
Gods, Armies, and Tax Collectors: Cultural Connection in Roman Egypt

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The Egypt of Antiquity has been in the forefront of European imagination for thousands of years. Its exotic landscape and amazing structures have fascinated visitors and scholars alike. Roman Egypt is no different; the province fed Rome and its ever-growing empire for centuries. The transition from the Ptolemaic Kingdom to the Romans was not a clean one, nor were the changes or continuities static; however, by observing what changed and what stayed the same, one may have a deeper understanding of Egypt and its place in the larger Roman Empire. The introduction of Roman rule changed the lives of the people in Egypt through government, religion, and culture.

Scholars have debated the assimilation of Egyptians into the Roman system, and this paper aims to demonstrate the ways in which Egyptians assimilated, but also retained their culture, while adapting to the Roman system. David Peacock, in his chapter of *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, argues that Egypt was distinct from the rest of the provinces. Egyptians rejected Roman culture and maintained Pharaonic traditions. "Egypt was a land apart – an exotic and distant part of the empire, perhaps more bizarre than any other province. Here, pharaonic culture thrived and a visitor to Roman Egypt would have found himself in a time capsule," he insists.¹ For Peacock, the distinct nature of Egypt caused it, in turn, to be so distant from the rest of the empire that it was declared an Imperial province, and was established as having a unique place in the imagination of the world. Peacock's chapter suggests some hostility in Egypt against Rome, where otherwise it seems like a stable province in comparison to a place like Judea or Gaul. Scholars like Ramsay MacMullen, however, claim otherwise, that Egypt had been in line with the rest of the empire until later periods of Roman Egypt, when Egyptians felt weakened by the occupation and therefore resentful of Roman's presence in Egypt.² Other revisionists find that the Roman aspects of Roman Egypt outweigh the pharaonic traditions; but, an argument can be made for assimilation and diffusion of Roman ideas into the Egyptian culture.

The measure of Romanization and the assimilation of Egypt into the Roman system is a complicated matter, as many of the scales used are dependent on infrastructure: the remaking of cities in the Roman style, roads, trade networks, etc. The extent of changes can tell several things about the nature of the province in the larger empire; this becomes very important to understanding the way that the Empire shared resources and wealth with Rome. Warwick Ball in his book *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire*, while not talking specifically about Egypt, suggests one can infer the same patterns. Large cities, such as Alexandria and Thebes, were great examples of the importance of Egypt in the Roman period. Alexandria was a hub of trade, culture, and therefore was a great fortified city that withstood the ages until Egypt's fall to the Muslims. The Roman re-founding of a city to fit a Roman city plan was a way of maintaining control and was "both the

¹ David Peacock, "The Roman Period (30 BC - AD 395)," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 414.

² Ramsay MacMullen, "Nationalism in Roman Egypt," *Aegyptus* 44, no. 3/4 (1964): 191.

cornerstone of Roman rule there and their main legacy.”³ Since the Romans used these methods across their empire, and the amount of change speaks to the province’s importance, and therefore its Romanization, Egypt must be an integral part of the Roman economic machine. Trade routes from the Red Sea moved to the Mediterranean. Goods and luxuries arriving from India and beyond drove the importance of Egypt as a provider of goods, including trade goods from Asia, Grains, and stone.⁴ Some historians do interject that urbanization is not the same as Romanization, and that it was “merely an enhancement of local urban achievements.”⁵ Understanding the significance of Egypt in regard to the empire informs us about how the government and society changed to preserve those goods and Rome’s access to them.

The government under the Ptolemies was court based and continued to grow weaker as the years passed. When Pompey, the Roman Consul, fled to Egypt to escape Julius Caesar after a civil war, the Ptolemies began losing their grasp on the country. Once Egypt was formally annexed into the Empire and made an Imperial province by Augustus,⁶ many things changed. One of the major changes was taxation. Collecting taxes was a skill that Rome had honed over the years, and Egypt did not escape the tax collectors. “No ancient government and a few modern ones have had a tax structure rivalling in intricacy that of Roman Egypt,” concluded one historian.⁷ The Ptolemies could not compete with Rome for taxes, and while the Ptolemies had made sure all the wealth of the land was sent to their coffers, it did not work in their favor in the end. Changing the tax system puts the burden of state support on the everyday people of the province, which could sow resentment as it did in other provinces. To protect these tax collectors, Rome had multiple legions of soldiers in Egypt at any given time ready to take the offensive against enemies both external and internal. Like most provinces in the Roman Empire, Egypt had a garrison of multiple legions that dealt with the day-to-day operations of the society. The military presence was felt throughout society as they protected the tax collectors as mentioned; but, also they were stationed to escort grain shipments and protect the mines in Egypt, which were still major economic assets for Egypt.⁸ The army was a distinct faction that protected the interests of Rome; but also, it policed as normal troops might, and overall Egypt was not as heavily raided as Peacock seems to suggest.⁹

