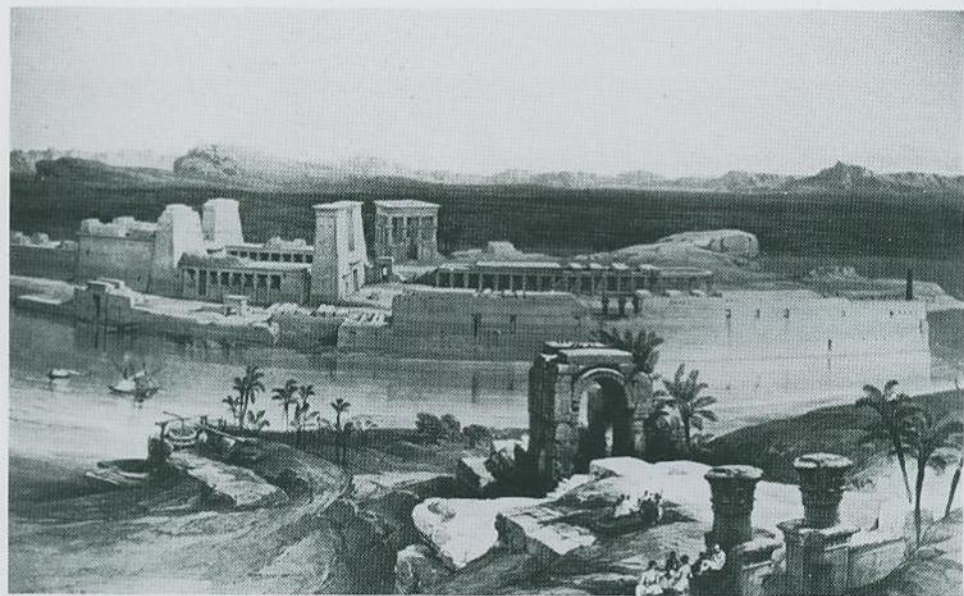


The catalyst which welded the natural resources of Egypt and its population into an effective foundation of political power was the governmental system which began its development under the early Ptolemies. The Ptolemaic government is usually characterised as one of the most efficiently run and most rigidly hierarchical bureaucracies ever devised; an administrative machine whose *raison d'être* was the enrichment of the monarchy through a highly organised and tightly controlled economy. This seems at first sight to be supported by what we know of the main features of the system. The administration was staffed by a host of officials and bureaucrats, recording and regulating the activities and obligations of the king's subjects, down to the last detail of the requisitioned labour and surveillance of irrigation works, cultivation and transport which was drafted in order to ensure maximum efficiency of production and profit. The ubiquitous tax-collector enforced harsh demands in the form of a bewildering variety of imposts. The land itself was in royal ownership, for the most part granted in modest parcels to tenants whose security of tenure was ultimately subject to the overriding power of the king. The other productive industries, most notably papyrus and oil, were minutely monitored in every aspect by government officials, as is shown by an extraordinarily detailed set of Revenue Laws promulgated under Ptolemy II Philadelphus.¹ These industries are usually described as royal monopolies but the term is something of a



35 **The Island of Philae.** David Roberts' sketch shows the spectacular complex of buildings as it stood in the mid-nineteenth century on the island which lay close to Egypt's southern border. The building of the Aswan High Dam necessitated the removal of the ancient structures, stone by stone, and their reconstruction on the neighbouring island of Agilqiyyah.

misnomer; certainly the crown owned some such enterprises but many were privately owned and operated under strict supervision and conditions. The Ptolemies also operated a closed and carefully controlled monetary system, an example which the Romans followed until the end of the third century AD. The higher degree of royal organisation and secular control was complemented by a decline in the wealth and power of the native Egyptian temples.

