CHAPTER FOUR

MORE IS WORSE: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE POPULATION OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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This paper is largely theoretical, and my aims are narrowly limited.\(^1\) Although my subject is the early Roman empire, I am not attempting to estimate its gross population, nor the populations of its constituent provinces or regions; nor do I express any view on whether these populations were actually growing or shrinking during this period. All these topics are unquestionably of immense historical importance. However, with regard to each of them I am, for the time being, agnostic. The reason is that surviving evidence on population seems to me exceedingly fragile both in its quantity and quality, and accordingly I have little confidence in our ability to arrive at more than vague (if arguably ‘educated’) guesses as to gross population levels and change.

From the outset of my research on Roman demography a little over two decades ago, my interest has lain in areas where, despite what I concede are still formidable evidentiary obstacles, I have felt that we can nonetheless hope to make progress. These areas involve the major underlying demographic realities of the early Roman empire, particularly as concerns subjects such as mortality, nuptiality, and fertility. Our knowledge of these subjects is, of course, still very imperfect. We have only occasional avenues of opportunity, and each is fraught with uncertainty at many crucial points. Nonetheless, these avenues have at least the virtue of being relatively untrodden; and, as I hope to show, they may also provide some indirect help on questions of gross population.

Let me begin by returning to a section of *The demography of Roman Egypt*, the book that Roger Bagnall and I wrote on what is probably

\(^1\) For this reason, I have preserved the original format of this paper, with only the lightest annotation. Newell (1988) outlines basic demographic concepts and working methods.
our best single source for ancient demography, the early imperial census returns from Egypt.² Towards the beginning of this book, we briefly discuss the gross population of Egypt. This matter was not, to be sure, of great moment to our project. For the most part, our discussion drew heavily from Dominic Rathbone’s persuasive article concerning the population of Graeco-Roman Egypt.³ However, there was a significant difference in emphasis between Rathbone’s article and our book. Though we did point out this difference, we did not stress it; but it has important implications.

As is well known, the two main literary sources for Roman Egypt’s population appear to contradict each other. Towards the end of the first century BCE, Diodorus Siculus (1.31.6–9) places Egyptian population at three million. By contrast, not quite a century later the historian Josephus, in a literary speech (BJ 2.385), gives a population of 7.5 million for Egypt exclusive of Alexandria, an estimate that is allegedly based (by what computation is unclear) on the amount collected from the poll tax levied on adult males; this population would imply a total Egyptian population on the order of eight to nine million. It is improbable that both Diodorus and Josephus are correct.

Historians of Roman Egypt, doubtless influenced by a commendable zeal to enhance the luster of their subject, have usually opted for Josephus’ higher estimate. Accordingly, they have denigrated or crudely emended away Diodorus’ figure. Rathbone, by contrast, supports the Diodorus estimate on a variety of grounds, but particularly because of the likely ‘carrying capacity’ of the Nile valley before the late nineteenth century, prior to the introduction of perennial irrigation and Egypt’s partial integration into European industrial economies.

Bagnall and I used Rathbone’s argument as our starting point, albeit with several revisions especially in the number and size of the populations of the district capitals, the metropoleis. However, the drift of our argument was neither to support Diodorus nor to undermine Josephus. To put it bluntly, stray population figures from ancient literary texts struck us as unimpressive in the absence of clear and convincing evidence as to their origins and interpretation; and cer-

² Bagnall and Frier (1994) 53–7. I should stress that Roger Bagnall is not implicated in the argument I am making here.
³ Rathbone (1990), esp. 103–10, 122–4.