

THE DECLINE OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

The Economic Evolution of the Hellenistic States¹

The problem to which this article tries to supply an answer, in any case for the time being, is the following: was the political collapse of the Greek world the result of a slow internal disintegration or of the destructive action of the Roman conquest?

In other words: did the Graeco-Macedonian states, constituted after the conquest of Asia by Alexander, die 'their own splendid deaths' or were they 'assassinated'² by Rome?

This question is less academic than it appears. Within the measure in which we consider ourselves heirs of the Greeks we may well ask ourselves why, in so short a space of time after the Hellenistic apotheosis, they were so easily subjugated. Moreover, many historians maintain that Antiquity was acquainted with capitalism; so it is interesting to examine the reasons

¹This article summarises conclusions which will be more amply expounded in a further book. I have recalled some of the problems posed by the decline of Hellenism in a lecture on the destiny of the Roman world delivered last March at the Institut de Science Economique Appliquée under the presidency of M. André Piganiol.

²These expressions are used by André Piganiol; see *L'Empire Chrétien* (Paris 1947, p. 422).

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for which the economy of the Eastern Mediterranean revealed itself incapable of assuring the resistance of the Hellenistic States and cities against foreign assault.

There can be no question here of bringing forward new elements and facts to throw light on this problem. Historians have put together an important documentation from which to draw.³

Naturally many points remain obscure, vast tracts are still unexplored, but in the last thirty years a great amount of work has been accomplished which can serve as a new starting-point for the discussions already opened up by the historians themselves. Our present aim is the following: to determine whether modern economic analysis permits us, on the basis of already established facts, to clear the way for a coherent and correct interpretation of the period which extends from the death of Alexander (323 B.C.) to the conquest of Egypt by Rome (31 B.C.). In what measure, so to speak, can the economist formulate a diagnosis based on the conceptions and theories with which he is familiar? His attempt can bear fruit only if he works out a *schema* which brings to light the *laws* of expansion and of contraction of Hellenistic economy.

This is obviously a difficult problem. Firstly because of the working habits of historians who do not make use of the same conceptions or the same instruments of thought as economists, and who attribute a quite different meaning to words in the economic and sociological vocabulary. Moreover, their 'restorations' of the past are influenced by political or cultural rather than economic or social interests. (In exactly what measure does the Hellenistic period constitute a *typical* phase of economic history?) We must in all justice recognise that this divorce between historic and economic science is equally imputable to the economists themselves and that the historians are not altogether mistaken in showing a certain measure of distrust concerning the methods favoured by the best-known theorists on modern economy. The latter in fact reason in abstract terms: for example, they use expressions such as 'marginal rates of substitution', 'liquidity preference', etc., which have reference to a simplified economy of an ideal nature, whilst the historian must start from reality and take his stand on facts of which he can furnish a detailed explanatory narrative. Moreover, economists like 'short-term' arguments, which means that they put aside certain 'data' of prime interest to the historian,

³For the bibliography as a whole and the various sources, the most recent and best informed work is that of H. Bengtson: *Griechische Geschichte* in the collection *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft* by Ivan von Müller and Walter Otto (Munich 1950), pp. 341 *et seq.*

such as the population, technical progress, the stock of capital, the country's needs. It should not, however, be concluded that the refusal to analyse 'data' is general among economists; certain theories on evolution do exist as for example those of Marx or of Schumpeter, but Marx and Schumpeter are not merely theoretical economists, they are at least equally sociologists and historians. We are accordingly willing to admit that if a reconciliation is to come about between historians and economists it will take place on the plane of the concept of 'evolution', and from this viewpoint we shall ask ourselves in what precise measure the most recent results of erudition are contributing material for the elaboration of a theory accounting for the progress of Hellenistic economy as it may have been affected by some change in one or several of these 'data' or may itself in turn have modified them.

We have arrived at the following provisional conclusions. In the first place we have recognised that, from the economic point of view, the Hellenistic period belonged to a historical phase of humanity characterised by the *preponderance of agrarian production* over industrial production or commerce. The fundamental economic unit on which we had thus to fix our attention was the *domain*, for it represented the form taken by the modes of production and appropriation characteristic of an economy founded on agriculture. And since we had to deal with this economy based on landed property we were bound to ask ourselves whether variations supervening either in population, capital, technical methods, or general needs would be capable of affecting the composition and the structure of those domains, and if changes of composition and structure would not in their turn act on the fundamental 'data'. It happens that at the epoch with which we are concerned the form assumed by the domain was quite peculiar and in no way resembled either that of the preceding or of the following period: it was in fact determined by an anterior 'processus' or chain of events affording plain evidence of the part played by the fundamental 'data'.