The general picture is strikingly illustrated by a remarkable text in demotic from the year 258 BC referring to orders for a complete census of the kingdom, the ultimate responsibility for which lay with the chief finance minister.² Detailed returns were submitted by the scribes and district officials of the nomes from Elephantine in the south to the Mediterranean coast; the sources of water, the position, quality, irrigation potential of the land, its state of cultivation, specification of the crops grown, the extent of priestly and royal holdings – all were to be recorded in detail. The operation was surely envisaged as a real one, even if the pompous tone of the text carries a hint of propaganda on the part of Philadelphus as ‘the king who triumphed over the pro-Persian king at the time of the Syrian journey’.

But this outline hardly does justice to the complexity of the Ptolemaic system in Egypt and it runs the risk of identifying the end – accumulation of wealth in the royal coffers – as the only feature of importance in the eyes of the rulers, ignoring or understating the significance of the methods and institutions by which the society was managed, the social and cultural patterns which they supported. It also tends to underplay the economic complexity and sophistication of a society for which a simple model of subsistence agriculture will hardly suffice. The picture of oppression of a poor and ignorant peasantry which grew almost everything it consumed and consumed (after rents and taxes were paid) almost everything it grew might suit some modern historical tastes but it does violence to the evidence for the diversity of economic activity in the towns and villages, for the high degree of monetisation, for commerce and transportation, for manufacture of raw products into goods without which the heavily dominant agricultural economic base could not have been converted into usable wealth. We might characterise this aspect of the Ptolemaic achievement as the creation of the means to use that economic base to great social and political effect and it is arguable that in the Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine periods, as a consequence, the Egyptian society and economy achieved a higher level of sophistication and complexity than we are accustomed to find in the ancient Mediterranean world.³

36 Order of Peukestas.

When Alexander left Egypt in 331 BC the command was divided between Balakros, son of Amyntas and Peukestas, son of Makartatos. This, the earliest known Greek documentary papyrus, contains a notice posted at Memphis which reads: ‘Order of Peukestas. No-one is to pass. The chamber is that of a priest.’



An analysis of the Ptolemaic machinery of government brings out the essential character of the administration very clearly. To begin with, we have the monarch who stood at the head of government as much more than a mere figurehead; he was the chief executive, his authority acted as a control on the conduct of his officials and, in concept at least, he was accessible to his subjects in a very direct relationship. The tone of numerous royal decrees of the Ptolemaic period gives the firm impression of the monarch making decisions and policies which his officials would implement, even on apparently trivial matters.⁴ One petition, for instance, cites a letter of Ptolemy II Philadelphus to one of his chief ministers regulating the conduct of lawyers in accepting cases which involve issues affecting the royal revenues.⁵ Control of malpractice by officials is a frequent source of concern, as a letter of the reign of Ptolemy VIII vividly demonstrates:

'The king and the queen attach great importance to justice being done to all the subjects in their kingdom. Now many people are . . . lodging complaints against you, your subordinates and especially the tax-farmers for abuses of power and fraudulent exactions and some even allege blackmail. We wish you not to lose sight of the fact that all this is incompatible with our rule of conduct and no less with your safety'.⁶

This splendid example of the power of suggestion resulted from complaints made at court, but it might equally come from the monarch's own journeys of inspection round the kingdom or from reports submitted by other officials hoping to curry favour and gain promotion.

It is more difficult to know what to make of the matter-of-fact way in which even a very humble person might petition the king:

'To King Ptolemy greeting from Ctesicles. I am being wronged by Dionysius and my daughter Nike. For though I had nurtured her, being my own daughter, and educated her and brought her up to womanhood, when I was stricken with bodily infirmity and my eyesight became enfeebled she would not furnish me with the necessaries of life. And when I wished to obtain justice from her in Alexandria . . . she gave me a written oath by the king that she would pay me twenty drachmae every month by means of her own bodily labour . . . Now, however, corrupted by that bugger (*sic*) Dionysius, she is not keeping any of her engagements to me, in contempt of my old age and my present infirmity.'⁷

Undoubtedly such a petition would not normally be dealt with directly by the king and the petitioner asks that a local official be instructed to handle the matter. But we know that the more influential could, with persistence, reach the king directly, if they needed, and it is of some importance that the letter of the aggrieved father reflects that theoretical possibility.

