

THE OPERATION OF THE STATE IN THE PROVINCES

The emperors' requirements in the efficient operation of the state in the empire were simple. So long as sufficient money came into Rome for disbursement to the army and for maintenance of an imperial life-style, nothing else much mattered. In practice the exaction of taxes on a regular basis was possible only if good order was preserved throughout most of the provinces, or at least those which provided surplus income. Thus areas too poor to be worth crushing were often left unconquered, while in the rich lands opposition to Roman rule and taxation was ruthlessly suppressed. Much government depended on *ad hoc* decisions, reflecting what was practical at the time, but stressing precedent when it was available. No-one, not even Augustus, seems ever to have produced an overall strategy for provincial administration, although he and Hadrian interfered with provincial government more than most emperors.¹

TAXES

The income of the Roman state was derived primarily from taxes levied on agricultural produce in those regions of the empire outside Italy.² In the Roman Republic, citizens had once contributed to the state's coffers when required, but foreign conquests had made this unnecessary since 167 BC, and it would be courting extreme unpopularity in Rome for any emperor to try to reintroduce the practice. Since all Italians had gained Roman citizenship by the end of the Republic, they too escaped the weight of direct taxes, but other inhabitants of the empire had to pay, even if they held Roman citizenship (as was increasingly common in the early imperial period). The tax came basically in two forms: *tributum soli*, a land tax based on the size of the plot farmed, and *tributum capitis*, a poll tax based on the size of the workforce, but there was much variety, depending on the taxation system in force before the imposition of Roman rule and on the state of local economies.

Standardization increased gradually in the first century of the Roman Empire. Thus under Augustus the inhabitants of Sicily may still have been

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paying a tithe of their produce to tax-farmers, and in other provinces the total payable may still have been fixed by tradition or by guesswork, but gradually the provincial census became the normal method to fix liability.³ One should not underestimate the difficulty involved in imposing a quick new system of fiscality and monetization on the whole of north-west and central Europe, and in introducing to the eastern parts of the empire regular censuses and a poll tax, both of which were previously unknown in some areas, although long established in others, such as Egypt (see also Plate 7). Easier to impose were the indirect taxes (*portoria*) payable on goods in transit at ports, imperial frontiers and various boundaries between provinces or groups of provinces. Rates recorded were sometimes as high as 25 per cent of the value of the goods taxed but, even though the volume of long-distance trade throughout the empire was considerable, the total revenue raised was probably less than by direct taxation.⁴

PROVINCIAL GOVERNORS

Responsibility for collection of the direct taxes rested with the governors of provinces, who in turn handed over the task to more junior members of their staff. When a governor had been appointed by lot in the senate as proconsul he used a quaestor for the purpose. When he was appointed as legatus to govern on behalf of the emperor, the latter appointed directly a non-senatorial agent called a procurator to collect the taxes. In either case the process had to begin with periodic taking of the census, which in turn generally required considerable help and advice from local leaders who knew the country and the people. Each year it was the same local leaders who were held responsible for collecting the taxes, usually in coin but sometimes partially in kind, which the quaestor or procurator would simply receive from them.⁵

The personnel employed by the state required for this operation was thus very small, but the process relied on the co-operation of the local people, in particular local aristocrats. Such aristocrats, often but not always descendants of the indigenous elite, but always defined at least partly by their wealth, were the main channel for provincials to have contact with the sources of power in the Roman Empire. Where they did not already exist, they were encouraged to emerge by state sponsorship of civilized, self-sufficient communities, sometimes (as in the north-western provinces) quite arbitrarily created out of existing tribal systems, sometimes (as in Egypt) relying on pre-existing regional units. The Roman state, itself accustomed to the rhetoric of oligarchy, preferred to rule through rich provincials, even though (as in Rome itself) lip-service could still be paid to democratic voting procedures, as is evident from municipal charters of the Flavian period recently discovered in Spain.⁶ When their co-operation was denied to Rome, the governor had no means to ensure it other than violent suppression. In