On the other hand the domain was not merely a centre of production, it was also a *centre of exchange*.⁴ The great domain of that epoch is inconceivable unless it could sell its produce on the market, either regional or

⁴This point has been well brought out by Mr. Rostovtzeff in a series of works (e.g., *Studien zur Geschichte des römischen Kolonates*, Leipzig and Berlin, 1910; *A Large Estate in Egypt in the Third Century B.C.* (Madison, 1922), reprinted in his monumental work published in 1941: *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*, Oxford, 3 vols. Cf. also the remarkable account by F. Heichelheim: *Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Altertums* (Leyden, 1938), I, 596 *et seq.*, and, generally, chapter VII (pp. 420 *et seq.*).

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international. The authorities and the bureaucracy in general always favoured this direction and treated the domains both as commercial and productive units. It follows accordingly that the bulk and the fluctuations of commerce and of industrial production were always essentially dependent on formal changes in the rural domain.

How are we to imagine the domain as the *motive power of the Hellenistic epoch*? Although specialised cultivation developed in proportion to the international division of work, the domain remained a manifold producer but its *poly-production was organised*. A staff directed by a steward took care that the crops cultivated corresponded in *quantity and quality* with the rules laid down by a central and national authority. This central authority worked out a joint plan whose aim was not only to bring about a maximum increase in production but in addition to favour the types of cultivation whose crops would find a ready sale on the market and so procure a large profit. It was accordingly the business of the holder of the domain to subordinate his plan of production to the exigencies of a policy aiming at producing the largest possible revenue for the Hellenistic king. The domain organised and controlled by 'royal' economy implies, obviously, the existence of a bureaucracy capable of enforcing the orders of the central authority, a kind of minister of finance (*dioiketes*) of the monarch.⁶ In this lies the fundamental originality of the agrarian *régime* of the Hellenistic epoch. The problem which presents itself is to know how this type of organised and controlled domain (favouring large-scale agriculture and the expansion of agricultural land) came about and if it spread throughout the States of the Mediterranean basin. Before answering these questions it is well to stress the fact that it is impossible for us to recognise in the economy of that period an economy of the capitalist type since the latter implies the *subordination* of the agricultural and commercial branches to industry. On the other hand, the phases of crisis and contraction in Hellenistic economy taken as a whole are characterised not by the familiar phenomena of over-production on a general scale but on the contrary by insufficiency of production and exchange.

It is accordingly impossible for us to follow the greater part of modern authors when they interpret the destinies of Hellenism in terms borrowed from the economic history of our times. Without doubt the Mediterranean world, between the third and the first century B.C., was the theatre

⁶ This holds good especially for the Egypt of the third century. One finds, however, analogous forms of organisations, if less developed, in South Russia, in Iran, at Carthage and in Sicily. Cf. Heichelheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 612 *et seq.*

of extremely violent social conflicts, but we refuse to see in these class-wars the reflection of the conflicts between the 'middle-classes' and the 'proletariat'. The middle-classes and the proletariat are tied to a specific economic system whose fluctuations and inconsistencies are of a radically different type from those which define a system of economy based on exchange and characteristic of the domain. Many scholars who adhere to a 'capitalist' conception of ancient classical history (e.g., Meyer, Kahrstedt) do not hesitate to maintain that Hellenism has been 'assassinated' by Rome. This is one more reason to be suspicious of this 'modernisation' of Hellenistic economy. We find it difficult to admit that the brutal methods of conquest of an economically *backward* State (as Rome still was at the beginning of the second century) could have so easily overthrown a civilisation founded on a powerfully armoured capitalism.⁶ Another staunch defender of a strictly modern interpretation, Mr. Rostovtzeff, is more consistent with himself when he invokes as essential factor of the collapse of Hellenism a long process of internal disintegration.⁷

If any interpretation of Hellenistic economy based on 'capitalist' terms appears to us in the light of a 'ready-made' solution, what other solution can we offer in exchange? We confess at once that, considering the character of our sources of information, their dispersion, their insufficiency and frequently their complete absence, it is difficult to establish a scheme of evolution capable of giving entire satisfaction. We are compelled, in face of the silence of documents, to deal with many capital points by simple inference. But our documents are not so insufficient as not to indicate a fundamental tendency or 'trend' (as the Anglo-Saxons call it) of which many events are symptomatic. Only in so far as we are able to measure the dynamic force inherent in this 'trend' shall we be in a position to give a precise meaning to the contradictions to which Rostovtzeff has, with every justification, drawn attention: the ethnic antagonism between Greeks and natives, redoubled by political antagonism (the statute for the Greeks in the towns contained privileges not extended to the peasants in the country) and by economic opposition (relative liberty

⁶ The most determined supporter of a 'capitalist' conception of Greek economy is E. Meyer; cf. *Blüte und Niedergang des Hellenismus in Asien* (1925). See also on the same lines, F. Munzer: 'Die politische Vernichtung des Griechentums' (*Das Erbe der Alten* [1925], II, 95); H. Berve, *Griechische Geschichte* (1933), II, 393 *et seq.*, and above all, U. Kahrstedt, 'Die Grundlagen und Voraussetzungen der römischen Revolution' (*Neue Wege zur Antike* (1927), IV, 94 *et seq.*).