Egypt was also the main source of food production, especially for the city of Rome itself, for its population did not allow it to produce enough food to sustain the city with upwards of a million inhabitants. Augustus brought 20,000,000 *modii*¹⁰ of grain from Egypt alone per year, accounting for one-third of the grain needed to feed Rome annually.¹¹ Access to grain made Egypt an economic and agricultural necessity for Rome; it fed the capital city, and this continued to be true even into the Byzantine era, as Egypt sent food to Constantinople until Muslim forces conquered Egypt in the 7th century. Egypt, the breadbasket of the Mediterranean, had been incredibly important to Rome before it had become a province. Rome, an enormous city, could not provide for itself without help from the outside. Egypt, with its regular harvests and fertile lands, was the perfect place to find the grain necessary to sustain a population growing to over a million. Treaties had been made between

³ Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East : The Transformation of an Empire* (London: Routledge, 2000), 149.

⁴ Richard Alston, *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt : A Social History* (London: Routledge, 1995), 80.

⁵ Lee E. Patterson, review of *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire. Second Edition.*, by Warwick Ball, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (January 2017).

⁶ Augustus Caesar, or Octavian, was the adopted son of Julius Caesar and his heir. He took control of Rome and after a civil war against Mark Antony, became the First Citizen, beginning the Roman Empire.

⁷ Naphtali Lewis, *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 159.

⁸ Alston, *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt*, 80.

⁹ Peacock, “The Roman Period (30 BC - AD 395),” 419.

¹⁰ A modius, or modii, was a unit of Ancient Roman measurement for dry goods and equated to about ¼ of a bushel or a peck. Merriam-Webster, “Definition of Modius,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, n.d., accessed April 26, 2017.

¹¹ Whitney J. Oates, “The Population of Rome,” *Classical Philology* 29, no. 2 (1934): 104.

the Ptolemies and Rome for shipments of grain,¹² but now Rome could take the grain that it needed without worry of interference. The Roman administration in Egypt was not unique to Egypt, but it did use the Ptolemaic structure on its own.

Rome administered Egypt as an imperial province, a different system from a senatorial province where proconsuls were the governors. In Egypt, leadership came by strict appointment from the Equestrian class, from which Augustus emerged. Augustus hoped to bolster his support structure within the Equestrian class and keep hold of what became one of the wealthiest provinces in the Empire and keep it out of the hands of the senatorial class. The senatorial class was not allowed to enter Egypt without express permission by the Princeps. The structure of the administration, based on the Ptolemaic structure of Nomes, or districts, divided Ancient Egypt into the Roman Period. Each Nome had a Metropolis that served as the administrative center.¹³ The government of the Metropolis and civil administration was increasingly Roman in manner. Positions on the top were reserved for Roman citizens and those connected to the Prefect, while those below were locals, be they Greek or Egyptian.¹⁴ Local affairs in the records conducted in Greek, and not in Latin, show the influence of Greek society on Roman Egypt through the Ptolemies. This may indicate a shift away from pharaonic tradition and hieroglyphics, which were absent in administrative documents, or they may have been simply removed for convenience of the mostly Greek and Roman administrators. These changes show a distinct trend of shifting away from the pharaonic traditions and a shift in the lives of those living in now Roman Egypt. Greek and Egyptian traditions continued into the Roman period; however, Egypt showed Romanization in different ways.

Religion can be an effective way to control a population for centuries, creating a connection between the citizen and the state. Roman Egypt was no different in this way, using the state pagan religion to create a bond between the Empire and the Egyptian people. There also was a continuity with the old pharaonic traditions in several ways. Like many of the Pharaohs before them, Roman emperors did not stop or discourage the deifications of the emperors. Emperors like Augustus and men like Caesar are examples of this, but, emperor worship became much more prevalent in Roman Egypt, which suggests a continuity between that of Pharaonic Egypt and the Roman Period. The Ptolemies also claimed divinity.¹⁵ How much of this was a strategy to assimilate Egyptian culture or how much was real Roman belief is a matter of debate; yet, it is clear in the iconography and cults that these emperors were worshiped. Temples, dedicated with images of the Roman Emperors dressed like pharaohs and performing like pharaohs of the Dynastic periods, were common. The connection of the emperor, the head of the government, to the religion of Egypt was not only an integral part of Egyptian culture, but it also gave Romans a way to provide legitimacy for their rule in Egypt. To the Egyptians the message was: Rome is not taking over: Horus and the gods approved of Rome. Later centuries saw the rise of Christianity, and Rome again used it to assimilate Egypt, this time with less success.