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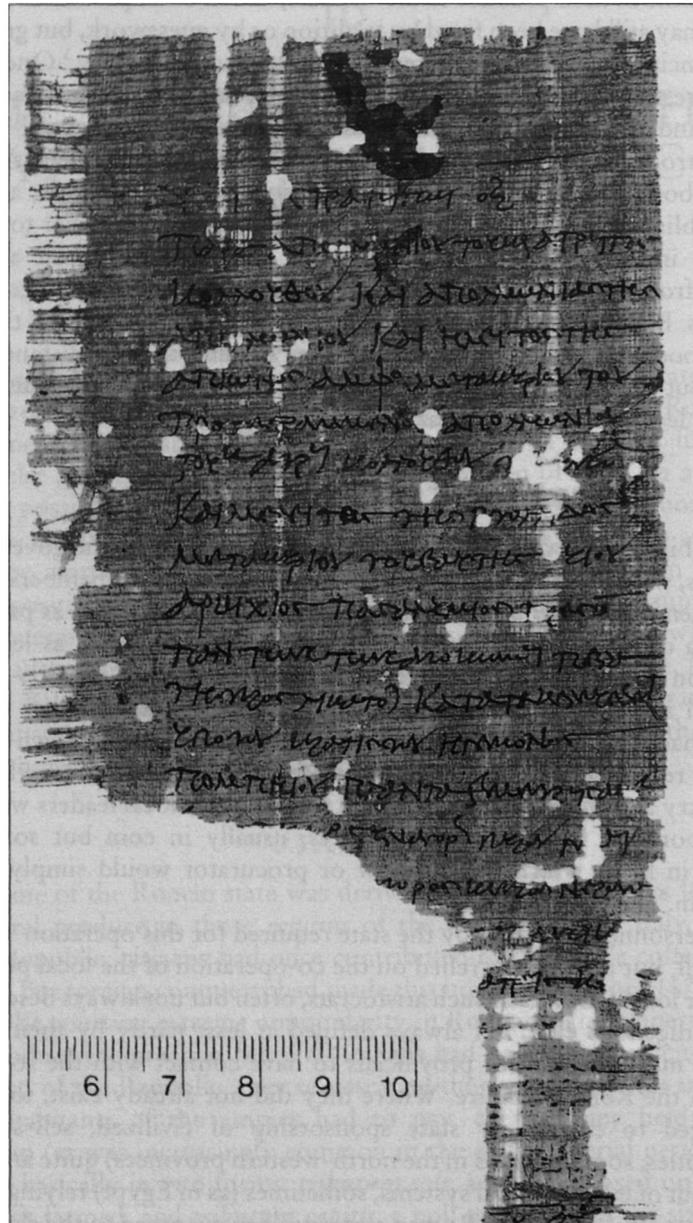


Plate 7 Oxyrhynchus papyrus POxy no. 3,910. A request to a local official in AD 99 or 100 by four Egyptians, three women and a man, for the refund of the price of requisitioned wheat which has been deposited in the public granary. The papyrus is incomplete at the foot.

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general, however, this was avoided because the local elite were encouraged to help the Roman state in return for the advantages offered to them: plenty of self-government, including control of magistracies, food supply, communal property, local cults, local entertainment, and so on, and the certainty of state support for their privileged status so long as they did not complain when governors chose arbitrarily to interfere, and so long as they did not subvert such rights as were guaranteed by Rome to minority populations who lived among them, such as Jews or (not surprisingly) Roman citizens.

Most of the time, then, a governor's life was peaceful. Away from the frontiers, his staff was generally small, in the hundreds even in large provinces: attendants (*lictors*), messengers (*viatores*), a few soldiers as a bodyguard, some slaves, his family, in provinces where more than one legion was stationed a few fellow-aristocrats to act as legates (commanders of individual legions within the province, under the governor's overall direction). His main business thus lay in the administration of justice, travelling from town to town to hold assizes.⁷ In practice the number of cases a governor could hear was severely limited by lack of time and staff, and the cases which had priority tended to be those in which the interests of the rich were involved. Only in a novel like Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* (10.28) could a poisoned woman get instant access to justice:

The doctor's wife had an inkling straightaway of what the matter was, when the havoc wrought by the appalling potion wound its destructive way through her lungs. Soon her laboured breathing made her absolutely certain, and she rushed to the actual living quarters of the governor, shrieking loudly and calling on him for the help he was duty-bound to give. Her claim that she was going to reveal the most monstrous crimes brought a noisy crowd together, and made sure that the governor accorded her instant admission and an instant audience.