⁷ Cf. the works already cited and, in addition, 'The Hellenistic World and Its Economic Development' (*American Historical Review* 41, 1936, pp. 231 *et seq.*).

of townfolk and oppressive control of workers on the soil).⁸ This 'antinomia' between the conquering Greeks and the conquered populations was naturally accompanied by a most unequal distribution of revenues and, as regards the entire Mediterranean economy, by a *chronic insufficiency* of purchasing power generating a limitation and narrowing of the international market and causing an invariable obstacle to any *unlimited expansion*. The observations of the scholar himself, based essentially on the papyrological sources of Lagid Egypt, are accurate and can also be applied, in a lesser extent, to other Hellenistic States (Asia of the Seleucids, Pergamon, Macedonia). On the other hand the City-States (Athens, Sparta) experienced class-conflicts of an almost identical nature. Kahrstedt has even ventured to speak of a 'proletarian international' responsible for the agitations of the second and first centuries.⁹ Although the term employed by Kahrstedt is manifestly anachronistic, the facts which it describes are perfectly accurate. But the scholars who have established this state of permanent internal warfare have not been able to give a satisfactory explanation of it, obsessed as they were by the history of the twentieth century. Rostovtzeff had been struck, on the eve of the Russian Revolution of 1917, by the opposition between town and country; Kahrstedt, Berve, and German scholars in general, by the troubles and revolutionary crises in Germany after 1919. Nor have other scholars who have adopted intermediary attitudes (W. W. Tarn, F. Heichelheim) furnished convincing solutions for lack, not of information (Heichelheim in particular furnishes us with new facts about prices and revenues), but of a method capable of explaining a dynamic succession of phenomena.¹⁰

Must it then be said that, though we recognise the accuracy of Rostovtzeff's statements and the precision of his information, we refuse recognition in our scheme to any disturbing action coming from outside, whether from Iran as Altheim suggests,¹¹ or from Rome herself, according to Willamovitz, Ed. Meyer or F. Munzer? By no means. The proper sense of our interpretation is precisely that it refuses an explanation based on simple factors of internal disintegration or external attack. Its aim is, on

⁸Rostovtzeff: *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World II*, 913.

⁹In *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, 1926, p. 97; 1928, p. 484.

¹⁰Cf. W. W. Tarn: *La Civilisation hellénistique*, Paris, 1936; Heichelheim, *op. cit.*, I, 1 *et seq.* The method (and consequently the presentation) of Heichelheim, inspired by the sociological works of A. Spiethoff and Oppenheimer, seems open to question.

¹¹F. Altheim: *Alexandre et l'Asie*, Paris, 1954.

the contrary, to point out how the *internal dynamism of the exchange economy of the domain in its Hellenistic phase rendered possible and practically inevitable a double pressure coming at the same time from East and West.*

It will be remembered that at the beginning of this article we stressed the characteristic fixed *direction* taken by the exchange economy of the domain in the period between 323 B.C. and 31 B.C. There appeared on the scene for the first time a type of domain whose essential aim was to co-operate in increasing the production of a State. Egypt in particular constituted a privileged laboratory for this kind of experiment. It was under the impulse of the economic counsellors of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–246) that the constitution of *model economic units* took place which were highly progressive in their methods and which proposed not only to reclaim the lands hitherto uncultivated but also to introduce new crops, to improve cattle-breeding, to establish modern methods of cultivation (the first attempts at triennial rotation of crops date from this epoch), to perfect ‘domestic’ industry, etc. All this in order that the produce of Egypt should compete victoriously with that of other States on the Mediterranean market and increase the Sovereign’s stock of precious metal. We are admirably informed about all these experiments by the correspondence of Zeno, steward of Appolonios, minister of finance of Ptolemy II Philadelphus.¹² Thanks to this correspondence we can follow the development and the progress realised on the domain of the district of Philadelphia which the Sovereign had granted to his minister. The methods of production were based on native manual labour, and the peasants were practically serfs who disposed of land *which they were not free to cultivate as they thought best* but only in strict conformity with the instructions of the steward. The latter supplied them with seeds, implements and cattle in return for a *quota* of their harvest (between 20 and 30 per cent) which was fixed and *previsionally* calculated. In other words, the harvest was estimated *ex ante* and the dues fixed in accordance. The steward did not confine himself to the use of already existing manual labour; he also called in *paid workers*, either permanent or temporary. The produce of the domain was later centralised in storehouses and its disposal realised by special sellers who enjoyed an actual monopoly. ‘The right to sell a particular product, for instance, oil, wine, salt, cheese, bread . . . was granted to

