

OXYRHYNCHUS

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ABOUT forty years ago two English archaeologists discovered, in the ruins of a Nile town known in antiquity by the grotesque name of Oxyrhynchus, several thousand sheets of papyri covered with writing. They removed these sheets from the ruins, packed them into boxes and carried them back to the British Museum; then they spent the rest of their lives in the work of editing them. For many years large grey tomes kept appearing, entitled the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*. These tomes contained a vast variety of documents on multifarious subjects, but the place of prominence was given to some new classical texts and to the fragments of two gospels hitherto unknown. Scholars and theologians braced themselves for controversy. Some new Ph.D.'s arose on the ruins of Oxyrhynchus, and one enterprising German even compiled a list of its street names, a work of vast labour and unquestionable utility, from which they say he has never recovered. But there was nothing much new in the texts; the fragments from the new gospels were too minute to interest anyone but the more donnish of dons, and the labour of the two archaeologists seemed rather Laputan until some historians set themselves to examine what at first had seemed the dregs of the discovery. This was a conglomerate mass of bills, receipts, letters, mortgages, contracts, tax-reports, police summonses and complaints to local authorities. And from this dusty pile of torn paper and bad Greek a picture can be drawn that ought to make some of us shiver.

Oxyrhynchus is known to us as a town in which Greeks, Jews and native Egyptian Fellahin lived subject to the authority of the Roman government. The Greeks were descended from Alexander's conquering Macedonians, they had been in the Nile valley for two hundred years before the Romans came, and there had derived a lucrative living at the expense of the natives who did most of the work for them. Now the Greeks were in turn to be exploited by the Romans, and Roman emperors nurtured Egypt as devotedly as modern capital nourishes its workers, for this was the richest province in the whole empire, the goose that laid the golden eggs; so by all means—it seemed to the Caesars—it must be given the advantage of Roman culture and laws.

The Roman Empire is not only our great predecessor, but also the example consciously followed by our forefathers and by some of our present rulers. While Rome was growing great,

she was an imperialistic democracy which believed in and practised the theory of economy known as private enterprise. Romans liked big things, they enjoyed large cities and enormous spectacles, and in the eyes of their jurists property was sacred. Rome never produced a conqueror like Alexander or Napoleon. Her generals tended to follow the steps of her merchants, and her merchants were so active that not only the whole Mediterranean world, but also Spain, France, Switzerland, and the left bank of the Rhine were taken in and made into provinces before the empire was officially created. Of the many causes which made democracy impossible to Romans, the cut-throat competition between land-owners and merchants was perhaps the most efficient. Generals representing one or the other party caused the civil wars of the first century before Christ, until finally Roman politics came to resemble a tournament between military autocrats. The winner was Augustus. In the year 31 B.C., after all his rivals had killed one another or been killed by him, the citizens accepted an emperor. Rome, having made a desert, could now call it peace.

But although private enterprise in politics had become impossible unless a man intended to commit high treason, it continued strongly in business and every-day life. No new way of living was contemplated for a moment, and although thousands hated the despotism, no revolution ever aimed at accomplishing more than the substitution of a stronger emperor for a weaker one. Under the new order the provinces developed and became more important than Italy. A poor boy could advance from an obscure provincial town and become a great official of state, even emperor. Yet this organism, after reaching a peak of wealth and culture which was never equalled until less than a hundred years ago, declined and fell. Historians are still asking why it collapsed, and most of them disagree in their reasons. Yet so much as this is certain, that a society founded on the principle of private enterprise and aiming at material possessions was unable to stand the weight of time and perished from the world.

The effect of this calamity on people like you and me is not revealed in the Roman history books; it is told in the *Oxyrhynchus papyri*.