Arrayed beneath the monarch was a handful of powerful officials whose competence extended over the whole land – a chief finance minister, a chief accountant and a chancery of ministers in charge of records, letters and decrees. Beneath them again, the broadening base of a pyramid of subordinate officials with competence in geographically limited areas, right down to the chief administrator of each individual village (*komarch*). About half-way between the chief ministers and the village officials stood those such as the nome-steward (*oikonomos*) whose competence ex-

tended over one of the more than thirty nome divisions of Egypt. The nomes, of varying size and population, had been the established geographical divisions from time immemorial, with their own local and religious traditions; though there were changes in the number and areas of the nomes they retained their importance as administrative units until the early Byzantine period and their local characteristics much longer.

The Ptolemaic bureaucracy certainly involved careful definition of duties and functions, but we must beware of identifying a rigid civil service mentality, involving clear demarcation of departments; in practice specific functions might well be performed according to local need and the availability of an official competent to



37 **Coin from Hermopolis.** A standing figure of the god Thoth (identified by Greeks with Hermes), bearded and wearing an *atef*-crown, *chiton* and *himation*, carrying a small squatting cynocephalus on right hand. These so-called nome coins of the Roman period reflect particular local associations and traditions.

take the appropriate action. It is particularly important to appreciate that there were no rigid lines of separation between military and civil, secular and religious, administrative and legal matters. The same person might perform duties in any or all of these areas and the law in particular pervades every aspect of society, regulates every activity to an extent which the use of the terms 'legal' and 'judicial' tends to hide. This is why, in some cases, we find it difficult to specify the precise area of competence of a particular official or to explain why he is doing something apparently outside what we take to be his proper sphere.

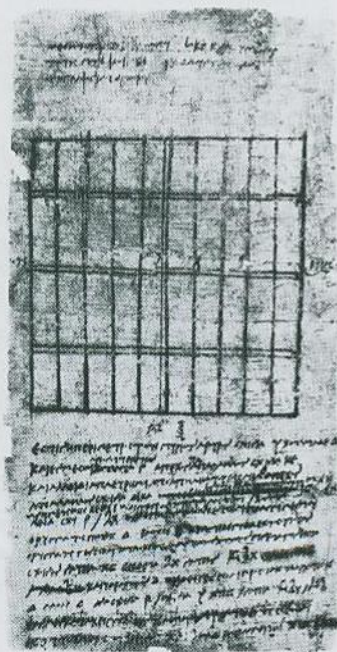
In fact, the issuance of general guidelines and instructions to officials was a Pharaonic tradition, which is still found in the Ptolemaic period. The following general exhortation is part of a long text from the late third century BC, which probably originated in the office of the chief finance minister and contains detailed instructions on the duties of an *oikonomos*:

'During your tour of inspection try, as you go about, to encourage everybody and make them feel happier; not only should you do this by words but also, should any of them have a complaint against the village-scribes or the village-chiefs about anything to do with agriculture, you should investigate the matter and as far as possible put an end to such incidents.'⁸

The text goes on to much more specific detail about duties in connection with the sowing schedule for crops, records of the numbers of livestock, checking the production of linen and auditing the revenue accounts and so on. It is striking that the whole tone of the document is one of positive exhortation rather than negative restriction.