¹²Cf. Rostovtzeff: ‘A large Estate’, etc., pp. 43 *et seq.*, for a careful analysis of the existing papyrological sources of which he gives a complete extract (Index IV, 205).

special concessionaires who had the exclusive right to sell these products to the population of a certain district.¹³

An attempt has been made to see in these new methods of agrarian production a form of State capitalism, mercantilism or some such thing. In effect, however, it was at first merely a question of allowing the Ptolemies a policy of presence and intervention in the Mediterranean area, but it was *also* important to favour the installation of the Greeks whom Alexander's conquest had dispersed to the four corners of the East. To solve the social problems propounded by this *diaspora* was a categorical imperative for the Hellenistic sovereigns who could establish lasting power only if founded on a Graeco-Macedonian *élite* provided with adequate wealth. If it is necessary at all costs to define this new type of economic organisation which allowed a complete general staff of Greeks to display their spirit of initiative and organising capacity, it is by the word 'colonialism', the least disfiguring term for the reality of that period. The constitution of 'conceded' domains or estates (*doreai*) was the most evolved and dynamic expression of the new style of economy which characterises the *Landwirtschaftswirtschaft* system in its Hellenistic phase. Naturally the establishment of an important mass of soldier-peasants on land concessions of small dimension (*kleroukie*), together with urbanisation (particularly in the satrapies of the Seleucid East), had their part in the colonial policy systematically pursued by the Hellenistic sovereigns. But it is necessary to insist on the originality, at that epoch, of the system of granting estates with a precarious tenure and of which the methods of production formed part of a general plan.

How widespread was this type of domain, in what sense can we say that it constituted the motive power of the evolution of the domain economy of exchange during the three centuries which separate the conquest of Alexander from the battle of Actium? These questions we shall now try to answer.

To begin with, we insist on the fact that it is possible, when considering Hellenistic economy as a whole, to trace a phase of expansion followed by a phase of contraction. What duration can be assigned to these two phases? Is it possible to be quite certain that the chronological framework coincides strictly with the logical unfolding of our schema?

There are two series of clues at our disposal. The first are of a political order and have, moreover, been widely commented upon; the second are

¹³Rostovtzeff, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

of an economic order and concern prices and revenues as they are disclosed to us by the Delos inscriptions and the cuneiform texts of Uruk.¹⁴

First it would be well to say a few words concerning the clues of a political order. After a period of effervescence and military anarchy, during which two principles were opposed in incessant warfare—the principle of unity (maintenance of the integrity of Alexander's Empire) and the principle of division (attempt to constitute kingdoms and independent States—a state of relative equilibrium is finally reached. This equilibrium is quite unstable, and each new State aims at defending its integrity by defensive measures, that is, by wars. Thus from 323 to 301 (date on which at the battle of Ipsos the principle of unity represented by Antigonos Monophthalmos suffered shipwreck), and from 301 to 281 (battle of Corupedion lost by Lysimachus of Thrace, which put an end to the wars of succession) we find a permanent state of war. From 281 to 215 (the latter date marking the first intervention of Rome in the affairs of the East) we have an epoch during which each of the large States has to wage costly wars, just to defend its existence. This is a period of relative stability cut up by local but practically incessant conflicts. An example is afforded by the four first Syrian wars between the Lagid rulers and the Seleucids (276–271, 260–253, 246–241, 218–216), the 'Chremonidian' war (276–261), and the war against Sparta (222) waged by the followers of Antigonos of Macedon, etc. . . . We are not called upon to interpret these events in detail, nor are we, unfortunately, in a position to do so. We shall merely point out that on the plane of economic evolution, which is ours, they bear witness to the difficult genesis of the new 'royal' economy, a form of organisation corresponding with the domain exchange economy. It is not only the existence of a mercenary army which explains the interminable duration of the conflicts, but also the difficulties consequent on Greek expansion in the East. This new 'colonisation' merely perpetuated the contradictions of the economy of the *polis* and 'resolved' them by

¹⁴On the political history of the Hellenistic period there are numerous works; together with that of Bengtson quoted above, to be consulted are volumes VII and VIII of the 'Cambridge Ancient History', published under the direction of S. A. Cook, F. E. Adcock and M. D. Charlesworth (with important bibliographies) and P. Jouguet: *L'Impérialisme Macédonien et l'hellénisation de l'Orient*. (Coll: 'L'Évolution de l'Humanité', vol. XV, Paris, 1926.)