Oxyrhynchus was a town which was about as important to the Roman Empire as Trenton, New Jersey, is to the United States. It lay in the Nile valley just above the Fayum, and was surrounded by rich wheat fields. It would take an Oxyrhynchian several days to reach Alexandria by river-boat, and most of the inhabitants were too settled or busy or uninterested to travel and see the world; in later days they were too poor. So Oxyrhynchus was just another

provincial town in which it was a big event when the prefect came through with his retinue, and praised or abused the local officials, and walked all the way from his litter to the state porticoes on purple carpets. In a quiet sort of way the inhabitants were fairly happy and prosperous in the early days of Roman rule. They had a theatre and baths for the public, they held their festivals and games and races, and the upper classes found a social centre in the gymnasium. That some citizens read good books is proved by the large number of texts which were removed from the ruins. Greeks owned most of the land, and Jews did some of the business. The hard work was still done by the native Fellahin, a people who had five thousand years of training in serfdom and rarely thought of rebelling.

We have definite evidence, too, that during those early days Oxyrhynchus had some public-spirited citizens living in it. There is a decree in honour of one man proposing that a statue and a full-length portrait be presented in his honour in return for his generosity to the town. He had contributed steadily to the theatrical fund, and had given money to help in the restoration of public baths. Towards the end of the second century a man called Horion wrote to the emperor asking permission to establish a fund to help out some backward sections of the community, and from Horion's letter we learn that "the prefect himself has a high opinion of the general excellence and culture of the inhabitants of Oxyrhynchus."

Although all this is commonplace, its prosaic quality is a good indication that the society was healthy. Most real news tends to be bad news, and when the news from Oxyrhynchus is interesting it generally tells of disasters. From the middle of the second century a decline set in, and times grew steadily worse; they kept on getting worse until by the end of the third century one thinks that the limit has been reached. Yet the fourth century evidence shows a greater decline still, and the fifth likewise. By the year 400 A.D. nearly all the descendants of Alexander's conquering Macedonians were living in abject poverty as serfs to a small oligarchy of rich men. In the sixth century even the rich families of a hundred years earlier had been eliminated, and the entire secular property of the district had passed into the hands of two or three men who lived in luxury in Constantinople and may not have visited their estates from one year's end to the other. The history of this town is the history of the Decline and Fall seen through the large end of the telescope, and it shows conclusively that although private enterprise was responsible for the greatness of Rome, it was also responsible for the reduction of democratic communities to a quasi-feudal serfdom.

During the second century of our era wars and pestilence had made the empire of the Caesars poor, and the Government could think of no other policy than to increase taxation. No one ever tried permanently to curtail the high standard of living demanded by the upper classes. It was reduced by time, not by law. When the exchequer felt the drain caused by the second century wars, it adopted—in Egypt at least—a device known as the *liturgy*. Under the *liturgy* private citizens were compelled by the government to perform public services such as maintaining the dykes and the irrigation system, cleaning the canals, building roads and collecting taxes. They were held responsible by the government if they failed to perform a *liturgy*, and were not remunerated if they did perform it. Farmers busy with their crops were compelled to leave their work to build a dyke several miles away. City-dwellers might at any moment be summoned from their work to spend several months in the collection of taxes. The result of this system was that both business and agriculture were slowly ruined. The land became filled with wanderers who had lost their farms when mortgages had been foreclosed; and as time passed, these wanderers not only formed into gangs of robbers, but later became the nucleus of the armies which produced the third century anarchy. The Government never once faced the problem of unemployment. An official attitude is best revealed in the following document, a prefect's edict from the early third century: "it is impossible to exterminate robbers without also exterminating the friends who shelter them. When they have been deprived of their helpers, we shall punish them quickly." The helpers were probably members of their own families.

Now, just about the time when affairs were growing acute, appears a document which suggests that the rulers were becoming almost Socialistic. Caracalla issues an edict in which he presents the town with "autonomy"! So the citizens in all good faith set about electing a local senate, elaborate speeches were made, and for a few years the local members may have felt important. Then, just ten years after the original decree, appears another edict which shows that the emperor had been as shrewd as he had been cynical, for he had foreseen that the times demanded still greater requisitions, and had introduced the senate as an attempt to divert odium from himself to his subjects. The only duties the senate had to perform were the assigning of liturgies, and most of these duties devolved on actual members. It is therefore not surprising that the second decree of Caracalla forbids senators to strike each other in public!

