γνώριμον, αὐτοῖς δὲ μόνοις ἐπικερδές.

¹³ *Ibid.* line 6: τὰ συνέχοντα τὴν ἡμετέραν πολιτείαν.

¹⁴ *J. Nov.* 30.5.1: ἐρυθρίωμεν εἰπεῖν μεθ' ὅσης ἀλῶνται τῆς ἀτοπίας.

¹⁵ See Luke 1.52: καθεῖλεν δυνάστας ἀπὸ θρόνων καὶ ὕψωσεν ταπεινοὺς. For a tenth-century parallel, drawing upon the Justinianic legislation as a template, see Morris 1976: 3–27. For divine mimesis, see McCormick 2000: 156–60, and Kelly 1998: 139–50.

would appear to have represented more than mere posturing on the part of Justinian and his advisers. For precisely the same picture is emergent from the literature written in response to Justinian's policies both during the emperor's reign and thereafter. As with Justinian's edict on Egypt, this conflict is depicted as having focused in particular, although not uniquely, on questions of fiscality, that is to say, the operation of the imperial system of taxation. The sources indicate unequivocally that in senatorial circles in Constantinople there was palpable unease at the fiscal implications of Justinian's attempted restoration of imperial fortunes. Upon his accession to the throne in 565, for example, Justinian's successor, Justin II, who would seem to have drawn the mainstay of his support from senatorial interests at court, famously declared that he found 'the treasury burdened with many debts and reduced to utter exhaustion'.¹⁶ This sentiment soon found itself repeated in propaganda disseminated on behalf of the new regime, as also in the works of Greek authors of the late sixth century writing in the 'high style', such as Procopius' continuator, Agathias, or the ecclesiastical historian Evagrius.¹⁷

This late-sixth-century perspective on Justinian's reign evidently drew upon criticisms of the emperor and his entourage that were already current during his lifetime. Thus Evagrius' complaints against one of Justinian's ministers, a certain Aetherius, who, he declares, 'resorted to every degree of sycophancy, plundering the properties of the living and of the dead in the name of the Imperial Household, of which he was in charge under Justinian', echo the sentiments expressed in the late 550s by the imperial bureaucrat, scholar, and antiquarian John Lydus.¹⁸ In his treatise *On the Magistracies of the Roman State*, Lydus bemoaned the brutal impact on his native city of Philadelphia of the attempts made by Justinian's officials to collect the imperial taxes which they believed to be due. He recorded how

A certain Antiochus, already an old man by age, was reported to him as being master of a certain amount of gold. For that reason [the official] arrested him and suspended him from both hands with strong ropes until the old man, having denied it, was freed from his bonds a corpse. I was a spectator of that vile murder, for I knew Antiochus.¹⁹

¹⁶ *J.Nov.* 148 *proemium*: τὸ γὰρ δημόσιον χρέεσι πολλοῖς καταπεφορτισμένον εὐρόντες καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἐσχάτην ἀπορίαν ἐλάσαν. For senatorial support, see Averil Cameron 1976: 131 note and 165 note.

¹⁷ Note the negative comments in Agathias, *Hist.* 5.14, Menander Protector fr. 8, and Evagrius Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.30.

¹⁸ Evagrius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.3: Αἰθερίος δὲ διὰ πάσης ἰὼν συκοφαντίας, καὶ τὰς τε τῶν ζώντων τῶν τε τελευτώντων τὰς οὐσίας ληϊζόμενος ὀνομάτι τῆς βασιλικῆς οἰκίας ἥς ἐπὶ Ἰουστινιανοῦ προὔσθηκει.

¹⁹ *De Magistratibus* 3.57: Ἀντίοχος τις, ἥδη γέρων τὴν ἡλικίαν, ἐμνηύθη αὐτῷ χρυσίου δεσπότης εἶναι τινος, συσχὼν οὖν αὐτὸν καλωδίοις στιβαροῖς ἀνέδησεν ἐκ χειροῖν ἕως ἑξαρκος γενόμενος ὁ

Lydus goes on to paint a salacious caricature of Justinian's chief financial officer for most of the early part of his reign, John the Cappadocian, denouncing him both for his fiscal rapacity and his equally unrestrained sexual appetites: in both public and personal terms, the *parvenu* Cappadocian is described as lacking the self-restraint expected of a gentleman.²⁰ Lydus' treatise breaks off with the temporary deposition of John the Cappadocian in January 532, and the emperor's replacement of him as praetorian prefect with a well-born aristocrat of conservative temperament by the name of Phocas, whose promotion Lydus eulogises as heralding the restoration of a golden age.²¹ This account is given added piquancy by the fact that Lydus must have known that Phocas was only to hold office for a matter of months, and that John the Cappadocian was destined to return. Any 'golden age' was to be short-lived.²²

