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BYZANTINE IMPERIALISM IN EGYPT [1]

I N this paper, which attempts rather ambitiously a survey of the period from Diocletian to the capture of Alexandria by the Arabs in 641 A.D.,[2] I have not sought to make any contribution to the historical material available, but merely to set forth my own impression of the various forces which were at work, their interrelation, and their results. My hope is that the interpretation thus given will serve as a basis for discussion and suggestion, and if I seem at times to speak dogmatically, I trust that this will be attributed to the character of the paper and not to any conviction as to my right to speak *ex cathedra.*

While it is now generally recognized that the history of the Byzantine Empire as a whole is by no means a record of continuous decay, but one of alternating periods of revival and decline, it must be admitted that the story of Byzantine imperialism in Egypt is a story of progressive disintegration. Nevertheless this episode in the

[1] A paper read before the Ancient History section at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Washington, D. C., Dec. 27, 1927.

[2] The following works are of especial use in the study of this subject: N. H. Baynes, " Alexandria and Constantinople: a Study in Ecclesiastical Diplomacy ", in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology,* XII. 145–156; *id., Byzantine Empire* (1926); H. I. Bell, " Byzantine Servile State in Egypt ", *id.,* " Hellenic Culture in Egypt ", *id.,* " Decay of a Civilization ", in *Jour. of Egypt. Arch.,* IV. 86–106, VIII. 139–155, X. 201–216; Ch. Diehl, " Une Crise Monétaire au VIᵉ Siècle ", in *Revue des Études Grecques,* XXXII. 157–166; H. Gelzer, *Byzantinische Kulturgeschichte* (1909); Matthias Gelzer, *Studien zur Byzantinischen Verwaltung Aegyptens* (1909); V. Martin, *La Fiscalité Romaine en Égypte aux Trois Premiers Siècles* (1925); J. Maspero, " Horapollon et la Fin du Paganisme Égyptien ", in *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale,* XI. (1913) 163–195; *id., Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie, 518–616* (1923); *id., L'Organisation Militaire de l'Égypte Byzantine* (1912); J. G. Milne, *A History of Egypt under Roman Rule* (third ed., 1924); Germaine Rouillard, *L'Administration Civile de l'Égypte Byzantine* (1925); W. Shubart, *Einführung in die Papyruskunde* (1918); *id., Aegypten von Alexander dem Grossen bis auf Mohammed* (1922); *id., Ein Jahrtausend am Nil* (sec. ed., 1923); Ulrich Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyruskunde,* vol. I., pt. I. (1912); F. L. Woodward, *Christianity and Nationalism in the Later Roman Empire* (1916).

(1)

history of Egypt may well claim our attention as involving the still perplexing problem of the government of a so-called " inferior " race. It is also interesting from the complexity of the political, social, and economic forces at work, which led at one and the same time to the decay of a civilization and to the rise of a nationality.

To understand the problems which faced the imperial government in the administration of Egypt one must begin with a brief survey of conditions as they existed there in the early fourth century of our era.   At this time the population of Egypt comprised the following elements: Roman, Greek, Greco-Egyptian, and Egyptian.   In spite of the extension of Roman citizenship by Caracalla's edict and of Diocletian's attempts at Romanization, the true Roman element in Egypt remained a negligible quantity.   Likewise the real Greeks were few in number and restricted almost entirely to Ptolemaïs and Naukratis.   Much more numerous and important were the Greco-Egyptians, the product, as their name implies, of six centuries of fusion of the two peoples, who formed the bulk of the population of Alexandria and the *metropoleis* or administrative capitals of the nomes.   Culturally, this element represented the main force of Hellenism in Egypt, economically it comprised the middle-class landholders.   But by far the largest group was formed by the native Egyptians, who were the agricultural laborers and tenant farmers as well as the poorer elements of the town population.   These " hewers of wood and drawers of water ", the predecessors of the modern *fellahîn,* were distinguished by their latent hostility to foreign rule in general and to Hellenism in particular, as represented by their social and political superiors.   Thus in the very character of the population of Egypt we see the possibilities of serious administrative difficulties.

