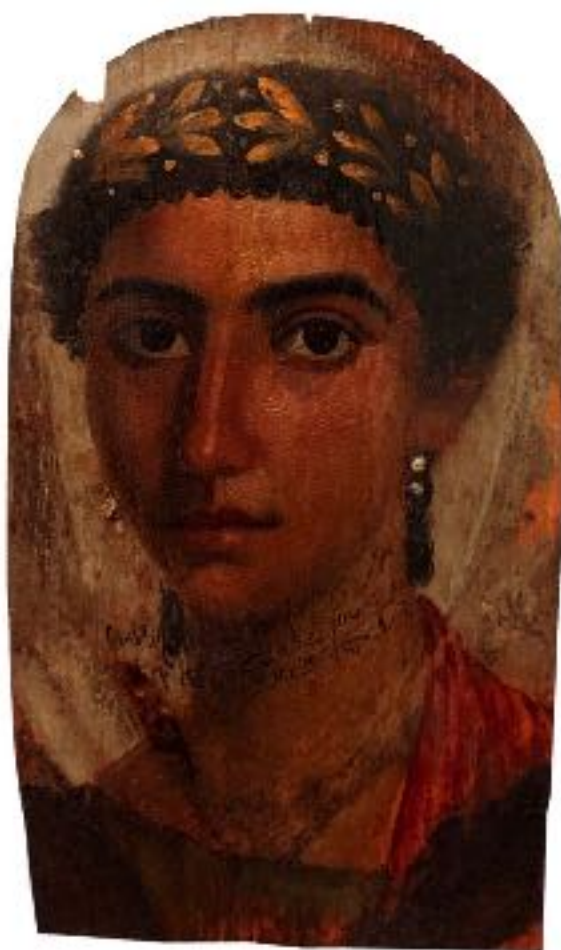


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ANTIQUITY EGYPT
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WILEY Blackwell

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Egypt's Specificity and Impact on Roman History

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Thousands of years before Rome took over control of Egypt, the expanding Sahara Desert drove the early ancestors of the ancient Egyptians to live in the narrow yet fertile Nile Valley. Here, they eventually adopted a more sedentary lifestyle and developed a most remarkable civilization, with various unique and striking features and achievements, including the organization and administration of mass-labor construction projects (not infrequently on a breathtaking scale), the intensive use of writing in various spheres of economy, religion, and government, a complex concept of the right and harmonious order of things, and the depiction of zoomorphic deities and gods with animal heads. Existence in the Nile Valley was governed by the yearly inundations of the river and structured by the static necessities of the recurring and symmetrical agricultural cycle, which prompted Hecataeus, Herodotus, and others to speak of a "gift" of the River Nile (Griffiths 1966, p. 57 on Herodotus 2.5; Arrian, *Anabasis* 5.6.5; Strabo 1.2.29, 15.1.16). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that it was the Egyptian calendar of 365 days that served as the basis for the new Roman calendar that Julius Caesar introduced in Rome in 45 BC, on the advice of the Alexandrian astronomer Sosigenes, and to which Augustus added final adjustments (Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 18.57.211; see Parker 1971; Hagedorn 1994; Hagedorn and Worp 1994; Jones 2000; Bennett 2003, 2004). Within Egypt, however, the traditional calendar remained in use.

At any rate, many of Roman Egypt's most striking institutional, architectural, cultural, and religious phenomena were a product of the country's long history and continued to characterize it for centuries after the last Hellenistic ruler, Cleopatra VII, surrendered her kingdom to Imperator Caesar in 30 BC. Other peculiarities, however, mainly concerning parts of the new province's government and its relation to the rest of the empire, were introduced by the Romans after their takeover of the Nile Valley. A question of particular

importance therefore, and one that has led to a long and intensive scholarly debate, concerns the extent to which continuity or change characterized the transition of the Nile Valley from Ptolemaic to Roman rule, and the degree to which Roman Egypt differed from all other Roman provinces (for recent well-balanced discussions, see e.g. Haensch (2008a, 2008b); Jördens 2009, pp. 24–58).