Similar motifs emerge from the bitter invective against Justinian and his wife, the indomitable Empress Theodora, written by Procopius of Caesarea in his *Secret History*, once again probably composed during the emperor's lifetime.²³ In addition to dwelling on the subject of the empress' cruelty and sexual excess, and the emperor's tyrannous and over-centralising zeal, Procopius emphasises the deleterious consequences for the empire at large of Justinian's all-consuming fiscal appetite. In one particularly vivid passage, Procopius purports to recount a dream that had come to a 'notable' in Constantinople, by which he probably meant a senator, prior to Justinian's accession to the throne in 527. The future emperor was seen standing in the middle of the Bosphorus, guzzling up the waters that surrounded the city until the very sewers of the imperial capital ran dry.²⁴ So too, we might infer, was Justinian to drain his subjects of their wealth.

Whilst denouncing the emperor's insatiable demand for tax revenues, Procopius returns time and again to a specific charge: the harm deliberately done to senatorial and land-owning interests by imperial policy. The emperor is criticised for refusing to remit taxes to landowners who had lost agricultural workers to the bubonic plague;²⁵ he and his wife are accused of devising various strategies for seizing the estates of members of the land-owning elite of the provinces,²⁶ and of using trumped-up charges

γέρων νεκρὸς τῶν δεσμῶν ἡλευθερώθη. ταύτης ἐγὼ τῆς μαιφονίας γέγονα θεωρὸς ἠπιστάμην γὰρ τὸν Ἀντίοχον.

²⁰ *De Mag.* 3.62. ²¹ *De Mag.* 3.76.

²² John was reinstated as praetorian prefect by October 532. See Whitby and Whitby in a note to their translation of *Chronicon Paschale* (1989: 116, n. 149). For the dating of the *De Magistratibus*, see Bandy's 1983 edition: xxvii–xxviii. On Phocas, Bandy notes 'This praise may well have had as its (further) underlying purpose the vindication of Phocas against the charges of paganism brought against him in 545–6, which resulted in his suicide' (xxi).

²³ Greatrex 1994: 101–14. ²⁴ *Anecdota* 19.1. The dream came 'τῶν τινι ἐπιφανῶν'.

²⁵ *Anec.* 23.19. ²⁶ *Anec.* 11.39–41.

to confiscate senatorial patrimonies.²⁷ It is in response to an account of Justinian and Theodora's attempts to seize senatorial estates in the wake of the Nika insurrection of 532 that Procopius adds that 'it was for such reasons to me and *most of us* (τοῖς πολλοῖς ἡμῶν) that these two people never seemed to be human beings, but rather avenging demons of some sort'.²⁸ This reference to the author's 'us' is highly suggestive and provides crucial insight into Procopius' aristocratic sympathies.

In addition to sharing general themes, both John Lydus and Procopius can be seen to adopt a common stance in relation to individual policies and events. Procopius concurred with Lydus' enthusiasm for Phocas, the praetorian prefect of 532;²⁹ both authors are critical of the economies effected with respect to the imperial messenger system or *cursus velox* by John the Cappadocian; and, crucially, they are critical of this policy for an identical reason – the impact of this measure on landowners.³⁰ It may be that John Lydus and Procopius knew one another and had exchanged opinions in private; it may be that Lydus had access to a copy of Procopius' *Secret History*.³¹ Either way, both authors give voice to a shared sense of hostility towards Justinian's fiscal policies, and resentment at his treatment of members of the upper echelons of Constantinopolitan and provincial landed society, those whom Procopius defined as the senators and those 'reputed to be prosperous . . . after the members of the senate'.³²

Both the legal sources composed on behalf of Justinian by his entourage, therefore, and the literary works written at the time by authors of aristocratic sentiment or sympathy, such as Procopius and John Lydus, speak with one voice. Both types of source portray Justinian's period of rule in terms of a protracted conflict between the emperor on the one hand and powerful, conservative elements within landed society and the imperial bureaucracy on the other. To some extent, this unison of testimony might be explicable in terms of the way in which Procopius frequently structures

²⁷ *Anec.* 19.11–12. ²⁸ *Anec.* 12.12–14. ²⁹ *Anec.* 21.6.