As the third century advanced, the signs of anarchy and increasing poverty become more and more frequent. All measures intended to restore financial security aimed merely at extracting more money, and such legislation as was controlled by the citizens themselves was always in the interest of the city bourgeoisie. So, in spite of the fact that the wealth of the empire was dependent mostly on agriculture, land was taxed prohibitively. The emperor Heliogabalus, a youthful prodigy who squandered millions on his own table, raised the taxes on farm land by two hundred per cent, and that at a time when small farmers were desperate. Then began the great era of foreclosures and land speculation. There were so many discontented men in the empire that any persuasive adventurer might hope to raise an army, and the papyri are full of references to the ruinous extortions of soldiers. Roaming armies of penniless proletarians led by unscrupulous generals who had themselves risen from poverty through the misfortunes of others were the forerunners of the coming barbarization of the world. Money became more and more unstable as confidence in money waned, and in the year 260 A.D. the banks in Oxyrhynchus closed their doors and refused to exchange the latest coinage. Again the Government had recourse to coercion, and the following edict came down from the prefect's office in Alexandria:

Since the officials have assembled and accused the banks of exchange of having closed their doors on account of unwillingness to accept the divine coin of the emperors, it has become necessary to issue an injunction to all such banks to open for business at once and accept all coin except the absolutely counterfeit. Business men also must accept this coin or suffer the penalties already ordained for them in the past by His Highness the Prefect.

But people could not be persuaded to put confidence in money which became cheaper every year. Real estate was the only thing they could trust now, and in spite of the fact that land was still heavily taxed, those who had capital began purchasing all the land they could get. This they could do, because farmers were so desperately in need of money to pay the land-taxes that they had no bargaining power. It was the beginning of the progress towards feudalism, the decentralization of life and the ultimate barbarization of the world. In Oxyrhynchus this progress is illustrated by the career of a man called Aurelius Serenus.

In the year 240 Serenus appears as a contractor who lived in the city and who would buy or sell anything, from house property to female slaves. He ended his life as a landed proprietor, the chief local dignitary in the district and one of the richest men in that part of the province of Egypt. It is unlikely that in his

younger days Serenus ever dreamed of becoming a landed gentleman, and it is just as certain that he never realized that his career had historical importance. His life was that of any commonplace man of business who acts according as the moment dictates and is shrewd enough to trim his sails to the wind. In his youth he had desired money, but in middle age inflation made him desire land. One document shows him bidding for land in competition with his own brother. By the year 285 he was so well established that he could afford to hand over his largest estate to stewards and pay them to administer it for him. There is no evidence that he did any real farm work himself; on the contrary, he regarded this land merely as a source of profit, not as a career.

It is of fundamental importance to examine the state of money at this period of transition. Prices were rising steadily in proportion as the coinage became inflated. One document informs us that a jar of wine cost nearly two and a half talents; a talent at par is generally equated to \$1080. There was always danger of inflation in the Roman Empire after the first century, but the emperors had managed to control it until the anarchy of the third century. Under Marcus Aurelius there were two grams of silver in the drachma; under Heliogabalus in the early part of the third century the silver content had shrunk to .937 grams. But thirty years later we see it fluctuating wildly between .48 and .065, and though Constantine many years afterwards attempted to restore the gold standard, he was at least a century too late. By that time the process of decentralization had gone too far to be stopped. After the anarchy and inflations of the third century, the condition of the city bourgeoisie was desperate. In Oxyrhynchus we discover that the population of the city had risen to its highest level at that time, but this increase in population does not in any sense indicate prosperity. On the contrary, most of the newcomers seem to have come up the Nile from the Fayum where the breakdown of the irrigation system had made conditions still worse. More references to banditry appear, the central government still doing nothing to reduce the numbers of the homeless; and these unfortunates, whom the authorities regarded as surplus nuisances, swelled the ranks of insurgent adventurers when they were not themselves preying on travellers and outlying farmers. It cannot be too greatly emphasized that the Roman bourgeoisie cut their own throats. By legislating always in their own favour they impoverished the small farmers and artisans; by hounding them as criminals they made them desperate enough to revolt; then the armies of the civil war destroyed so much wealth and produced so much disorder that inflations became necessary. Lacking