On August 1, 30 BC, Emperor Caesar triumphantly entered Alexandria. His victory over the Queen of Egypt and her Roman ally was soon celebrated throughout the empire as the beginning of a new era of peace; thus, various Roman calendars celebrated August 1 as the day on which “Imperator Caesar freed the State from the gravest danger,” (*Imp(erator) Caesar, Divi f(ilius), rem public(am) tristissimo periculo liberavit*, e.g. Inscr. It. XIII 2.2 and 25; cf. Ehrenberg et al. 1976, no. 49). At any rate, the date marked the beginning of the victor’s sole rule over the Roman Empire and the start of a new regime known as the “Principate.” To be sure, the agrarian lifestyle of the vast majority of Egypt’s population was hardly touched by the transition from royal Ptolemaic to imperial Roman rule, and continued to exert great influence on the social, cultural, and administrative organization of the province (cf. Ritner 1998, pp. 2–4; Rowlandson 2010, pp. 237–238; Huebner 2017). A particularly striking insight into how contemporary Egyptians experienced this transition comes from a famous sworn declaration on papyrus of four lamplighters to the overseers of the temples of the Oxyrhynchite and Koptite nomes that they will supply oil for the temple lamps for the current first year of Caesar “in accordance with what was supplied up to the 22nd which was also the 7th year” (i.e. of Cleopatra) (P.Oxy. XII 1453 = Sel.Pap. II 327). In a very sober and businesslike tone, the text thus illustrates how life at this level of society went on in 30/29 BC without much upheaval after one monarch, called “Caesar, god and son of a god,” simply replaced another, Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemies (Millar 2002, p. 294).

Historians have long ranked the Roman takeover of Ptolemaic Egypt both as a major and far-reaching event in contemporary geopolitical power relations and as a pivotal moment in Egyptian and Roman history and culture. At the same time, however, as a Roman province, they also considered the former Ptolemaic kingdom to have fundamentally differed from all other Roman provinces. Theodor Mommsen even declared that it was never a Roman province in the true sense of the word before the end of the third century AD. In his view, Emperor Caesar confiscated the Ptolemaic kingdom and transferred it into a kind of personal possession or private estate (Mommsen 1887, pp. 749, 859, 952–956). (Later however, Mommsen changed his mind and counted the country among the imperial provinces; Mommsen 1886, pp. 233–234, n. 3. The enormous influence of his *Staatsrecht* is no doubt the main reason for the prevalence of his earlier opinion.) With the Roman ruler thought to have taken on the role of an Egyptian pharaoh, the many scholars who adopted Mommsen’s view even called Egypt’s equestrian governor a “viceroy” (apparently alluding to the governor-general of British India) and thought of Egypt as a sort of crown domain (for these developments, see Geraci 1989; Jördens 2009, pp. 24–58).

Support for thinking of Egypt’s position as unique within the fabrics of the Roman Empire and as more closely tied to the emperors than any other part of the *imperium Romanum* seems to be ample and readily available in our literary, epigraphic, and archeological sources: traditional depictions of Roman emperors as pharaoh on the walls of

Egyptian temples, the continued existence of many of the Ptolemaic administrative institutions in Roman times, the ban on Roman senators and leading equestrians to enter the country without express permission of the emperor, the well-attested introduction after the takeover of a new era called “the rule of Caesar, son of a god,” the custom of dating by the emperor’s regnal years (rather than by the names of the eponymous Roman consuls), the closed monetary system within the province, and the near complete absence of municipal structures throughout the country all seem to betray the true sense of such sketchy remarks by Strabo, Flaccus, and Tacitus that Augustus had set the Nile Valley aside in order to keep it under direct imperial control, that it was in the “possession” of the emperors, and that the Roman governors ruled Egypt like kings (Strabo 17.1.12; Philo, *In Flaccum* 19.158; Tacitus, *Annales* 2.59.3, *Historiae* 1.11.1; cf. Geraci 1989, pp. 58–88; Jördens 2009, pp. 24–61). No comparable statements are known from other imperial provinces. According to this view, continuity was predominant, and contributed significantly to a unique status of Egypt within the Roman Empire (Law 1978, p. 194: “Roman rule did not involve any considerable degree of ‘Romanization’ for Egypt”).