On the history of prices the chief work is by F. Heichelheim: *Wirtschaftliche Schwankungen der Zeit von Alexander bis Augustus* (1930), whose conclusions are summarised in the *Wirtschaftsgeschichte, des Altertums*, I, 420 *et seq.* Valuable information can also be obtained from the articles by G. Glotz in the *Journal des Savants*, 1913, pp. 16 *et seq.*; from the *Revue des Etudes grecques* for 1916, pp. 281 *et seq.*; 1918, 207 *et seq.* (on prices at Delos); from the *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique alexandrine* (1930), pp. 80 *et seq.* (on the price of papyrus). Cf. also H. Michell: *Economics of Ancient Greece*, 1937.

military conquests. From the moment that the towns of continental Greece, because of foreign competition, could no longer dispose of their manufactured goods and suffered accordingly from chronic unemployment and over-population, aggravated by the poverty of their soil in raw materials as well as alimentary products and by their ineradicable particularism, the only possible road to safety was unification and expansion. Philip's Macedonian state, and the universal monarchy of Alexander mark the intermediary stages of the process leading to the 'royal' type of economy of which the Pseudo-Aristotle speaks in his *Economics*,¹⁵ and establish beyond recall the decadence of the City-States of the Athenian or Spartan style. Similarly the dislocation of Alexander's empire marks the doom of a formula no longer corresponding with the real development necessary to assure the permanence of a monarchy of a universal type.¹⁶ The hour was favourable to States of large dimensions and traditional form, familiar from early times to the East, to India and to China, but in the end, as will be seen, more vulnerable, more fragile than even the Empires of the Pharaohs or the Babylonian State of Hammourabi. From 215 to 31, the history of the Hellenistic Orient is intermixed with that of the Roman conquest.¹⁷ Does this mean that, as regards the Graeco-Macedonian States, this period represents a phase of continuous and irremediable decadence? By no means, and it is precisely because histories have noted the presence of incontestable symptoms of renewal at certain epochs that Heichelheim has ventured to accept only partially what he considers the too radical thesis of Rostovtzeff.¹⁸ He notes, for example, that between 190 and 135, the Hellenistic States experienced not only a political renaissance but also an economic renewal. We repeat that we do not consider the two points of view to be incompatible, but before entering into the heart of the subject it is well to review the movement of prices and revenues.

It is not possible to enter into details. Only the important pulsations can be briefly registered. From about 320 to 280, there were sharp and irregular fluctuations of prices and revenues, both upwards and downwards. From 280 to 250 more stable movements supervened with a

¹⁵ Cf. the commentary given by Rostovtzeff in his *Economic Social History*, I, 440 *et seq.*

¹⁶ On this point we are in entire agreement with the conclusions drawn by W. Wilcken in his *Alexandre le Grand* (Paris 1929), *passim*.

¹⁷ On the Roman conquest, its causes and its consequences, cf. the admirable account by A. Piganiol: *La Conquête Romaine* (Coll. 'Peuples et Civilisation'), Paris, 1927, to be completed by *l'Histoire de Rome* by the same author (Coll. 'Clio', No 3, Paris, 1939), pp. 110 *et seq.* Lastly: Giannelli-Mazzarino: *Trattato di Storia Romana*, II (1954).

¹⁸ Heichelheim: *Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, I, 452.

tendency to weakening. From 250 to 200–190 the accounts of the priests of the temple of Delos display a rising phase sufficiently durable to enable prices to return to the level of the beginning of the third century. The revenues (and particularly the salaries) did not follow this rise and reveal a sufficient rigidity to permit us to speak of a deterioration in the standard of living of the working classes. This tendency was maintained as far as 170–160, the date at which there are signs of a new rising phase to continue up to the year 80. From Sulla to Caesar, a new fall and stabilisation.¹⁹ It is thus clear that the rhythm animating Hellenistic economy was decomposing in alternate phases of *inflation* and *deflation* depending not so much on variations in the money stock as on the vicissitudes common to the exchange economy of the domain and, in a more general manner, to the destinies of the various Hellenistic States.

We have considered it useful to furnish the above indications as they make it possible for us to determine the crucial points of our schema. We shall put aside the *intermediary* period, 320–280, during which a new economic and political order was organised. This phase of violent agitations and disordered rivalries leading towards 'royal economy' is accurately reflected in the anarchy of prices and their erratic variations (within a few months oil, as standard unit, fluctuated between 54, 31, 18, 45, and 54 drachmas, flour passed from 4½ to 10 drachmas, etc.). From the year 280 we should like to distinguish a *specific* Hellenistic cycle which falls into three phases: a phase of expansion, going from 280 to 240; a halt which marks the turning point, from 240 to 200, and introduces the phase of contraction, which in turn gives way to a new type of organisation of domain exchange economy, of which Rome, Sicily, and Pergamos were the promoters, an agricultural economy founded on slave labour. Having defined the chronological limits of our schema it now remains to analyse its internal mechanism.