confidence in money, the bourgeoisie had no weapons left. A bourgeois way of life became impossible and the towns poor. Decentralization and serfdom followed inevitably. I wonder if the British National Government was aware of this when its prime minister stated that England must resign herself to the fact that two millions of her people are to be regarded as permanently surplus and devoid of value.

The plight of the city bourgeoisie is admirably illustrated by this document which bears a late third century date. It is a series of the most customary questions put to the local oracle: "Am I to be sold up? Shall I obtain relief from my friend? Am I to get furlough from the army? Shall I get the money? Is the person abroad (almost certainly an evicted relative) still alive? Is my property to be sold at auction? Am I to become a beggar? Shall I take to flight? Have I been poisoned? Am I to be divorced from my wife? Shall I get my own?"

But however destructive economic chaos may be, it can rarely compete with an army; and however inevitable the anarchy was, it is certainly tragic to observe how soldiers fomented it. Armies wandered everywhere and stole all they could lay their hands on. Most of the emperors were successful generals who then tried to run the state with the same brutality with which they ran the soldiery. And they showed the same lack of imagination. A squad of soldiers entered Oxyrhynchus and robbed the treasury, stating that it was all in the line of duty. A private letter reads: "The prefect has sent an amnesty here, and there is no longer terror. You may come boldly if you will, for we are no longer able to remain indoors." These military emperors, knowing little of statesmanship and less of finance, would issue a coinage so debased that the citizens would hoard their gold, then order their prefects to requisition what had been hoarded. There is an example of this kind of official extortion in the form of a letter to the Oxyrhynchus authorities from the prefect in Alexandria. Thirty pounds of gold were demanded arbitrarily, from "each man according to his means", and the citizens were held responsible for its delivery. More and more strongly, as one follows this dismal chain of evidence, one has the feeling that most of these people were doomed and knew it, and that the more powerful of them thought of nothing beyond their immediate interests. In earlier times the soldiery may not have been popular, but there had been a show of justice and the form of the law had been maintained. Now, in the death throes of Roman capitalism, even the show disappeared and the soldiers ministered to the brutality and cowardice of anyone who paid them. Landlords and peasants alike used to pay soldiers

to settle their private disputes for them, and there are several examples which prove that the practice was common. "Let them know that if they neglect to come, Serapion will make things hot for them, for he will send the soldiers." The most a prefect could do was to protest. "I learn from petitioners," an edict reads, "that some persons of civil status, whether from perversity of judgement or sheer malice...are having recourse to the local military to settle their civil disputes."

Yet it is a mistake to assume that barbarization came hastily. Its advance was almost imperceptible to the inhabitants, who continued to hope until the fourth century. War and anarchy were the instruments of destruction, but economic competition was the root evil. If there is one point that the evidence makes certain it is that a small number of individuals cynically used the calamities of their neighbours to develop and consolidate their own fortunes. Brutal armies of vagrants may have terrorized over whole districts, but the rich bourgeoisie, which was merciless towards debtors and small holders and always reached out for more than it could possibly use, had certainly bred the vagrants who formed the armies. The rich acted as ruthlessly as they could, and when justice broke down they had it all their own way. One document is an appeal from a poor man against a rich neighbour who had removed him from his land by the simple expedient of bribing a local police authority to imprison him. From another document we learn that the justices expected to receive, and did receive, gratuities from the rich. Sometimes a powerful landlord would sabotage the property of a rival, rendering him incapable of paying his taxes. Then the property could be purchased for a song from the man himself or from corrupt governmental officials who had confiscated it. "Relying on his superior wealth and means, he wishes to drive me from my village, just as he drove out my husband who is still living in foreign parts. Today I am paying taxes on fifty acres of unirrigated land."