Taking this position, of course, meant that, methodologically, it was practically impossible to make use of Egypt’s rich documentary evidence for attempts to reconstruct practice in other parts of the empire. Some scholars still adhere to this opinion, or have done until very recently (“private domain”: Davies 2004, p. 60; Rocca 2008, p. 211; de Blois and van der Spek 2008, p. 210; “personal possession”: Kleiner 2005, p. 208; Bringmann 2007, p. 103; Cooley 2009, p. 229; cf. also Clauss 2003, p. 238: “kaiserliches Krongut” and “Privatanwesen des Kaisers”: Kienast 2009, p. 378; “Kronland des Prinzeps”: Dunstan 2011, p. 240). However, an altogether different view – which also had its early advocates (e.g. Mitteis 1908, pp. 350–352; Wilcken 1912, pp. 30–31; Stein 1915, p. 98; Gelzer 1963, pp. 368–370) – has now won the upper hand, for there is a broad and growing consensus among scholars that Imperator Caesar, in 30 BC, reduced Egypt, despite its many peculiarities, to a regular province, even “a Roman *provincia* like any other” (Kruse 2013b, p. 95; Jördens 2012a: “there can be no notion that the former Ptolemaic kingdom had any special standing within the Roman Empire as compared to other provinces”). That, of course, amounts in principle to what Augustus claimed he had done: “I added Egypt to the power of the Roman People” (RGDA 27: *Aegyptum imperio populi Romani adieci*; cf. CIL VI 702 = ILS 91b: *Aegypto in potestatem populi Romani redacta*, from the base of the obelisk used for Augustus’ sundial in Rome). Strabo (17.1.12) concurs, stating that Egypt was turned into a “province” (*eparcheia*), and Velleius (2.39.2) even specifies that the Egyptian revenues went to the “Roman People’s treasury” (*aerarium populi Romani*), as we would expect to be the case with ordinary Roman provinces. The weight of this testimony is increased by the fact that both of these authors were writing close to the events, and by the existence in Roman Egypt of well-known institutions of Roman provincial administration (such as the *conventus*) and of garrisons of the Roman army.

In particular, a very influential paper by the famous American papyrologist Naphtali Lewis emphasizing the “romanity of Roman Egypt” (as he put it in another article) has dramatically shifted scholarly consensus on this question (Lewis 1970; see also Lewis 1984). It is now generally held that the transition from Ptolemaic to Roman rule entailed a fundamental rupture in the country’s history, and that Egypt, in many important aspects, turned “Roman” in a process that began in 30 BC and reached its culmination around the

turn of the third to the fourth century, during the reign of Diocletian (e.g. Geraci 1983; Bowman and Rathbone 1992; Rathbone 1993; Sharp 1999a; Capponi 2005, p. 60; Ando 2006, p. 178; Bowman 2007b; Capponi 2010a, p. 183; Rowlandson 2010, p. 238; Kruse 2013b, p. 95). Interestingly, the great many documents on papyrus that survive from Egypt and nearly nowhere else in the Roman Empire have been identified as a main cause for the supposed earlier misinterpretations of the status of Roman Egypt. For, this unique and immensely rich body of evidence is said to have previously been wrongly taken to reflect an administrative and legal practice peculiar to Egypt (Capponi 2010a, p. 183; Ando 2006, p. 178; Kruse 2013b, p. 95). The current revised position is based first on studies analyzing the documentary papyri from Egypt and second on finds of ancient Greek and Latin documents from outside Egypt, many of them from recent decades, as well as on the few surviving copies of such documents in inscriptions of stone and bronze (e.g. Haensch 1992, 1997, 2008a; Cotton et al. 1995; Feissel and Gascoü 1995). The results of such studies reveal remarkable common traits between legal and administrative practices in Egypt and other provinces, and therefore are generally taken as proof for the “normality” of Egypt as a Roman province.