In the first place we must insist on an essential point: the type of new organisation represented by the organised domain *does not seem to have spread* beyond the frontiers of Egypt. We are certainly much less well-informed concerning the economic life of Macedonia and of Seleucid Asia, but the small evidence at our disposal does indicate a radical transformation of existing economic conditions by a concerted development of production. This is especially true of Macedonia which up to the reigns

¹⁹Heichelheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 440–57; *ibid.*, p. 605; Rostovtzeff, *Economic and Social History*, II, 1185.

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of Philip V and of Perseus seems to have preserved an archaic agrarian structure. As regards Seleucid Asia, the texts at our disposal (the inscription of Mnesimachos, for example) suggest that the domains were cultivated in the traditional manner without concerted planning. What was the cause of this lack of dynamism? It is very difficult to say. We are inclined to think that the resistance of the great landed proprietors was successful in opposing what they considered an inadmissible intrusion of the central power. This may have been true in the case of the great lords (dynasts) and the clergy of Syria and Seleucid Babylonia. But we must be on our guard against definite conclusions on the subject. What is in any case certain is that the new political economy of the Lagians did not succeed in securing them an absolute economic preponderance analogous to that of England at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Egypt was not able to acquire an advance sufficient to allow her an undisputed control of the seas except for a relatively brief period. On the other hand, the appearance on the scene of the organised domain did not resolve one fundamental contradiction in ancient economy: the opposition between a particularist land economy of limited range and a commercial economy of international character.²⁰ In no case did the land proprietors become landlords endowed with an economist mentality and actuated by strictly economic objectives, and so no profound change took place in the spirit which had previously dominated the domain exchange economy. From this contradiction resulted the necessarily unequal distribution of the revenues. One of the essential laws of domain economy in general is the tendency to the increasing concentration of landed property. It does not appear that the Egyptian *doreai* made any serious change in the *consequences* deriving from this law in the sense that the purchasing power of the peasant was not improved, far from it.

We can now explain in a certain measure why the phase of expansion induced by the directed policy of the Hellenistic sovereigns had a relatively short duration. The reason is that it was not able to exert a lasting pressure on the fundamental data: population, capital stock, technical progress, needs. Its general effect was undoubtedly favourable, but slight and of short duration. The population perhaps increased in numbers, but very slightly, and possibly owing to immigration. The stock of capital registered an increase only of agricultural goods due to the introduction of more rational methods of production, to specialisation in crops, and to the

²⁰ Well brought out by E. Will in *Annales d'Histoire Sociale* (March, 1954).

reclaiming of waste lands; but industrial production and the rhythm of industrial investments made no progress worth mentioning. Certain vital sectors of industry (e.g., textiles) remained strictly dependent on rural economy and a large portion of the production of goods for current consumption continued to be guaranteed by the efforts of 'domestic' economy, that is to say, by the *workshop* of the estate. As regards ceramics, a *complementary* industry of agriculture, it was a long way from having attained, as Rostovtzeff claims, the stage of 'mass production'.²¹ Some 'manufactories' doubtless did exist in Rhodes and Alexandria producing water-jars and amphoras, but the main necessities were assured, as in the classic epoch, by the workshops (*ergasteria*). The same can be said about mining production whose character underwent no modification after the fifth-century exploitation of the Athenian mines of Laurion. On the whole, therefore, a state of stagnation must be registered at least as regards industrial production. In the same way, it must be admitted that the rate of technical progress during this period remained somewhat low. Neither the introduction in the textile industry of a perfected vertical loom, nor the new method of moulding in pottery work, nor the improvement in the draining system of the mines due to the introduction of the pump of Archimedes, caused any noticeable disturbance in the rhythm of industrial activity. It goes without saying, moreover, that the existence of slavery put a considerable check on the movement, but its importance ought not to be exaggerated. By reason of the fact that the slave trade had assumed an international character (Delos was the great centre of this market)²² technical progress could only be very slow and many inventions (the Hellenistic epoch was extraordinarily rich in inventions)²³ were condemned to remain dead letter. No illusions should be further entertained concerning the expansion of the market. Certainly by reason of increased specialisation resulting from the existence of a concerted plan of agricultural production and of 'model' estates, exchanges were intensified and the unification of money (a kind of monetary bimetallic system existed in which the Ptolomaic stater played somewhat the role of the dollar today,

²¹ Mass production implies that the early stage of individual handicraft has given way to the factory, a fact which the defenders of 'capitalism' seem not to have always grasped (e.g., F. Oertel in R. von Pohlmann: *Geschichte der sozialen Frage und des Sozialismus in der antiken Welt* (third edition, Munich, 1925). Nor is it possible for me to agree with the too 'archaic' conclusions of J. Bassebrook, above all concerning classic Greece. (Cf. *Staat und Handel in alten Griechenland*, Tübingen, 1928.)