In the time of Hadrian the practical bias towards the rich in the administration of law in provincial society was enshrined in a remarkable development of Roman law by which the legal rights of 'more honourable people' (*honestiores*) were defined as greater in a whole variety of ways than that of 'more humble people' (*humiliores*). Thus, for example, theft by a humble man was more severely punished than that by an honourable man. The dividing line was clear: it separated the provincial aristocracy from the rest of provincial society.⁸

To underline their importance, provincial aristocrats were encouraged in the West to contact the state through provincial councils (*concilia*), formed in the first instance as a focus for the cult of Rome and Augustus; *koina* in the East fulfilled the same function, but where they did not already exist before the imperial period they were not often imposed, although self-interest eventually encouraged some provincials to create such bodies, as at Ancyra (now Ankara).⁹ In any case the provincial elite made great use of an

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attractive method of gaining direct access to the emperor through embassies, of which a large number are recorded on extant inscriptions. In a letter of 10-9 BC Augustus relates his reception of an embassy from Alexandria:

Imperator Caesar Augustus, pontifex maximus, in his fourteenth year of tribunician power, imperator twelve times, to the people of the Alexandrians, greetings. The envoys whom you sent came to me in Gaul and made your representations and in particular informed me of what seems to have troubled you in past years.... The spokesman: 'Caesar, unconquered hero, these are the envoys of the Alexandrians. We have divided the embassy ... amongst ourselves ... according to the competence of each of us ... Theodorus on Egypt ... on the Idios Logos ... myself on the city... not to give a defence but to request your imperial intervention.'

(POxy no. 3,020; Braund no. 555)

ADMINISTRATION

The management of the empire did not require a great many officials, because so much was done semi-willingly by the provincials themselves, or at least by the provincial aristocracy. The magistrates in local cities, tribal centres or other administrative units reorganized by the state collected the direct taxes and kept the peace. In the East, Greek cities also generally issued their own bronze coinage, in tandem with imperial issues.¹⁸ By contrast, the civic pride of towns in the Latin West was often more nebulous, but, although in theory the relations of such communities to Rome might vary greatly, some being 'allies' or 'friends' of Rome rather than subjects, in reflection of their varied histories before the advent of Roman power, in practice they all served the state in the same way by relieving it of the need for a bureaucracy to fulfil such functions. None the less, those who governed areas on behalf of Rome needed to be moderately competent and, even more important, trustworthy in the eyes of the emperor.

In the Republic the command of legionary armies had always been entrusted to senators, and this remained in general true in the Roman Empire, apart from the legions in Egypt which were commanded by a non-senator, the prefect (*praefectus Aegypti*). Restriction of command to persons of this high rank particularly helped to deal with the potentially serious problem that military careers might cease to appear attractive to politicians

once the highest prizes of success had been taken from them. After 30 BC, triumphs were rarely permitted to senators apart from the emperor (after 19 BC only to members of the imperial family), and in 28 BC the special award traditionally granted to commanders who had personally killed the enemy leader in combat (the *spolia optima*) was denied to Marcus Licinius Crassus, who had achieved this bloodthirsty feat while waging war on a tribe in Macedonia. But it is evident that, despite this, a good number of individuals were prepared to opt for a career in effect as army officers, for Augustus greatly increased the number of senators required, by the introduction of a new military rank, the *legatus legionis*. One legionary legate presided over each individual legion under the overall direction of a provincial governor. Auxiliary troops, however, were commanded by non-senators, and correspondingly were less often mentioned in literary sources, despite their military significance in particular campaigns.

Below the rank of senator, emperors employed a great variety of functionaries who served in hope of advancement and pay.¹⁹ The social rank and precise functions of these individuals are nicely disguised by the regular description of those in civilian roles as *procurator* (agent) and those in military roles as *praefectus* ('man in charge').²⁰ The term *procurator* could be used of any agent appointed by another person for any purpose. The term *praefectus* indicated any soldier put in temporary command of any task or group of men, although it had also been used in the Late Republic as a more regular title of the *praefectus fabrum* who acted as a sort of second-in-command to the general.