But the question of governing a subject people whom the Ptolemies and the Caesars had shut out deliberately from absorption into the body of the ruling class was complicated by a pressing economic problem, which had its roots in the period of the Principate. The policy of the Roman government had been to collect the greatest possible revenue from Egypt.   At best, the Egyptian was but a sheep to be shorn.   The application of this principle had resulted in crushing the peasantry under a load of taxation and enforced corvées, while at the same time it had gone far towards ruining the middle class of landholders by burdening them with liturgical services in connection with raising the revenue, by making them responsible for the tax quota of their districts, and by forcing them to cultivate, or at least pay the rental for, the vacant state lands.   Impoverishment, flight, and the abandonment of farms and villages were most eloquent testimonials of the results of a misguided fiscal policy.   This de-

plorable economic condition was rendered worse by the anarchy which prevailed in the latter part of the third century. In spite of the restoration of order and the revival of irrigation, the proprietors and the peasants alike remained in a precarious condition, and many towns and villages were never reoccupied. We thus find the government face to face with a second serious problem; that of combating an economic decline.

The general situation was still further complicated by the spread of Christianity. Up to the time of Diocletian the new religion seems to have had its main strength among the Greeks of Alexandria and the country towns, but the last great persecutions which began in 302 scattered its adherents throughout the country and brought them into contact with the rural population. In the course of the fourth century the new faith became the dominant religion throughout the land. It is important to note that, although Christianity came to the Egyptians through the Greeks, it did nothing to heal the breach between the peasantry and those whom they looked upon as their oppressors. On the contrary, leading as it did to the revival of the native tongue (Coptic), it soon became a means of expressing the latent national feelings of the subject people. Nor was Egyptian paganism any more friendly towards the imperial government, which from the time of Constantine I. was identified with Christianity.

In tracing the course of Byzantine imperialism in Egypt it will be convenient to distinguish two periods: the first running up to the year 538 A.D., the second from 538 to 641 A.D.

The first period opened with the establishment of the new administrative system of Diocletian and Constantine I., one effect of which was to put an end to the unique position of Egypt within the Roman Empire. In so far as this involved the establishment of an out and out autocratic régime, Egypt was unaffected, for it had always known autocracy; and the introduction there of the new bureaucracy resulted more in a change of titles than a change of system. However, more striking innovations were the subdivision of Egypt into several provinces and the separation of civil and military authority, in conformity with principles applied throughout the empire in the vain hope of promoting honest, efficient, and stable government. Another change was the conversion of the nomes into municipal territoria of the erstwhile *metropoleis.* The new tax system, based on the units of *caput* and *jugum,* came into force, but can not have been a great novelty in a country used to the land and capitation taxes of the previous period.

But these were outward changes. The Egyptian policy of Constantinople was inherited, together with the aforesaid problems, from

the preceding epoch.   The main feature of that policy was the fiscal
exploitation of the land of Egypt and its population, largely in the
interest of provisioning Constantinople (after 330) and Alexandria.
In raising the revenue the government still adhered to the use of
liturgical officials for whom the municipal senates had to assume col-
lective responsibility.   It was inevitable that these should seek to
save their properties at the expense of the poorer agricultural ele-
ments and try to shift upon them the deficiencies of the local tax
quota.   The policy of making the landholders responsible for the
taxes or rentals upon unleased state lands remained also in force, and
seems to have developed into a systematic attempt to place all state
land in the possession of private persons, either by attribution
(*epibole*) or compulsory hereditary lease.   As a result both public
land and public tenants disappear from Egyptian records after the
fourth century.   With no relief in prospect, proprietors and tenants
alike turned to the time-honored path of escape by flight.   To pre-
vent this the government stepped in and fixed both classes to the
soil, as well as to their inherited status.

    The converse of the decay of the class of small proprietors was
the rise of the great estates.   This movement had its origin in the
ambitions of the upper official class and in the desire of the peasants
to escape from their crushing burdens.   As the former powerful per-
sonages were able to defy successfully the municipal tax collectors
and the imperial police, the small landholders and peasantry sought
refuge under their patronage in the hope, largely futile it must be
admitted, of escaping from their obligations.   The formation of
these great estates threatened the sum of the revenues and the im-
perial government fulminated vigorously against them in its consti-
tutions after the middle of the fourth century.   But in vain.   Here
as elsewhere the bureaucracy had got out of hand, and in 415 the
government capitulated, recognized the institution of patronage,
bound the clients to the lands of their patrons as coloni, and gave the
patrons the right of collecting taxes from their clients and paying
them to the state without interference from local tax officers (*auto-
pragia*).   In the fourth century the land system in Egypt is char-
acterized by the prevalence of small holdings, in the sixth it is char-
acterized by the great estates, whose owners in their official capacity
as governors, pagarchs, and autocratic landlords control the admin-
istration.