²² On the commerce in slaves, cf. the well documented article by W. L. Westermann in the *Real Enzyklopädie* of Pauly-Wissow-Kroll: 'Sklaverei' (supplement VI).

²³ Cf. Tarn: *La civilisation hellénistique*, pp. 273 *et seq.*

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even if only relatively) still further accentuated this intensification. But it is necessary to insist on the fact that if the level of the exchanges increased, *their structure remained identical*. The goods forming the object of an international commerce were partly luxury goods intended for rich clients (pan-Hellenic ceramics) and partly agricultural produce (wine, oil, grain) together with certain raw materials (wood and metals).²⁴ This international exchange trade had as essential aim the alleviation of the lack of foodstuffs (for example, wheat), from which certain Mediterranean States were suffering (especially the Greek towns) and which threatened to cause food scarcity and want unless regular supplies could be maintained. The fact must be stressed that because of insufficient purchasing power goods of current consumption did not constitute a decisive factor of maritime commerce. This explains the under-developed character of the commercial technique. A striking feature, for example, is the absence of great permanent companies similar to the societies which constituted themselves as far back as the thirteenth century in medieval Italy. Rhodes was certainly an important clearing-house and an essential place of transit—in which role it was later substituted by Delos—but the truth remains that the international market was never able (because of the extreme inequality of revenues) to develop to a point sufficient *to assure the economic preponderance of the merchants, to incite them to modify their methods of production and to destroy the artisan framework of industry*. The market remained almost stationary because too ‘narrow’, and accordingly *wealth founded on land always ended by getting the better of wealth founded on movable assets*. The rate of interest moreover remained relatively high (between 8 and 12 per cent) which must have considerably restricted the merchants. The transfers of property which in the fourth and third centuries favoured the newly rich were not sufficiently extensive to modify in a definite manner the existing social relations, except naturally to aggravate the situation of the middle and poorer classes (especially in continental Greece). Nor is it astonishing that credit and banking, though their operations developed, still preserved an archaic character. The bankers were above all money-changers; they carried out conveyances of property and accorded credits (in a limited number). But nothing existed in any way comparable to what was to be, for example, the market of Antwerp in the sixteenth century, or of Amsterdam in the seventeenth. If the letter of credit existed, the bill of exchange of the type used by medieval Italian merchants was

²⁴It is to be noted that the evidence of prices at our disposal concerns chiefly wheat, wine and oil.

unknown, so that there could be no question of a short-term money market. And as there were no joint-stock companies, there was no financial long-term market either.²⁵

It is accordingly clear why the phase of expansion brought about by the new royal economy could not last and why the turning point which led first to stagnation, then to contraction, manifested itself rapidly. Since Mediterranean economy was unable to free itself from the constraints of the archaic framework of its agriculture, it was precisely in the rural districts that the most evident symptoms of contraction first appeared. Rostovtzeff has given a remarkable description of the first consequences of this backward tendency: depopulation (especially in continental Greece), silent strikes of the peasants, fleeing to the temples to escape from the ever-increasing pressure of the contributions exacted from them by the royal functionaries, the retrogression of crops (the land once more remains uncultivated), and finally inflation.²⁶ In fact from the day on which 'interventionism' and control of agricultural production proved incapable of developing the forces of production, that is to say, of taking efficacious action on fundamental data, the pressure of the bureaucracy and of the army was bound to reveal itself day by day more unbearable, so that the 'financing' of these parasitic organisms inherent in every evolved State could be effected only by aggravating the burdens on the native peasants and by depreciating money. It was under the reigns of Ptolemy III Euergetes and of Ptolemy IV Philopator in Egypt, of Seleucus II in Asia Minor, of Demetrius II in Macedonia, that the backward tendency manifested itself. From 220 onwards and in spite of some temporary remissions, the decadence was irremediable. It is therefore not surprising to note how violent the racial and social conflicts became. The natives, both Egyptians and Persians, not only resisted all attempts at Hellenisation but actually rebelled both passively and actively against the Greeks. The desertion of the lands (*anachoresis*) and strikes followed by military insurrections (after the battle of Raphia in 217) multiplied in number. The Iranian satrapies (Bactria, Parthia) regained their independence.²⁷ In Greece, Sparta, under the reigns

²⁵ With the exception of the *partes*, societies of tax-gatherers, who, however, played no essential role until the second century. Cf. the important text of Polybius referred to by A. Piganiol in his *Conquête Romaine*.

²⁶ Cf. M. Rostovtzeff, *Economic and Social History*, II, 841 *et seq.*, 870 *et seq.*, 955 *et seq.* Perhaps he does not insist enough on the decisive and specific role played by inflation in a fundamentally agrarian economy. It not only accelerates the concentration of property and the unequal distribution of the revenues, but it also increases hoarding; hence the plethora of purely monetary 'capital'.