Such official posts were evidently well worth having and people were prepared to act unscrupulously in order to get them or help others to get them. A report of the year 117 BC points the finger at people who 'have been appointed without the knowledge of the chief finance minister, and some have wormed their way into positions of steward of the nome, district-chief, collector of wheat, village-chief and other offices inconsistent with their own work and others have transferred their duties to their sons who are quite young men and sometimes to other persons altogether'.⁹ Legal penalties against such behaviour could be very severe but the advantages to be derived from the posts, especially at the highest levels, meant that there were always some people willing to take the risk. An extreme example of a successful official with personal interests not easily distinguishable from his public duties is Apollonius, the chief finance minister under Ptolemy II Philadelphus, an enormously influential courtier who was personally enriched by the royal gift of a very large estate at Philadelphia in the Fayum. This was the centre of Apollonius' sizeable business enterprises which involved import and export on a considerable scale, many details of which are known from the surviving archive of the papers of his estate manager, Zenon.¹⁰

Such activities ought properly to be classed as private but the distinction between public and private is not quite so clear cut as in some modern political systems; for instance, one of the minor apparent oddities in the Ptolemaic machinery is the existence of the king's 'Special Account', which suggests that we should not think of the whole kingdom as the private possession of the monarch in a straightforward sense, but rather of the monarch as in some aspects an institution, in others an individual. As far as administrators and officials were concerned, the distinction was not easy to maintain in a system where the collection of taxes and the operation



38 Plan of irrigation works.

The papyrus illustrates the irrigation system on the estate of Apollonius at Philadelphia and contains an estimate for the cost of digging out canals and moving earth. The area is divided into 40 plots of 250 arourae each by a system of 4 main irrigation channels, represented by double lines, and transverse dykes. The Greek text was written with a rush pen by an Egyptian and the compass directions are given in both Greek and demotic.

of banks was contracted out to private businessmen and there was no regular salary structure for the administrators and officials themselves. This striking fact in itself does much to account for corruption and malpractice. The idea that magistrates and officials should be the kind of people who could afford to fill offices without pay was a distinctively Greek one – democratic Athens was a rare exception – and reflects the values and traditions of aristocratic society.

It also makes a contrast with Egypt in the late Pharaonic period, when the tendency went against compartmentalisation of function, favoured hereditary transmission of office and placed considerable power in the hands of the army of scribes who could write demotic Egyptian (first attested in use in 643/2 BC). In fact, in the Ptolemaic period demotic was still much used and the scribes still appear, especially in connection with native Egyptian temples. But the government administration was conducted in Greek, at first the officials at the upper levels were all appointed from the Greek-speaking elite. If Egyptians wanted an entrée into the bureaucracy at the lower levels they had to hellenise and learn Greek. Many did so but the absorption of the Egyptian element into this powerful Greek overlay was a slow, uneven and ambiguous process. Certainly in the Ptolemaic period there are striking signs of consciousness of the distinction. ‘They have treated me with contempt because I am a barbarian, . . . I do not know how to behave like a Greek’; this from a camel-contractor demanding unpaid salary.¹¹ ‘Some of them had stones in their hands and others sticks and they tried to force their way in, in order to seize the opportunity to plunder the temple and to put me to death because I am a Greek’; this from a religious detainee in the Serapeum at Memphis, demanding legal redress against attacks made on him by Egyptian temple-cleaners.¹²

But cultural and linguistic differences, even though they may give rise to hostility and favour one group against another, do not necessarily imply an institutionalised ‘apartheid’. Such implications have sometimes been identified in the legal system, with a higher-level judiciary (*chrēmatistai*) for the Greeks and a lower counterpart (*laokritai*) for the native Egyptians; but these were not exclusive legal systems operating different bodies of law for different sectors of the population. They were interlocking institutions which existed to meet the different needs of, on the one hand, a native Egyptian populace whose internal social and economic relationships (marriage contracts, divisions of property and the like) were largely conducted in the demotic Egyptian language, and on the other a Greek elite, politically and economically dominant, which operated roughly in the framework of traditional Greek law, gradually adapting to its new environment.

