Migration in Roman Egypt: Problems and Possibilities*

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Introduction

Edict of Gaius Vibius Maximus, prefect of Egypt. The house-to-house census (τῆς κατ’ οἰκίαν ἀπογραφῆς) having started, it is essential that all persons who for any reason whatsoever are absent from their nomes be summoned to return to their own hearths, in order that they might perform the customary business of registration (τῆς ἀπογραφῆς) and apply themselves to the cultivation which concerns them. Knowing, however, that some of the people of the country are needed by our city, I desire all those who think they have a satisfactory reason for remaining here (in Alexandria) to register themselves before... Festus, praefectus alae, whom I have appointed for this purpose, from whom those who have shown their presence to be necessary shall receive signed permits (ὑπογράφαι) in accordance with this edict up to the 30th of this present month Epeiph...¹

This well-known edict of the prefect Vibius Maximus offers a convenient starting point for a consideration of the significance of migration in Roman Egypt. It presents a number of important points: first, it shows that it was fully

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accepted that individuals would be absent from their ἰδία (‘place of origin’), permanently or temporarily. In this case country-dwellers are being ordered to return home from Alexandria, but it is probably part of a general order to the province. The second point is that there was a range of reasons why someone would be absent – would have migrated – and these included reasons which the state found to be acceptable (so that administrators were willing to grant permits in order to facilitate residence in another area), and those which had seemingly diverted them from “the cultivation which concerns them”. Third, it hints at the difficulties that the state faced in tracing individuals who were absent for whatever reason. How did the state deal with those who had left their ἰδία to avoid paying taxes or undertaking liturgies (ἀναχώρησις), people who would not present themselves willingly before the praefectus alae? Finally, we should note the rather ad hoc nature of the registration of individuals, even in the highly formalised context of census documentation. This is shown for example by the presence of lodgers, who are unlikely to have obtained permission, let alone a permit, for their residence but clearly had not returned to their ἰδία. The difficulties faced by the state in this are well illustrated by a papyrus of the early third century:

Of the Oasis of the Thebaid [...] on those residing away from home. Sextilios Hierax, strategos of the Oasis [of the Thebaid to...strategos of the Arsinoite Nome] for the Themistos and Polemon divisions. You are well aware, my friend, of the recent [orders of Severus and Antoninus, our great lords,] our divine and unconquerable emperors, and of the written instructions of our [illustrious prefect, on the subject of those] natives residing away from home, [telling us] to take cognizance if these [men living away from home and] being [from] other nomes, [and to see to it] that they go back home, each man to his own [birthplace. Therefore make sure,] my friend, in the same [way...] that [you repatriate] those who are residing in your neighbourhood or [have settled there...] and who are from this area [...]lest we be held (?) to have neglected the decrees, so that [...] here.3

2 Compare Luke 2.3. The concept of ἰδία is a complex one, as individuals who owned land in different regions would have had tax and liturgical responsibilities in those various regions where they owned land. See Braunert 1955/6. On returning to one’s ἰδία, see Jördens 2009: 69–75.

3 sb 12, 10884, lines 1–16 (200 CE) (BL 7, 223) (with sb 1, 4284): Ὀάσεως Ἱεραίων Θεμίστου καὶ Πολέμωνος [μεριδων -ca.?] Ὀάσεως Ὀάσεως Θηβαίδος ς̣[-ca.?] περὶ τῶν ἐν τῇ ἄλλῳ ἐκκλησίᾳ δ[ατριβόντων -ca.?] Σεξτίλιος Ηέραξ στρ(ατηγὸς) Θεμίστου καὶ Πολέμωνος [μεριδων -ca.?] σὺκ ἀγγειεις ἀδελφε ὑπόγυον ,[-ca.?] τῶν κυρίων Ἦμων μεγίστων καὶ