The degree to which the Roman takeover of the Nile Valley entailed continuity or change is evidently an important factor when attempting to define the specificity of Egypt as a Roman province. On the whole, it appears that “the changes introduced by the Romans were at least as important as the continuities” (Bowman 1996, p. 682). Both contributed significantly to the specificity of the Roman province of Egypt. Thus, phenomena of continuity can even be observed in the country’s new provincial government, although this entire sphere, from a Roman perspective, was evidently expected to fully and reliably serve Roman interests. For instance, the pre-Ptolemaic basic administrative division of the Nile Valley into nomes was left intact by the Roman conquerors (cf. Haring 2010). The two leading officials at this administrative level in the Ptolemaic period, the *strategos* and the royal scribe, continued to exist and to perform most of their former administrative tasks in the nome’s capitals (*metropoleis*) under Roman rule. Moreover, the Romans continued to recruit these officials from the indigenous Greek-speaking elite, although they now (apparently as a rule) had to serve outside their home nomes for their terms of office, and the *strategos* lost his military authority (Derda 2006, pp. 149–150). The Romans also took over from the Ptolemaic administration many other offices in Alexandria and the Nile Valley, such as the toparch, the *bibliophylakes*, the *eklogistai*, the *eisagogeis*, and the *epistatai*, and continued to recruit the relevant officials from the local elites of Greco-Egyptian background (Derda 2008; Haensch 2008b, pp. 86–90; see also Chapters 4 and 8). Also, there are significant continuities between the local capitation taxes of the Late Ptolemaic Period and the Roman poll tax (Monson 2014b, pp. 127–160; see also Chapter 10). Whereas Rome’s taking over and making use of traditional institutions in administrative respects was anything but unknown, the continued existence of many Ptolemaic offices in the administrative system of Roman Egypt evidently contributed to the specific character of the Nile Valley province (e.g. for the continued existence of Hellenistic *strategiai* in the Roman provinces of Thrace and Cappadocia, see Speidel 2009, p. 588). Moreover, it seems that this particular aspect of Roman Egypt’s provincial government entailed further consequences, as certain types of document kept their traditional forms and Greek language to an extent that is unknown

from other Roman provinces (Haensch 2008a). In other cases, it is more difficult to determine whether the rich (if chronologically and geographically unevenly distributed) papyrological evidence reveals phenomena typical of Roman Egypt or whether it simply allows a more detailed view of realities that also existed in other provinces of the Roman Empire but which cannot be observed there because of the lack of surviving papyri (Haensch 1997, 2008b).

The replacement of the Ptolemaic royal government by Roman magistrates at the top echelons of the new province's administration also contributed to the extraordinary character of *provincia Aegyptus*. For, Emperor Caesar decided to permanently install an equestrian prefect at the head of the government instead of a senator, as was found in every other province (Tacitus, *Historiae* 1.11.1; cf. also Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.5.7; Cassius Dio 51.17.1–3). In order to convert this arrangement into a permanent institution, Augustus even had the people of Rome approve a law (*lex*) that gave the equestrian *praefectus Aegypti* the same powers as a senatorial *proconsul* (*imperium ... ad similitudinem proconsulis*) so that he could legally command the legions and fulfill his function as a fully fledged provincial governor (Tacitus, *Annales* 12.60.1; Cassius Dio 53.13.2; Digesta 1.17.1 (Ulpian, *Ad edictum* 15): *praefectus Aegypti non prius deponit praefecturam et imperium, quod ad similitudinem proconsulis lege sub Augusto ei datum est*). In other words, the office of the late republican governor served as a model for the head of Egypt's new Roman administration, based on the legal authority conveyed by the people's assembly and the political will of the new sole ruler (Eck 2016, pp. 101–102).

The appointment by the Roman ruler of a *iuridicus* (*dikaiodotes*) as the second most important position in the new government's organization and as a high-ranking "assistant" to the governor in matters of jurisdiction, on the other hand, was not as extraordinary as it may seem (cf. Haensch 2008b, p. 85; *pace* Capponi 2005, p. 32). For, only a few years later, Augustus also appointed a (senatorial) *iuridicus* to assist the (senatorial) governor of *Hispania Citerior*. In both cases, this was no doubt mainly due to the enormous size of the two provinces. As a direct consequence of appointing an equestrian governor, it was impossible for Roman senators to serve in subordinate positions within the government of Roman Egypt, as they could not be expected to take orders from mere equestrians. Thus, all other top officials, including the *iuridicus*, the procurators, the *epistrategoi*, and even the commanders and tribunes of Rome's legions in Egypt were of equestrian rank.