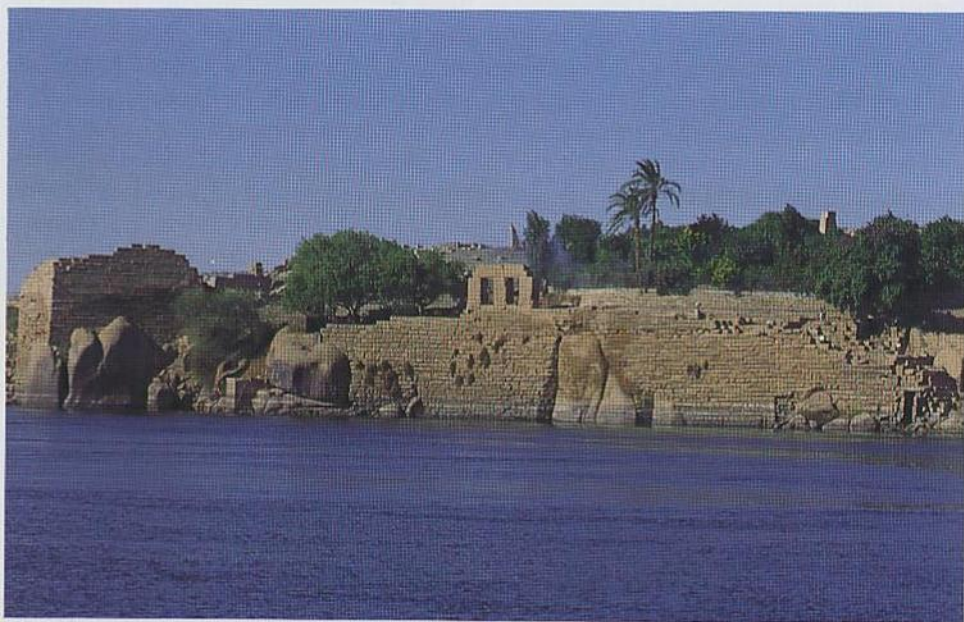
This is precisely the significance of a regulation which we find in the Amnesty Decree of Ptolemy VIII and the two Cleopatras issued in 118 BC:

‘And they have decreed concerning suits brought by Egyptians against Greeks, viz. by Greeks against Egyptians or by Egyptians against Greeks, with regard to all categories of people except those cultivating royal land, the workers in government monopolies and the others who are involved with the revenues, that the Egyptians who have made contracts in Greek with Greeks shall give and receive satisfaction before the *chrēmatistai*, while the Greeks who have concluded contracts in Egyptian (i.e. with Egyptians) shall give satisfaction before the *laokritai* in accordance with the laws of the country (i.e. Egyptian laws). The suits

of Egyptians against Egyptians shall not be taken by the *chrēmatistai* to their own courts, but they shall allow them to be decided before the *laokrítai* in accordance with the laws of the country.²¹³

The Greeks were certainly favoured by the governmental and legal system – that is what being the dominant elite means – but there are many areas (including the law) in which the term ‘Graeco-egyptian’ has real meaning. There could scarcely be a more vivid illustration of this than the fact that one of our main sources of knowledge of the traditional Egyptian laws is a demotic papyrus from the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus and that there survives, from the second century AD, about half a millennium later, a fragment of a Greek translation of this text.¹⁴

The gradual erosion of some aspects of the superiority gap can also be seen in the Ptolemaic handling of the army and the land, both vital aspects of the whole organisation of the state. Although the army was a visibly distinct entity when it was assembled as a fighting force, its regular soldiers, as opposed to mercenaries which the Ptolemies also used, were socially integrated when they were not on active service. As favoured holders of allotments of land (cleruchs) in many communities they formed an elite group among the small to moderate landholders. The rentals were low and although the grants were personal they came gradually almost to have



39 Elephantine Island. The island, in the Nile opposite Aswan, was a crucial site for the defence of the southern frontier. Its ancient name derives either from the shape of the rocks at the right or from its involvement in the ivory trade. The quay dates to the Roman period.

the status of hereditary private property. These soldier-cleruchs were at first drawn exclusively from the Greek-speaking elite and the less-favoured royal tenants (*basilikoi geōrgoi*) were mainly native Egyptians. But at the battle of Raphia in 217 BC large numbers of native Egyptian soldiers were used in the army for the first time since the battle of Gaza in 312 BC and thus became eligible for such grants of land.