Christianity grew immensely throughout Egypt; there was a locational connection between the land and the faith. The Jewish community that became Christian swelled in Egypt. Monasticism and Aestheticism found their roots in the first monasteries of Egypt, and the Bishopric of

¹² Ptolemy IV's grain shipments to Rome were most likely done in business to continue an amicable, yet not close relationship. See Arthur M. Eckstein, *Rome Enters the Greek East: From Anarchy to Hierarchy in the Hellenistic Mediterranean, 230-170 BC* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

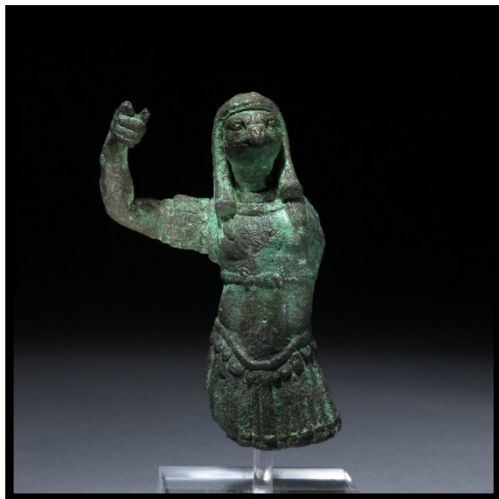
¹³ Peacock, "The Roman Period (30 BC - AD 395)," 416.

¹⁴ Alan K. Bowman and Dominic Rathbone, "Cities and Administration in Roman Egypt," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992): 107-27.

¹⁵ Alan B. Lloyd, "The Ptolemaic Period (332 - 30 BC)," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 403.

Alexandria¹⁶ held tremendous sway in the growth and flowering of the faith. Ramsay MacMullen argues that the introduction and growth of Christianity and Coptic Christians in the late Empire changed the political relationship between the now Byzantine Empire and Egypt in that their nationalist identity began to show through during this period. “[O]pposition to the imperial orthodoxy of Constantinople, to a large extent inspired ‘nationalistic,’ or anti-Roman, or anti-imperial urges.”¹⁷ The growth of Christianity in Roman Egypt and the breakdown of native religion created a rift between Egypt and the Roman Empire in a way that was not present before.

Compared to other colonized areas, in Egypt, Roman assimilation achieved its greatest success. The iconography of the Roman Emperor as Pharaoh, gods taking on Roman forms, and the continuation of Graeco-Roman traditions from that of Pharaonic Egypt display Egypt’s integration of Roman ideals into their society. Art, religion and the relationship between the government and the governed is intrinsically important to understanding how the society adapted to Roman rule. In terms of art, one may believe that there was a distinct continuity from that of Dynastic Egypt and that the iconography rarely changed; while this may be true regarding traditional and ceremonial art, it is not as true regarding other forms. In sculpture, one can easily see the connection between the Greco-Roman world and Egypt in the statues of Horus.¹⁸ Horus is seen in several sculptures depicted as a Roman Emperor, the outfit of a Roman general supports the idea that Egyptians began to associate themselves with Romans by the way that they were depicting their gods.¹⁹ This could also demonstrate a shift from the uniform idealization of many Egyptian sculptures toward a Roman emphasis on realistic features. The cultural assimilation is complicated, yet certain instances paint a picture of Egyptian integration to Roman culture. When scholars wish to show continuity between the Dynastic period and the Roman period, they show the images of Augustus as an Egyptian pharaoh in traditional adornments; but, it can also suggest cultural diffusion. As the



Representation of: Horus 1

Egyptians came to terms with their new foreign rulers, they used iconography and cultural norms that resonated with their people to explain the world around them. Making Augustus a pharaoh only makes sense in the context of the Egyptian experience. Using their iconography and understanding of the world around them, making Augustus the Pharaoh, and therefore a living God as seen by cults dedicated to the emperors, shows how Egypt fit into the scheme of the Roman Empire. They assimilated with the Romans, and while they did preserve some of their culture and practices, their administration, religion, and culture became diffused with that of the Romans.

Ancient Egypt has fascinated the European world for centuries and continues to provide fascination to scholars and non-scholars alike. For thousands of years, people had dreamt and thought about Egypt and

how the Great Pyramids came to be. Movies are made, and historical inaccuracies run rampant—all to feed public fascination with this most ancient civilization. Roman Egypt too fascinates, as scholars see the continuation of pharaonic and Ptolemaic traditions, but also the distinct change to a

¹⁶ The Christian faith was divided into multiple bishoprics that hoped to bring unity and structure to the Christian religion, such as bishoprics eventually divided into many different denominations, including Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

¹⁷ MacMullen, “Nationalism in Roman Egypt,” 199.

¹⁸ Ancient Egyptian god, generally depicted as a falcon.

¹⁹ *Representation of: Horus*, Figure, Roman Period.

Roman province. The change of administration, religion and art culture demonstrate how the Romans affected and changed Egyptian society for centuries. Cities like Alexandria and Oxyrhynchus give tantalizing clues as to the daily lives in Roman Egypt and what changed forever under Augustus and later Roman Emperors.