The equestrian rank of the governor and the local, Greek-speaking environment (but not Ptolemaic traditions) in which the Roman army was embedded also led to the establishment and unusual designation of certain military functions, and specifically local religious practice became traditional routine in certain units (Haensch 2010, 2012). However, on the whole, such cases were exceptional, and as far as the structure, the operation, and the daily administrative practice and official record-keeping of the Roman troops in Egypt is concerned, the *exercitus Aegyptiacus* seems to have differed little from other Roman provincial armies (Speidel 2009, pp. 283–304).

There can be no doubt, therefore, that the Roman conquest of Egypt led to the transformation of the country into a true *provincia* of the Roman Empire. It shared many traits with other provinces, and the principles that guided the new Roman government of the *praefectus Aegypti* were practically the same as those of other provincial governments (Jördens 2009, pp. 515–523). Nevertheless, as a province, Egypt was also different in many

ways – even peculiar in some respects – due both to particular spheres of continuity and to the Roman implementation of unusual measures. Its uniqueness persisted for centuries, as its provincial organization never served as a model for other Roman provinces. Equestrian prefects of provincial territories are indeed known from other parts of the empire (e.g. Judea, Commagene), but they were subordinate to full provincial governors (Speidel 2009, pp. 576 and 638–639). From the reign of Claudius, equestrians also independently governed a number of provinces, but their title (*procurator*) and rank, as well as the administrative and military structures of their provinces, differed radically from what characterized Roman Egypt. Even Septimius Severus' establishment of an equestrian government for his newly created *provincia Mesopotamia* in AD 195 was modeled not on Roman Egypt, but on the usual organization of imperial provinces (Speidel 2009, pp. 184–191). Of course, many other provinces (particularly in the East) also had specific traits rooted in developments of their local past that characterized their governmental, social, religious, and cultural traditions. Moreover, the eastern provinces all shared the experience of Hellenistic rule, and their administrative structures may therefore have had more features in common than can be identified with the sources currently available. Yet, to claim that Egypt was not an atypical province simply because “there was no typical province” is to ignore its many blatantly unique traits (Capponi 2010a, p. 183).

Despite the strangeness that characterized the Egyptians in the eyes of the Greeks, Herodotus (2.35), for one, was thoroughly impressed by the age of the Egyptian culture, noting that “it has the most wonders, and everywhere presents works beyond description.” Yet, Greek opinion on Egypt was anything but undivided, if we are to trust the few pertinent scraps that have survived from the works of Greek authors. Some, including Plato in his *Timaeus*, published utopian views of the Nile Valley culture, while others, such as Polybius, were less impressed, and described latter-day Egyptians as greedy, cruel, angry, or sluggish (Gruen 2011, pp. 76–114). What is known of Roman perceptions differs little: many admired the Egyptian culture, particularly for its age, achievements, and assumed wisdom, but others thought of contemporary Egyptians and Alexandrians as excitable, quarrelsome, and even downright seditious (cf. Juvenal, *Satire* 15; Ammianus Marcellinus 22.16.23; *Historia Augusta* Q 8.1–2; on the subject in general, see Gruen 2011; Bryen 2013). Evidently, during Emperor Caesar's campaign against Marc Antony and Cleopatra, Egyptians and their culture had an exceptionally bad press in Rome, but it seems that the victor of Actium particularly feared the alleged rebellious nature of the Egyptians. For, according to Tacitus, fear of rebellions stood behind his decision to entrust the government of the new province to an equestrian, as the fanaticism and superstition of its inhabitants could easily lead to civil strife and sudden disturbances (Tacitus, *Historiae* 1.11). Philo of Alexandria, writing just a few decades after the Roman conquest and the ensuing revolt in the Thebaid of 30/29 BC, thought of the Egyptians as “constantly being in the habit of exciting great seditions from very small sparks” because of their natural insubordination “at every trivial or common occurrence” (Philo, *In Flaccum* 4.17; for a very similar notion at a much later date, see Ammianus Marcellinus 22.16.23). Tacitus also explained that Augustus banned Roman senators and knights of higher rank from entering Egypt without his permission because he feared the possibility of a rival exciting the unruly population and seizing the country, distressing Italy by famine, and thereby threatening his rule (Tacitus, *Annales* 2.59; cf. Cassius Dio 51.17.1). Cassius Dio

(51.17.2) concurs, and adds that Augustus denied the Alexandrians the reinstatement of a town council for the same reasons (cf. Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 2.16.4). He even claims that Augustus did not allow Egyptians to become senators in Rome.