²⁷ Cf. the excellent development of the subject by F. Altheim: *Alexandre et l'Asie*, pp. 194 *et seq.*

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of Agis (241) and of Cleomenes (227), instituted a laboratory for the most 'advanced' social experiments (liberation of slaves, abolition of debts, division of the land). These reforms could not be realised in a durable manner because of the crushing of Sparta by Antigonos Doseon, and although they were resumed in the following century by Nabis they finally became dead letter, constituting, however, the *fundamental revindications* of the peasantry throughout the entire Classic Antiquity. The liberation movements, favoured either by the Macedonian kings themselves (Perseus) or by adventurers such as Andrisus in Macedonia, by Aristonicus of Pergamon, by Saumacus in the kingdom of the Bosphorus, were all at the same time *nationalist* (animated by the spirit of revenge of the original inhabitants of the land towards the Greek and Roman conquerors) and radical (not 'communist' as has been erroneously maintained).²⁸ In fact, the solution of the agrarian problem and the attenuation of the irreducible class conflicts could not come from such measures as dividing up lands or abolishing debts because of the congenital inferiority and the *regressive* character of the small landowner. The levelling policy of the Stoics, the ideal communism of the 'City of the Sun' had no influence whatever on the *data* of the problem.²⁹ The contradiction could not be resolved except by an *economic revolution* which would considerably develop the volume of production, and it has already been shown for what reasons this revolution had proved to be impossible. The 'cumulative' process of dilapidation of the agrarian economy, rendered still more manifest by the inflation which exposed so glaringly the unequal division of revenues, was able to develop without any obstacle. This does not mean that the Hellenistic sovereigns were insensible to the misfortunes of their subjects, but even their decrees of 'amnesty' were insufficient to turn the tide. Equally unsuccessful was a new 'lowering of debts' as enacted by Solon, and tried by Perseus in Macedonia, or an attempt to liberate the serfs, like that of Antiochus III in Asia Minor. It is possible, as Heichelheim sustains, that these several measures were evidence of a revival of Hellenism and that they favoured a partial improvement in conditions, but it is well

²⁸ Cf. once again the masterly development of the subject by Rostovtzeff in his *Economic and Social History*, II, 756. Although violently anti-Marxist, Rostovtzeff definitely seems to me the historian of classic antiquity who comes nearest to Marx by the importance he attaches to the class conflicts and by the care with which he seeks out the strictly social and political origin of racial opposition. Symptomatic also seems the small importance he attaches on the whole to monetary phenomena; cf. also the works of Kahrstedt, Meyer, Tarn, mentioned above.

²⁹ On the role of the stoa, cf. R. von Pöhlmann, *op. cit.*, and H. Bengtson, *op. cit.*

to remember that a period of depression of long duration is not exempt from spasmodic phases of prosperity of brief duration.

In what measure can Rome be held responsible for the collapse of Hellenism and the 'barbarisation' of the Greek world? For a considerable time (up to the end of the Republic) the brutal methods of conquest of the Romans considerably aggravated an already critical situation. It is quite certain that the enslavement of entire populations, the destruction of towns and of their artistic treasures, the enormous reparations, the activities of the tax-gatherers and the considerable 'exportation' of capital resulting from them, all helped to *accelerate* an internal process which had already begun to manifest its regressive effects long before the arrival of the Romans. Later, however, the *unification of the Mediterranean market* realised by Rome was a decisive factor of the ensuing recovery, and introduced another great historic cycle of expansion and contraction of a different type. The great domains were again transformed and became the origin of a new economic style, although the last centuries of the ancient world do not differ essentially from the centuries which preceded them.

In conclusion it is interesting to note that the fall of the Hellenistic monarchies strangely prefigures the fall of the Roman Empire. In the second and first centuries there had been, as it were, a 'dress rehearsal' of what was to take place on a greater scale in the second, fourth and fifth centuries A.D. If we are to reject the theory of the unilateral responsibility of Rome (who actually did no more than prolong the life of a moribund system) it is safe to suppose that on an international scale the contradictions which the Hellenistic governing classes had to face created unsurmountable difficulties. It would have been necessary to re-absorb the sequelae or morbid conditions arising from an archaic structure which had managed to maintain itself, notwithstanding a certain number of modifications in agrarian economy, which absorption was unthinkable. Rome was destined to face the same difficulties on an even greater scale resulting in a still more terrible failure. F. Altheim insists that '*the intervention of the other*' (i.e., the invader) constitutes a crucial factor of evolution 'in so far as it stops it, curbs it or stimulates it'.³⁰ We are of the opinion that it is merely the epilogue of a drama whose introduction and problem are purely internal.

³⁰ Altheim: *Alexandre et l'Asie*, p. 406.