³⁰ *Anec.* 30.5–9 and *De Magistratibus* 3.61. According to Procopius, the workings of the *cursus velox* benefited 'landowners everywhere (οἱ τῶν χωρίων πανταχῇ κύριοι), and particularly if their lands happened to lie in an inland zone . . . For every year they sold the surplus of their crops to the Government for the provisioning of horses and grooms, and thus earned much money.' With the abolition of this system, John Lydus notes 'the contributor perished' (ὁ συντελεστής ἀπώλετο). On the significance of the term *syntelestes* ('contributor') for a well-born or powerful landowner, see Laniado 1996: 23–51.

³¹ Averil Cameron 1985: 243 and Kaldellis 2004: 116.

³² *Anecdota* 11.40. Lydus is also particularly critical of those administrative reforms that he felt had hindered his own personal career prospects and those of his colleagues on the legal staff of the praetorian prefecture: see the highly effective deconstruction of the *De Magistratibus* in Kelly 2004: 1–104.

his critique of Justinian's reign around the framework of the emperor's own legislation.³³ But Procopius is doing more than simply inverting imperial rhetoric. Rather, as with John Lydus, he gives us vivid, concrete, illustrative examples of the struggle between emperor and aristocrat, landowner and Crown: thus he describes the confiscation of the estate of Evangelus of Caesarea, 'a man of no little distinction', and Justinian's connivance in the Church's illicit acquisition of the property of Mammianus of Emessa, 'a man of distinguished family and great wealth'.³⁴ Both types of source describe an objective social reality. The imperial response to this reality was to advocate autocratic centralisation. Procopius' response was to hint at opportunities for imperial assassination.³⁵ Either way, conflict and struggle were central to the politics of the age.

It is striking how little this perspective on Justinian's reign has informed modern studies of the period. Historians have been happy to follow in the footsteps of Procopius, and indeed, Justinian's own propaganda, in terms of emphasising the emperor's military feats, his building activity, and his centralising tendencies, but they have been rather less inclined to follow the indications given by both Procopius and the imperial legislation as to this broader context to many of Justinian's policies and the political history of his reign.³⁶ Both the literary works and the legal texts appear to point to an important social and economic dimension to Justinian's reform programme arising out of a bitter struggle between the imperial authorities and aristocratic interests over access to the wealth created by – and extractable from – the labouring population of the empire. Yet such indications have been largely ignored in the recent historiography.³⁷

That historians have tended to shy away from approaching the reign of Justinian in such terms is perhaps readily explicable. In recent decades the study of the late antique Eastern Empire has become ever more popular. Yet most of the research undertaken has tended to be essentially cultural in focus.³⁸ As a result, 'cultural determinism' has become the order of the day.³⁹ Although economic history has been written, primarily social and economic explanations for the empire's pattern of development have not been fashionable, and hypotheses based upon concepts of class antagonism and social conflict even less so, redolent as they are of 'Marxist' associations and models.⁴⁰ In addition, it can be argued that we simply do not possess the sort of evidence required to write a plausible socio-economic account of

³³ See Kaldellis 2004: Appendix I: 223–8.

³⁴ *Anecdota* 30.17–21, and 28.2–10.

³⁵ See Kaldellis 2004: 159–64.

³⁶ Scott 1996: 20–4.

³⁷ Thus Maas 2005 contains very little by way of diachronic discussion of social and economic trends.

³⁸ Giardina 1999: 157–80.

³⁹ See, for example, Fowden 1993.

⁴⁰ Note Kaegi 1994: 487–9.

the age of Justinian. The first instinct of the social and economic historian has traditionally been to look to documentary evidence. For the late antique Eastern Empire of the sixth century, however, documentary sources are, on the whole, few and far between.⁴¹ Epigraphic data, archaeological evidence, and hagiographic texts can each provide crucial insights into various aspects of late antique social and economic realities, but in the final analysis, they are poor substitutes for documentary texts.⁴²

Yet to attempt to make sense of the reign of the Emperor Justinian in social and economic terms, and in particular, with an eye to conflict between the imperial authorities and members of the land-owning elite of the empire, would not be to impose upon the early Byzantine world an inappropriate and alien form of analysis derived from what some might regard as an outdated and discredited politico-historical ideology. Rather, as already seen, it would be to adopt the perspective of the sources themselves. The imperial legislation, the writings of Procopius, and those of John Lydus all point in the same direction. They invite a response. In order to formulate such a response, the historian has little choice but to attempt to make maximum use of such sources as are available, however limited or imperfect they may be. The chapters that follow represent an (initial) effort at just that – an attempt to build up a social and economic context in which to situate Justinian's reign, and also to consider the implications of the empire's pattern of social and economic development under Justinian for its subsequent post-Justinianic history.