    The fiscal policy of the empire which had resulted in creating an
aristocracy able and ready to defy the central authority had also
ruined the very class upon which the government might have de-
pended for loyal support—the municipal senatorial order.   This was

all the more tragic since it was the chief cause of the decline of Greek cultural influences and the non-appearance of an important Greek Christian element, which might have been a powerful obstacle in the path of the rising nationalistic tendencies of the Egyptians.

It is high time to turn to the religious developments and to trace the growth of a breach between the Egyptians and the empire from this side also. Here two factors must be borne clearly in mind: (1) the ecclesiastical relations of Alexandria and the other bishoprics of the empire, in particular Constantinople, and (2) the relations of the patriarchs of Alexandria to the people of Egypt. The root of the matter was the determination of a number of able patriarchs of Alexandria to assert their independence of the see of Constantinople, and for that matter of Rome also. In the East it was a well-recognized principle that the position of a city in the sphere of the political administration should determine its position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. But, when the patriarchs of Constantinople tried to assert their primacy among the Eastern bishops, they were opposed by the older patriarchs, and among their opponents Alexandria took the lead. The recognition of the primacy of Constantinople by the second ecumenical council in 381 A.D. by no means settled the question. Although Constantine I. and Theodosius I. had been able to repress by force Alexandrine opposition to the decisions of ecumenical councils, under Theodosius II. Constantinople was humbled successively by Theophilus and his successor Cyril. Dioscuros continued the Alexandrine tradition of ecclesiastical diplomacy by refusing to submit to Emperor Marcian and the council of Chalcedon (451) which condemned the Monophysite doctrine. But Marcian was strong enough to banish Dioscuros and the power of the Alexandrine see outside of Egypt was at an end. Constantinople had triumphed over Alexandria, but at the cost of creating the Egyptian Monophysite Church which was to remain a bitter foe of imperial orthodoxy. For the patriarch of Alexandria had no rival in his control over the Egyptian churches, and he enjoyed the support and confidence of all but a small party of the church in Alexandria. Not only was the patriarch the spiritual head of the Egyptians, but he became the incarnation of Egyptian nationalistic tendencies. As a recent writer has ably expressed it: " Egypt was still a nation, and the old kingship was but transformed: the Patriarch, as a spiritual Pharaoh, was enthroned in the capital; he was the representative of a people and for them his word was law; from the desert, populous with anchorites, he could call forth his armies, and the monkish hosts, wielding their clubs, were ever ready to obey his

summons." [3]   Egyptian national feeling rallied to the support of the memory of the great patriarchs and readily seized upon this method of expressing its animosity to Constantinople.   The term Melchites, or Kingsmen, applied to the orthodox from the middle of the fifth century, shows how closely religious and political opposition, were combined.   It was Alexandrian opposition to New Rome which produced the Monophysite heresy, not the heresy which produced the schism.

Another form in which Egyptian nationalism revealed itself was in the revival of racial pride shown both in pagan and Christian literature.   The Copts (to use their later name) regarded themselves as the heirs of the Ancient Egyptians, who, in their opinion, were the source of all civilization.   Everything worth while was said to have an Egyptian origin.   Legends grew up which claimed that Egypt was the birthplace not merely of great political figures like Diocletian but even of Christ himself.   This vanity was piqued by the contempt which Byzantine writers expressed towards Egypt's inhabitants, its monuments, and its traditions.

By the early sixth century, then, we may picture conditions in Egypt somewhat as follows.   Overtaxation, the burden of personal services and liturgies, and a corrupt administration had rendered the peasantry and the remnants of the class of small proprietors hostile to the imperial government and its representatives.   This hostility was fanned into a flame of hatred by the religious conflict between Alexandria and Constantinople.   The conflict thus awakened assumed the character of a national movement, which expressed itself in a revival of national cultural traditions and in open acts of rebellion against the government.   A wide gulf separated the interests of the, poor cultivators from those of the great landlords, but even these were only loyal to the empire in so far as it did not interfere with their privileged position.   The slender props of government were the senatorial class of Alexandria, the imperial officials, and the soldiery.