This ambiguity and vagueness were highly useful to emperors in describing the agents who undertook tasks for them, which might range from the collection of taxes in provinces for which the emperor was responsible, a common role, to the governorship of a province (although the term *procurator* was only used for this purpose after Claudius, when for instance the governor of Judaea began to be described by this title), to an entirely private task of the collection of monies owed to the emperor as private landlord. The private role of procurators could be insisted on by the scrupulous, as by Tiberius in AD 23 (cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 4.15), but it gradually faded away, as the distinction between the emperor's interests and those of the state became more and more difficult to descry. In part the disappearance of the distinction was facilitated by the gradual increase in the amount of provincial land actually owned directly by the emperor through confiscations and bequests, since such imperial estates were naturally managed by the emperor's private agents, who in practice often wielded great political authority.

The term *praefectus* to indicate a formally appointed military officer was much used by Augustus, who thus described the first governor of Judaea in AD 6, and another in the Alps, but after Claudius it continued to be used only of the *praefectus* of Egypt, whose military role was particularly striking because he commanded two legions.

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The whole system of appointments, both of senators and of *praefecti* and *procuratores*, was effectively designed to prevent any one individual accruing too much patronage to his own person through his position. Thus the procurator in a provincial province owed his post not to the governor (the *legatus*), but directly to the emperor, and it was to the latter that he reported back, sometimes in conflict or competition with the *legatus*. The system was not formally one of checks and balances, nor is it possible outside Egypt to show that each procurator had in general a precise sphere of operation different from that of the governor. The impression is rather of an overall bureaucracy in which everything, at least in theory, was referred back to the centre where power lay. The system was also highly flexible. Provinces moved freely from control by the *legatus* of the emperor to control by a proconsul, and special envoys of the emperor might take command of whole groups of provinces for specific campaigns; thus did Agrippa, Gaius Caesar and Corbulo in their time. The emperor stood at the head no matter what the official status of the governor. Thus he could (and did) issue *mandata* (instructions) to proconsuls as well as to his legates, in both cases often in response to requests for advice.

A good picture of the whole system can be found in Book 10 of the *Letters* of the younger Pliny, which were addressed to the emperor Trajan.²¹ Pliny's status in Pontus and Bithynia was exceptional, according to an inscription set up at his birthplace Comum (Lake Como) in Italy which records him as 'legate of Augustus ... sent by the senate ... with proconsular power', and it is possible that this reflected his special tasks in a troubled province, but it is more likely that high status was intended to compensate him for his comparatively unimportant posting, which might otherwise have seemed an affront to a senator of his seniority. If the latter explanation of his title is correct, his actions as governor in his province may be taken as fairly typical of a provincial governor's work.

Pliny was probably exceptional in the triviality of the questions he asked of Trajan. On one occasion he wrote to inform Trajan:

It is general practice for people at their coming-of-age or marriage, and on entering upon office or dedicating a public building, to issue invitations to all the local senators and even to quite a number of the common people in order to distribute presents of one or two *denarii*. I pray you to let me know how far you think this should be allowed, if at all.

(*Letters* 10.116)

Trajan's reply acknowledges the fear which Pliny goes on to express, that excessive numbers of invitations might lead to corrupt practices, yet concludes:

But I made you my choice so that you could use your good judgement

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in exercising a moderate influence on the behaviour of the people in your province, and could make your own decisions about what is necessary for their peace and security.

(Letters 10.117)

However, it is only rarely in the extant correspondence that Trajan states that such trivial questions are inappropriate for a governor. On the other hand, Pliny's tendency to intervene in comparatively small matters does seem to reflect an increasing concern among governors from the Trajanic period to interfere in provincial life, often at the request of one or another of feuding provincial aristocrats.

In the final analysis it was never possible to prevent entirely the concentration of power in the hands of governors of exceptional energy and ambition. The province of Egypt, which was strategically placed for secession, and, after the mid-first century AD, for imposing grain restrictions on the city of Rome, was forbidden territory for senators throughout the imperial period. And where a single commander of a large number of legions was absolutely unavoidable, as in the preparations of large armies in campaigns against Parthia, emperors entrusted the command to long-standing friends or to relatives in the hope, not always justified, of their loyalty. When a governor could count on local support in his province because of his own origins there, danger most obviously threatened. Such was the case with the Syrian Avidius Cassius, governor of Syria and then given supreme control of the East, including Egypt. In AD 175 he revolted against Marcus Aurelius, and held Egypt and most of the eastern provinces for three months. After his defeat, a governor's holding office in his place of origin was forbidden.