In so doing, great emphasis will be placed on the one region of the late antique east from which there survives a substantial body of documentary sources, namely Egypt, for which we possess valuable collections of documentary papyri. Whilst interpretation of the Egyptian material is by no means straightforward, any attempt to come to terms with the political developments of the sixth century in their social and economic setting inevitably leads back to the testimony of the papyrological sources. On one level, this is because it is only through examination of the Egyptian papyri that we may establish a firm conceptual basis from which to proceed to the study of the legal, numismatic, epigraphic, hagiographic, and archaeological evidence for the empire at large. To put things another way, it is primarily through the testimony of the papyri that we encounter the material structures and the social, administrative, and legal vocabularies

⁴¹ The same is even more true, of course, of the late antique west – see the comments of Collins 1991: xiv.

⁴² For the problematic interpretative nature of archaeological, epigraphic, and hagiographic sources, see Sarris 2002a: 172–5 and Sarris 2004b: 55–71.

preserved in the other sources, deployed, given meaning, and lived in by those who experienced them.

The truly crucial significance of the papyri, however, lies in the fact that they preserve details of the structure, administration, and activities of a number of aristocratically owned great estates dating from the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries. As a result, the Egyptian papyri reveal what relations between the imperial authorities, aristocratic landowners, and provincial society beyond the great estates looked like on the ground. As will be seen in chapter [eight](#), the social, economic, and juridical character of these estates has been hotly and, at times, fiercely debated over the years. They have been variously characterised as socially preponderant proto-feudal ‘baronies’;⁴³ relatively marginal bit-players in a provincial world dominated by autonomous peasant producers;⁴⁴ and, in more recent years, ‘semi-public’ institutions which shouldered many of the administrative burdens of the late Roman state.⁴⁵ Some have regarded them as highly commercialised enterprises, others as rather more primitive, essentially autarkic regimes.⁴⁶ In the chapters that follow each one of these propositions will be examined, challenged, and – to varying degrees – modified. In any case, it is with Egypt that we must begin.

⁴³ See Bell [1917](#): 86–106 and Hardy [1931](#). ⁴⁴ Johnson and West [1949](#).

⁴⁵ Rémondon [1974](#): 17–32; Gasco [1985](#): 1–90.

⁴⁶ For sophistication, see Banaji [2001](#) and Mazza [2001](#); for the most recent and spirited defence of primitivist autarky, see Hickey [2001](#).

CHAPTER I

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.¹ 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 200,000–300,000.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ On a recent analysis, it has been postulated that the ‘gross provincial product’ of

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

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

³ 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.

⁴ 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’.

⁵ I owe the phrase to Professor C. Wickham.

sixth-century Egypt amounted to a minimum of some 20 million *solidi*.⁶ 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.⁷

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'.⁸ 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.⁹ As the author of the *Expositio* put it, albeit with some exaggeration, 'no other province could subsist without divine Egypt'.¹⁰

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.¹¹ Yet comparatively little wine would

⁶ Banaji 2001: 65. ⁷ Hendy 1985: 172.

⁸ *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.'

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ *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.

¹¹ *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.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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)

¹² 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.

¹³ 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 Ashkelon 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 Phocaean, Cypriot and African red slip ware, are also common within the province.'

¹⁴ Johnson and West 1949: 107–51.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

The exportation of vast quantities of papyrus is further mentioned in the *Expositio*.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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'.²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ Such trading contacts with the east are well attested numismatically.²⁴ Given the role played by

¹⁷ 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.

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

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

²¹ 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.

²² 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.

²³ *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.

²⁴ 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 541–2.²⁵

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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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 602.²⁸ 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.

²⁵ Allen 1979: 5–20, and Sarris 2002a: 169–82.

²⁶ 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 Hephaestus PPO (east) 551–2 (Martindale 1992 (hereafter *PLRE III*): 582–3, Fl. Ioannes Theodorus Menas Narses Chnouabmon Horion Hephaestus). 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 (?), Osroene (?), Greece, Lycia, Phoeniciae, Lydia, Apamea, 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.

²⁷ *Codex Theodosianus* 14.26.2; 12.1.190; 12.1.191; 14.27.2; 11.5.3.

²⁸ 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), Hephaestus 545–6(–551?) (*PLRE III*: 582–3, Fl. Ioannes Theodorus Menas Narses Chnouabmon Horion Hephaestus), possibly Petrus in the mid sixth century (*PLRE III*: 733–4, Iulianus 12) and Peter in 602 (*PLRE III*: 1011, Petrus 56).