It remains to ask how this apparatus of government worked in practice. One way to answer this is by pointing to the great body of royal ordinances and regulations which tell us how it was supposed to work. Or we can look at the petitions and complaints, evidence of official malpractice or government repression, which tell us when things did not work the way they were supposed to. Between the evidence for the theoretical ideal and the possibly untypical malfunction there must lie a great deal of routine which is, for that very reason, unremarkable. Egypt is practically the only place in the classical world from which evidence of this routine kind has survived in significant quantity. Thus for instance, we can follow the operations of the office of Menches, village scribe of Kerkeosiris in the Fayum, in compiling a topographical survey of the area registered around the village in about 115 BC; and we can see that, despite mistakes and falsification, the complicated system of classification and registration did work, on the whole, even if it was less accurate in practice than in theory.¹⁵

But perhaps a more vivid impression is to be gained by looking at the ways in which the everyday lives of individuals were affected by their government. Such a worm's eye view comes from a marvellously informative archive of papers belonging to a man named Dionysius, son of Kephalas, who lived in a village called Akoris in Middle Egypt towards the end of the second century BC.¹⁶ Dionysius is an excellent example of a man of modest status who straddled the Egyptian and the Greek worlds. The archive itself contains documents in demotic and Greek (Dionysius was capable of writing both) and gives information about his family, many of whom bore both Greek and Egyptian names, like Dionysius himself, whose Egyptian name was Plenis (which actually means 'smith', although it is not certain that it also indicates his engagement in a trade). The Greek name Dionysius will have been adopted to bring him into the world of the Greeks, but at the same time he also appears in some documents under a third name, also demotic, which indicates a particular priestly or religious office in connection with a local deity, perhaps connected with the ibis-cult, very popular in the Hermopolite Nome where he lived.

So here we have a man who held a priesthood in a traditional Egyptian religious cult, but who entered the more privileged milieu through military service as his father Kephalas had also done, at around thirty years of age; it is worth noting that the father's status had not automatically taken the son entirely out of the Egyptian milieu. As well as being a soldier, Dionysius appears in the guise of a royal tenant, his main source of livelihood as a civilian before he entered military service. So he was priest, farmer and soldier, perhaps all three simultaneously at some time in his life.

Many of the documents in the archive refer to economic transactions. It is fascinating to see that in some of the demotic documents Dionysius appears as the economically dominant force, selling livestock, letting small parcels of land, tenure of which was presumably connected with his priesthood, whereas his predominant

role in the Greek contracts is as a borrower of commodities at 50 per cent interest; but this may not necessarily reflect a lower standing in the Greek world so much as a respectable credit-worthiness in a bigger pond. The people from whom Dionysius borrowed belonged mainly to the class of soldier-farmers which Dionysius had himself joined.

So we can grasp the nature of the social, economic and occupational institutions within which such a Graeco-egyptian family was able to manoeuvre. What happened when they got into difficulties? Naturally they turned to the government and its officials for help. We have a petition to the king from Dionysius' father Kephalas, complaining of the behaviour of a certain Lysikrates, one of the Greek military elite, which is threatening he says, to reduce him to the status of a slave.¹⁷ Kephalas had bought some wine on credit from Lysikrates, paid the debt in two instalments but had failed to obtain a receipt for the second, with the predictable result that Lysikrates was claiming that it was still owed. Kephalas asks that Apollodorus, one of the 'First Friends', president (*epistatēs*) and scribe of the cavalry landholders (*katoikoi hippeis*), be instructed to investigate the matter and make sure that, if Kephalas' version is accepted, Lysikrates is allowed no claim against Kephalas' property.