From this we see that when Justinian came to the throne he had to face essentially the same problems as Diocletian, only in an aggravated form.   Devoted as he was to the ideal of " one state, one law, one church ", he was bound to intervene actively to readjust conditions in the Egyptian diocese.   After an initial period of toleration he attacked the religious problem and tried to force upon the Monophysites a formula under which they could be united to the Orthodox Church.   This attempt was a failure: the Monophysites remained unreconciled and irreconcilable.   Justinian's administrative

[3] N. H. Baynes, *Byzantine Empire*, p. 78.

reforms were promulgated in his famous Edict XIII. (538/539 A.D.). His prefatory statement, that there was so much confusion in Egypt that the government at Constantinople did not know what was going on there, should perhaps be taken as referring to fiscal conditions only, but at any rate it shows that the emperor was alive to the disorders that prevailed. Still the reforms themselves fail to reveal any attempt to grapple with the fundamental causes of the situation. Fiscal interests predominated, and such changes as were made in the civil and military organization were introduced to secure greater efficiency in collecting the grain for Constantinople and Alexandria and in raising the other taxes.

The outstanding feature of the new order was the abandonment of Diocletian's principle of the separation of civil and military authority and the concentration of both in the hands of the provincial governors; a reform which had already been carried out elsewhere and had been partially introduced even in Egypt itself. From now on Egypt was divided into five separate provinces, each under a governor clothed with civil and military power and directly subordinate to the Pretorian Prefect of the Orient. The future was to show that this administrative tinkering was as unavailing to put an end to graft and inefficiency as were his later attempts (Edict XI., 559 A.D.) to deal with the problem of debased coinage.

After Justinian, religious differences continued to complicate the situation. Following a brief respite under Tiberius, Phokas resumed the persecution of the Monophysites, and Heraclius, subsequent to his victory over Persia, insisted upon a reconciliation of the heretics and the state church. The refusal of the Copts to accept the Ekthesis of 638 resulted in a great persecution which continued until the very end of the Arab conquest and deeply embittered the Egyptians against the Byzantines.

The papyrus documents of the late sixth and early seventh century indicate that conditions were just as bad if not worse than before Justinian's reforms. The great proprietors, combining local and official provincial posts, appear as a class of hereditary office holders, maintaining their own troops, ships, messenger service, and even petty courts. Imperial officers and troops are openly defied, the rights of the taxpayers are violated, and the government provides no redress. Corruption is rife, and, as Justinian himself had been forced to admit, officials on the ground could spurn imperial edicts. The support given by Egypt as a whole to the revolt of Heraclius shows the attitude of disloyalty which pervaded all classes of the population.

The fruits of Byzantine imperialism then were in the first place

the economic and cultural decadence of Egypt, in the second the development of an hostile Egyptian nation. The general weaknesses of the imperial policy were adherence to the old Roman idea of the fiscal exploitation of the Egyptians as subjects, the overdevelopment of bureaucracy, and the preoccupation of the government with the problems of maintaining religious unity and upholding the political prestige of the empire. The ruin of the middle classes, the growth of the great landed proprietors, and the bureaucratic maladministration were ills which Egypt shared with the empire as a whole. What was more peculiar to Egypt was the revival of an Egyptian nationality which expressed itself in a conscious linguistic, cultural, religious, and political hostility to its rulers. Under these conditions Egypt was governed and held only by military force, and could not be expected to protect itself for the empire from outside attack. Accordingly, the continuation of Byzantine rule was dependent upon the presence of an adequate garrison, and this Constantinople failed to provide.

Whether because of inadequate resources, or a mistaken sense of security, or fear of rebellion, the Byzantine army of occupation was organized primarily as a police force to support the civil authorities in the maintenance of order and, above all, the collection of revenue. It consisted, in the sixth and seventh centuries, of some twenty-five thousand men, split up into between seventy and eighty units of some three hundred each. These were distributed among the chief towns, with smaller detachments in subsidiary guard stations. They did not form part of the field army of the empire, and each of the five provincial governors had independent command over the troops in his district, subject to the general oversight of the *magister militum per Orientem.* Such was the force which, even when aided by its fortifications, apparently gave no serious opposition to the Persians in 617, and was later defeated by the Arab invaders, whose total strength reached some sixteen thousand men. Its defeat was due to the lack of military experience, the divided command and failure of the governors to coöperate, the jealousy of the commanders, and, to some degree, the disaffection of the Copts. However, the latter did not rise *en masse* to aid the invaders, but for the most part remained passive spectators of the struggle, hostile to both Byzantines and Arabs.

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