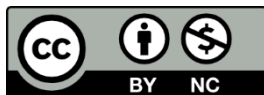

Rosetta

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Christel Freu, *Les salariés de l'Égypte romano-byzantine. Essai d'histoire économique*, Paris, Association des Amis du Centre d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, coll. 'StudPAP' 3, 2022, 392 p.

Carl-Loris Raschel

Christel Freu (University of Evry-Val d'Essonne), whose own research about Late Roman Empire has focused now on Egyptian papyrological documentation, achieves two worthy objectives with this book: she offers a summary book about the use of salaried work in Roman and Byzantine Egypt and contributes to broader debates on the relevance of concepts and models initially linked to capitalistic economy in ancient history.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, entitled *Travail salarié et capital en Égypte romano-byzantine* ('Salaried work and capital in Roman and Byzantine Egypt'), deals primarily with the conditions for the appearance of salaried work, first from a juristic and inter-personal point of view (what kind of agreement employer and employee could have negotiated and concluded) and secondly from an economic and global point of view (how the concentration of capital results in hotbeds of employment throughout the country). The second part *Environnements, modes de production et division du travail* ('Environments, modes of production and division of labour') offers an extensive overview of economic activities that might need salaried workers, in the countryside as well in cities, for agriculture, craftsmanship and services. The third part, entitled *Les salaires : hiérarchie, composition, fixation* ('Wages : scale, composition, fixing'), examines more specifically the payment of the workers, by studying the mechanisms that determined wages within a relatively stable and common scale, the composition of that payment in both cash and in-kind (more accurately, in several types of currency and in-kind), and wage regulation across Egypt.

The author has chosen not to reduce the subject to the study of employment contracts, of which no more than about fifty are known and which, most importantly, take various (and more or less developed) forms according to the type of employment. On the contrary, she has looked for every sign of salaried work in Greek papyri (especially accounts, letters, receipts) in order to understand its function and logic. In doing so, the author takes a methodological step other historians refrained from taking for

reasons of prudence, that is to ascertain the type of work contract (*paramone*, *misthosis*) involved from other data (nature of the activity, amount of the wage, term of engagement...). This approach is proving to be of interest; it is possible to convincingly reconstitute the reasons why certain contractual relationships are favoured (especially inside great estates) and to draw a general overview of their respective weight among Egyptian workers.

The author concludes that being a salaried employee was a condition more frequent and more adaptable than estimated by the substantivist approach which emphasises the underdevelopment of the ancient economy and, therefore, of the labor market in Antiquity. Those for whom the salary constituted the major part of their income represented up to 30% of the urban working population and 10% in countryside, without counting the seasonal workers and other short-term working contracts – according to estimations which would have deserved more discussion in the book. In one's professional lifetime, it was common to go through phases of short or extended salaried employment before resuming an independent activity, in agriculture or a craft.

In the absence of clear and extensive sources which would give us information about the recruitment and the management of workers in a workshop or an administration, the author focuses on great estates that left many papyri concerning their daily administration and thus broadens our knowledge of their uses of manpower. Their internal work organisation shows a great diversity of staff employment in terms of number, duration of contracts, and activity, beyond irrigation which was everywhere a key driver for salaried work. Rather than contrasting and distinguishing the modes of production based on salaried work, land rent or slavery, the author shows how all of them were combined in different ways from one estate to another, and moreover in a way that evolved alongside needs and projects.

Several factors, more or less specific to Egypt, may lead to employ salaried workers: available manpower whose mobility was facilitated by the spatial organisation of Egypt along the Nile ; integration into the Roman Empire which enabled some productions to develop beyond local basic needs for requisition and exportation (especially textile pieces) and the ease of raising capital from land property. These combined conditions allow for the emergence of a labor market, as outlined by the author. This book actively contributes to discussion about the relevance of the notion of labor market for ancient

history, a topic already discussed by Peter Temin, Jairus Banaji or Jean Andreau¹, by depicting labor markets with different geographical scopes according to the activity in question.

The questions addressed by the book never become too abstract or theoretical. The author takes advantage of her deep knowledge of the papyrological documentation in order to understand by which mechanisms supply and demand of labor came together and on the basis of which available information the actors adjusted their expectations. Some private letters allow us to grasp what the workers considered to be a good pay according to their qualifications and how they investigated job opportunities from one employment market to another. The renewed attention given to dates of hire leads the author to emphasize some key moments employers and prospective employees took advantage of to meet up and conclude agreements, especially major annual religious holidays which attracted a significant part of the population to well-identified public spaces.

The best proof of the integrated functioning of Egyptian labor market are, in the author's opinion, the salary fluctuations recorded when manpower varies sharply. Several epidemic events, starting with the so-called Antonine Plague (that is the smallpox under Marcus Aurelius), drove wages upwards. It is precisely because great estates were unable to counter wage inflation that they made the choice to internalise the working force. Moreover, a trend of increased homogenisation of the salaries between cities and the neighbouring countryside can be noted when the activity implies to move from one location to the other, the best example being the building industry.

By studying everything which is likely to vary the wages, the author reaches her most noteworthy and convincing conclusion. Over those six or seven centuries, in spite of currency variations and the range of modes of remuneration, a relatively stable salary scale appears if the full amount of the remuneration composed of both money and in-kind (food, clothing, potentially lodging) is taken into account. By means of the numerous price indications kept in papyri, the author manages to reduce disparate and

¹ See Christel Freu, 'Écrire l'histoire du travail aujourd'hui. Le cas de l'Empire romain (note critique)', *Annales HSS* 73/1 (2018) : 178-183.

heterogeneous remunerations to simple monetary amounts. The resulting scale can be divided in three levels:

- The secondary wages earned by children, by most women (for example child nurses who left more employment contracts than any other salaried women) and also by farm hands and house servants who were fed, housed and even dressed by their employer. They form a halo of very poor remunerations barely sufficient for one person to live on.
- The wages of adult men working in un- or low-skilled occupations in agriculture, quarries, workshops, or transportation companies. Although much higher than the wages of the first level, they are insufficient to support a household of 4 or 5 people.
- High wages, especially those of skilled craftsmen and public officials. This last category is broader than the two others but is unified by the fact that money almost totally supplants the in-kind part of the wage.

The identification of these wage levels is an essential tool to arrange the abundant and manifold documentation the author strives to present in its complexity, incompleteness, and, sometimes, opacity, since some classes of employees might disappear from the accounts on papyri after certain (especially monetary) changes. The careful study of the texts is never neglected in favour of historical synthesis so that this work provides a shining example of cross-fertilisation between history and papyrology.