Dionysius' problems, thirty years later, were not dissimilar and related to a loan of 150 artabs of wheat (a very large quantity, perhaps intended for resale at a profit) which Dionysius and his mother had contracted. The creditor was harassing them and Dionysius petitioned first the governor of the nome and then the royal scribes, asking to be left in peace and using the argument that he was a royal cultivator, it was the sowing season and if he was not left to get on with it the land would be left idle. The point was effective and the nome governor docketed the petition: 'If he is a royal cultivator see to it that he is left in peace until he has completed the sowing.' Similarly, the royal scribes passed down the instruction to the *epistatēs* of the village not to distrain on his person until the land was sown.¹⁸ The conclusion of this particular episode is not recorded but Dionysius' papers show him taking further loans soon afterwards, perhaps to pay off the first debt; but we do not know where this chain ended.

The case of Dionysius and his family suggests clearly that, however rigorous was the framework of rules which prescribed royal control of all aspects of the economy, there was a large area within which the small man could behave as if he enjoyed a good deal of freedom of manoeuvre, socially and economically. He might improve his social status, better himself professionally and economically, behave as if he really owned and controlled goods and property. The autocratic rules by which his actions were constrained and restricted were perhaps not more oppressive than, for example, tax law in a modern capitalist state. If he got into trouble he could ask the government for help. If that did not work he could defy the law and run away from home, perhaps to become a brigand; there is evidence, even from the prosperous reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, of serious attempts to stamp this out.¹⁹ But freedom of manoeuvre was limited because, in the final analysis we come up against the hard fact that Dionysius and his like were powerless to choose, challenge or change the governmental system which ruled their lives. What they conspicuously lacked was any degree of political freedom.



40 **The Tazza Farnese.** This dish, dating to the first century BC, is a masterpiece of Alexandrian artistry, magnificently carved from sardonyx in the cameo technique. Seated against the tree to the left is the god Nilus holding a cornucopia, below him Isis reclining on the head of a sphinx. The central figure is Horus-Triptolemus, depicted as the 'sower' carrying a knife and a bag of seed. The significance of the scene has been much debated – some have seen it as a comment, after the battle of Actium, on the passing of an era and an expression of hope for a new order.

This system of government is best known from the early Ptolemaic period in Egypt and, although there were changes in detail, it continued to work in much the same way until the coming of the Romans. If Dionysius had lived seventy or eighty years later he would probably not have seen much difference in the general level of prosperity or security experienced by people of his class. There are suggestions that the administrative system was running down in the later Ptolemaic period, that corruption and oppression were more rife than earlier, that when Octavian made his brief tour of Egypt he found the canals and waterways clogged, the dykes collapsing and the irrigation system in a general state of neglect and disrepair, a situation which the Roman soldiers were set to work to remedy.²⁰ It is true that a petition of village priests in 51/0 BC refers to the decline and desertion of their village but it is difficult to know how widespread this kind of thing was.²¹ And there may well be an element of propaganda at work in our Roman sources, designed to set off the decadence of the last of the Ptolemies against the workmanlike efficiency of the Roman administration.

The pattern of government which was established in Egypt under Augustus was to last, in all its essential features, for over three centuries. And even then, the changes which occurred in the Byzantine period were subtle and gradual rather than radical and sudden. Many have seen its basis as the Ptolemaic legacy, which indeed it was in some important respects, but despite the similarity of titles and terminology, the innovations were far more significant and the notion that the Romans merely took over the institutions which they found, with minimal adaptation, cannot be applied to Egypt. If nothing else, the advent of Roman law will have guaranteed the inevitability of far-reaching changes.

Who, then, made the new rules? There might at first sight appear to be little difference between the writ of a Ptolemaic king and that of a Roman emperor. The emperor and his officials imposed their will by issuing decrees and edicts, writing letters, responding to requests and petitions. The effect of all this was cumulative,