Such statements are of course just as anachronistic as Tacitus' and Dio's references to Egypt's anticipated role as a major supplier of grain for the city of Rome, the army, and other regions in the East. Egypt's importance in these respects was only to become fully apparent in the years and decades after the conquest. Nevertheless, their reports no doubt accurately record the new sole ruler's main incentive for establishing an equestrian governor in Egypt: Emperor Caesar, evidently still in the mindset of the many years of civil war that had just come to an end, took this extraordinary measure because he hoped to prevent the country from becoming the base of a successful rebellion that might threaten Rome and his rule (Jördens 2009, pp. 46–53). For, in his days, even an experienced and high-ranking equestrian official could qualify as “fit for supreme rule” (*capax imperii*; cf. Tacitus, *Annales* 1.13.2; *Historiae* 1.49).

When Germanicus visited Egypt in early January AD 19 without imperial consent, Tiberius reacted nervously (there had been rumors that Germanicus was secretly entertaining aspirations for supreme power) and even publically criticized his adopted son and designated successor before the Senate (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 52; Tacitus, *Annales* 2.59–61; for rumors, see Tacitus, *Annales* 2.43.4, 2.78.1). By then, the importance of Egypt's exports to Rome in grain and taxes must surely have become fully apparent. Thus, Josephus (*Bellum Judaicum* 2.16.4) claims that Rome's annual tax revenues from Judea in AD 66 were less than what Egypt produced for the Roman treasury in a single month, and that Egyptian wheat made up a third of Rome's grain imports (cf. also Velleius Paterculus 2.39.2; *Epitome* 1.6). According to recent estimates based on figures transmitted by ancient historiography, geographical works, and documentary evidence, the revenues from the 25% import tax (*tetarte*) collected at Alexandria probably reached amounts that could have covered the greater part of the regular expenses for the Roman army (for the *maris rubri vectigal*, see Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 6.24.84; for revenues, McLaughlin 2014, pp. 88–94; Wilson 2015, p. 23; Speidel 2015, pp. 104–105, 2016, p. 294). Rome therefore evidently had a crucial interest in the regular flow and abundant volume of long-distance trade through Egypt, and hence in the security of the land and sea trade routes that connected the Roman Empire with the southern Red Sea and India (e.g. OGIS II 701 = I.Pan du désert 80 (Antinoopolis, AD 137); Cuvigny 2003; Speidel 2016a; for the argument in full, see Speidel 2016, n.d.). As brigands and pirates constantly threatened the transport of immensely profitable goods from Southern Arabia and India, the Roman emperors invested great resources in the protection of the long-distance trade routes through the Red Sea and the Eastern Desert (O.Krok. 41, 60, 87, 88; Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 6.26.101; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 3.35; Malchus of Philadelphia (ed. Blockley) 2.404–406). To a significant extent, this shaped the mission of the Roman army in Egypt, which, during the second century, even maintained a base and a prefecture on the Ferrasan islands in the southern Red Sea (AE 2007.1659).

Egypt was the origin of many remarkable products and developments that swept through the Roman Empire, including the dissemination of popular deities like Isis and Sarapis and of romantic notions of a bucolic lifestyle set in Nilotic landscapes. Nonetheless, together with the large-scale organization of grain transports to Rome, the investments in

the security of the long-distance trade routes to a significant extent betrays that the highest importance that Rome attached to Egypt lay with the enormous revenues and exports this extraordinary province provided for the capital and other parts of the empire. To use Mommsen's words (1886, p. 253), the Roman province of Egypt was "the birthplace and the stronghold of the principate."

FURTHER READING

Naphtali Lewis's two important contributions (1970, 1984) no doubt offer the best approach to the subject, but see also Rathbone (1989) and Bagnall (2005). For a more recent, detailed, and well-balanced overview of the debate, see Jördens (2009, pp. 24–58). Rudolf Haensch (2008a, 2008b) discusses important details bearing on the issue, suggesting a more complex view of Egypt's specificity as a Roman province than is currently generally held. For a recent and concise overview of Roman principles and practices of provincial administration and Egypt's position within that framework, see Eck (2016).