Meanwhile those who had influence used it mainly to avoid responsibility. "I shall send you to a lawyer called Dionysius," one man writes to another. "If you employ him, he will show you how to get out of your corn-tax."

So it followed naturally that the poor and helpless, seeing that wealth was the only safeguard, were willing to give up a painful independence and become serfs of a rich master, if only the master would guarantee protection from the violence of others. A letter from an army officer to his brother runs as follows: "To my brother Heras Ammonius, greeting. The bearer of this letter is my tenant. He states that he has been appointed to a public

office in the village, namely the collectorship of cloaks and tunics. Do all you can to rescue him from this, and see that *his own people* cease bothering him in the future."

Thus barbarism advanced and civilization was frozen out of the world. "Subjection to the punishment of scourging," a late fourth century edict reads, "is even for those of servile estate lamentable, though not entirely forbidden; but for free men to have to submit to this is against the law."

In another passage a local police chief speaks: "Having no assistance either from public guards or inspectors, we risk our lives often in going about the empty streets of the town on our patrols."

A brother writes to his sister; "Hermias to his sister, greeting. I have already told you of everything until I am tired. . . . When a man finds himself in calamity, he ought not to struggle stupidly against fate. We fail to realize our happiness, the misery and inferiority to which we are born. I wonder if *time* can accomplish everything after all."

Another person writes, in a single line, the epitaph of the bourgeoisie of the time: "Even though I am hopeless, I shall go there. It might just be that there would be something to sell."

There is little more to tell of this small town. The fourth century came to an end with the civic population ruined and a small oligarchy of landlords established in the rural districts. The Christian Church was winning many converts, and a bishop of Oxyrhynchus states that in the fifth century there were thirty thousand people under monastic vows in the city alone. But a hundred years after this nearly all the documents deal with the estate of one man only, a splendid noble called Apion who was a grandee at the court in Constantinople and had the whole district subject to him. Apparently the House of Apion had eliminated all its rivals during the fifth century, until it possessed all there was to own of the secular property of the district. When on vacation from the court Apion amused himself with the racing of horses, with bathing in his elaborate open-air swimming pools, and with reading about the glories of the past in the books of his library. He had several country residences, and stewards and bailiffs did all his administrative work for him. For his people he seems to have had no regard whatever. They worked from morning till night, hopelessly, sowing seeds of wealth that another man reaped, and thinking themselves lucky if they were even permitted to live. The life was out of them. There was no longer hope of improvement, for barbarism was not a thing to be resisted but a fact to accept, and the Church, a great property owner itself, did

all in its power to force the people to accept the barbarism. The whole organism of Roman society lay passive, inert, as though waiting to be obliterated by a force external to itself. It had not long to wait, either, for in the first half of the seventh century Oxyrhynchus was swept forever from the Empire by the Arab Hegira. And to us to-day, to whom the Fascists are offering a return to barbarism, the most horrible feature of the Decline and Fall seems not to have been so much economic failure as the spiritual destruction it involved. When life became difficult, Christianity won converts and for a time gave comfort, but somehow it became corrupted too, until nothing remained but resignation and servility. The Christian documents from the third century show real religion; those from the sixth are fewer, and the most notable are these two;

“As the Lord lives, if I find they have not shown zeal in collecting, I shall punish them well.”

“To Apion, my kind lord, lover of Christ and the poor, all-esteemed and most magnificent patrician and chief of the Thebaid, from Anoup your miserable slave on the estate called Phraka. . . . I, your miserable slave, desire by this petition for mercy to call it to your lordship’s notice that I serve my kind lord as my fathers and forefathers did and pay the taxes every year.”

It took centuries of economic cannibalism to produce this fine flower of a system that had hitched its wagon to the star of private enterprise. How long would it take the Fascists to do as well?