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PELOUSION, AN ARSINOITE VILLAGE IN DISTRESS

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The present note on BGU I 84 does not pretend to be more than a small contribution to the study of villages in the Arsinoite nome. Recent years have seen a blossoming of studies on particular villages in this nome.¹ Attempts at a synthesis have only just arrived on the scene.² It has become increasingly clear that in the course of the Roman period there was a dramatic decline in some of these villages. Sharp decreases in population and cultivation seem to be paramount in the villages for which we have an abundant documentation. Of course, we owe the survival of these papyri to the decline itself. As far as we know, only villages at the outskirts of the Arsinoite nome are concerned. Soknopaiou Nesos was one of the early casualties. After the early years of the third century A.D. no more is heard from it. In the early years of the fourth century other villages were dying out.

Although we do not know exactly where the Arsinoite village of Pelousion was situated, it probably also belonged to the marginal villages to which we have just referred because it was not far from Theadelphia. This appears from the verso of BGU I 84 where Pelousion occurs in combination with some other villages in the *meris* of Themistos. The text dates from A.D. 242/243 and therefore comes from the crucial period between the second century A.D., when we still hear much of these villages, and the fourth century when they appear to give way to the desert. In fact BGU I 84 is the last item in our documentation for Pelousion.³ There is only one cursory treatment of this text and unfortunately it is erratic.⁴ A new discussion may therefore not be unwelcome.

BGU I 84 is a report, for various villages in the Arsinoite nome, of amounts of wheat, barley, and lentils, comparable to P. Ryl. II 209. The amounts are imposed as rent on state owned land as appears from the heading in col. I (ll. 4-6):

[ἤχθ(ησαν)] ε[ι]ς ἀπαίτησιν σιτικῶν
 φόρων διοικήσεως καὶ οὐσιακῶν
 διὰ δη(μοσίων) γεωργῶν

In ll. 10-17 the text lists the amounts of rent for the village of Pelousion. The amounts due for more than (ll. 11-13) .]φιζ arouras of land are almost 29,300 artabas of wheat, more than 302 artabas of barley, and 1,261 artabas of lentils. These are the fixed amounts expected in normal years. The text however goes on to mention the amount of land left untouched by the present inundation. The amount of this type of land, ἄβροχος γῆ, is almost 4,438 arouras. The rents for this amount of land are somewhat more than 24,565 artabas of wheat, 296 artabas of barley, and an unknown amount of lentils. These should no doubt be subtracted from the fixed amounts

¹ Cf. the bibliographical references in I.F. Fikhman, *Vvedenie v dokumentalnuju papirologiju* (Moskva, 1987), pp. 145-148 and 510; S. Daris, 'I villaggi dell'Egitto nei papiri greci', in: *Egitto e società antica* (Milano, 1985), pp. 211-231.

² Cf. especially R.S. Bagnall, 'Agricultural productivity and taxation in later Roman Egypt', in: *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 115 (1985), pp. 289-308.

³ According to A. Calderini/S. Daris, *Dizionario* 4, s.v. 2 there is only one other exactly dated third century text, SPP XX 74 from A.D. 214. Pelousion in P. Sakaon 75, 1 and 11 is the city in the Delta, not the Arsinoite village as the editor has it.

⁴ M.I. Rostowzew, 'Frumentum', in: *RE* 7 (1912), col. 135, repeated by M. Schnebel, *Die Landwirtschaft* (München, 1925), p. 97, criticised by D.J. Crawford, *Kerkeosiris* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 115-116, with note 2. One can agree with Rostovtzeff and Schnebel that the text gives some sort of idea of the importance of wheat in relation to other crops on state owned land, but the point is that the amounts given only existed on paper.

normally due to arrive at the amounts actually due this year. From l. 17 onwards the text indeed mentions (in a lacuna) the amount of ὀμολογος γῆ, land ‘accepted’ by the tenants and therefore probably inundated. Amounts of wheat, barley, and lentils are only due for this type of land. Unfortunately the rest of the text is severely damaged.⁵

Two things are striking. First, the loss in wheat (24,565 out of 29,300 artabas) is more than 80%, that in barley (296 out of 302 artabas) even 98%. Although the figure for lentils is unknown, we may assume that the loss of 4,438 arouras amounted to a loss of about 80% of the productive land because wheat accounts for almost 95% of all rents anyhow. Second, the amount of rent is about 5.5 artabas per aroura on average and this confirms our impression from documents from Karanis and its territory at the other end of the Arsinoite nome.

We can now read the original amount of land in l. 11 as ε’]φιζ etc. or almost 5,518 arouras because a higher amount is excluded in view of the rate of 5.5 artabas, and a lower amount is impossible to reconcile with the amounts of dues in wheat still standing.⁶ We notice therefore that in A.D. 242/243 the loss of productive land, more than 12 square kilometres,⁷ was 80%. This is about the same order of magnitude as in Karanis and its territory in the early fourth century.⁸

The explanation for all this is not so easy. A.D. 242/243 just might be a bad year. But put in the larger perspective of the changes in the marginal territories of the Arsinoite nome, BGU I 84 does seem to testify to the general decline already at an early date. Only one thing should give us pause: in the early fourth century the privately owned land in the other dying villages of the Arsinoite nome does not seem to be affected in the same manner as the state owned land, although the decline there is also unmistakable. Perhaps we may put it thus: a combination of physical deterioration and demographical decline caused, not so much the government,⁹ but the peasants to abandon marginal land in the course of the third century. Because in an agricultural sense virtually all of the land in the villages at the outskirts of the Arsinoite nome was marginal, the peasants had the first choice in defining what was ‘marginal’ to them, not the government. It therefore was the state owned land, where dues were generally high, that was the first to be abandoned.

Finally we might be tempted to reconstruct the loss of productive land sown with lentils in Pelousion. At about 5.5 artabas per aroura the 1,080 inundated arouras would still have to yield about 5,940 artabas for the government. The text implies that wheat still takes 4,735 artabas and barley only 6 artabas. Lentils therefore would have to account for about 1,200 artabas. The loss (61 out of 1,261 artabas) would be no more than 5%. This seems to confirm the suspicion¹⁰ that whatever land was left was not used for cereals but for crops that were more profitable to the peasants. But it is very likely that the tax rates were not uniform throughout the entire area and this may perhaps also account for the differences.

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⁵ In col. II 8 and 12 perhaps read φορ(έτρων) as in P. Ryl. II 209, 5 and 24.

⁶ Taking only wheat into account, about 4,735 artabas (the difference between 29,300 and 24,565 artabas) on less than 80 arouras (the difference between δ’]φιζ+ and 4,438 arouras) is already an impossible amount. If the whole area was ζ’]φιζ+ arouras the expected amount on the 2,080 arouras left would be 11,440 artabas. In that case lentils would have to account for 6,700 artabas.

⁷ D. Bonneau, *Le fisc et le Nil* (Paris, 1971), p. 256 says ‘plus de 11 ha’.

⁸ Bagnall, p. 293.

⁹ As suggested by Bonneau, referred to by Bagnall, pp. 296-297.

¹⁰ Bagnall, p. 298.