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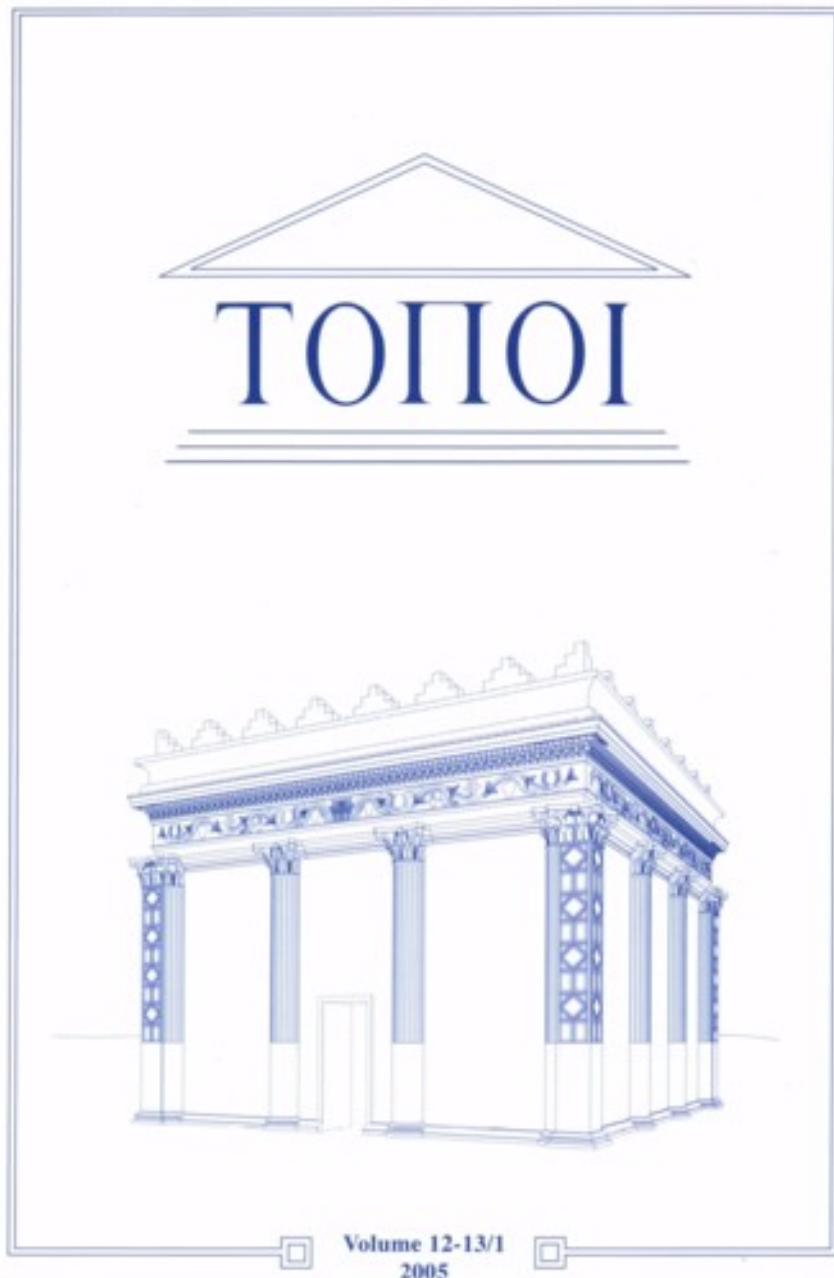
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Economic Rationalism and the Heroninos Archive

[article]

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Texte intégral

ECONOMIC RATIONALISM AND THE HERONINOS ARCHIVE*

Economic Rationalism and Rural Society in Third-Century AD Egypt : the Heroninos Archive and the Appianus Estate (hereafter ERRS), published in 1991, is an expanded revision of my Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, submitted in 1986. Its foundation is a traditional study of an archive of ancient texts, the Heroninos Archive. The published part of this archive is centred on the 400 or so letters written to, and various accounts drafted by, Heroninos, who from 249 to 268 was the manager (phrontistês) of the unit at the village of Theadelphia (Fayyum, Egypt) of the large private estate of the Alexandrian notable Aurelius Appianus. Much of my work was antiquarian : classifying and dating documents, identifying people and places, working towards a descriptive reconstruction of the functioning of the estate, as seen, very fragmentarily, through one of its outlying units. But the task was more than mechanical. Making links and bridging the many gaps required leaps of imagination. My reconstruction is open to challenges based on new evidence or different ideas.

Although the reconstruction was fun and interesting in itself, my hope was that it would contribute to the debate about the ancient economy provoked by M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (1973 ; 2nd ed, with « Further Thoughts », 1985). I was, as I still am, interested in Roman agrarian history, and was not persuaded that the « peasant mentality » which Finley argued characterised Graeco-Roman landowners (and other pre-modern landowners ?) in contrast to the economic rationality of modern farmers, was applicable to Roman landowners of the late Republic and Principate. Finley' s model, it seems to some historians of Rome, does not account adequately for the writings of the Roman

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agronomists or the archaeological evidence for villa-estates (which I began to discover as a « schiavo » at the excavation of Settefinestre): for instance, Cato's concern for the efficient deployment of slave labour in intensive cash-crop farming, the architectural 'rationality' of the compact, ergonomic, design of the wine-producing villa at Boscoreale Pisanella, and the mass maritime distribution of wine 1 . Archaeology, however, and the prescriptive recommendations of the agronomists are silent on many important

questions of actual management: how, and how well, did largely absentee landowners direct production and marketing? What were their management structures, employment practices, distribution systems, financial arrangements, accounting methods, and so on? For this I had to turn to the texts on papyrus from Roman Egypt.

I had imagined I would find modest groups of documents from a number of different estates to examine. Instead I woke the sleeping monster of the Heroninos Archive. This opened a second line of research: the reality of the so-called crisis of the third century. In my book I argue, contrary to the views of Rostovtzeff, Frank and others, that the economy of Egypt in the third century was vigorous and heavily monetised, that there was no monetary inflation until Aurelian's coinage reform, and that the Appianus and related estates had not usurped any public powers. This revised background matters because arguably the type of economic rationalism which I claim was practised by the Appianus Estate would not have been possible without it.

Over the last ten years the slow work has continued of publishing and revising texts from the Archive and related documents; for a change of material, some more stamps from amphora stoppers have appeared². These add new detail and oblige some amendments but as yet no major changes. We now know, for example, that Appianus had died by October 259³. P. Bingen 111 (2000) adds two high figures for wheat yields from directly worked fields. Some other examples are cited below. There are also various minor errors and points to clarify which I and others have noted. Among reviews, Andreau and Maucourant (hereafter & ') have published the most substantial and thought-provoking critique of my book, but important points have also been made by Bagnali, Kehoe, Bingen and Jördens⁴.

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My argument that the Appianus Estate was a private property, not a leased imperial domain, has been accepted. Bingen is right that I may have underestimated the extent to which the Estate rented arable public land, for my argument that land in klêroi must have been private is unsafe⁵. The vineyards, however, were private. Bingen also asks how Appianus and his peers came to acquire their huge estates. P. Col. X 255 (AD 131) now shows that the vineyard « of Spartianos » had existed at Theadelphia at least a century before Appianus owned it, which suggests a slow process of private accumulation. However, archaeological evidence for brick-and-mortar wine-pressing installations, the lênoui of the Heroninos Archive, built over abandonment layers in Fayyum villages, suggests that there may have been a particularly rapid phase of expansion of large estates through reclamation of land abandoned as a result of the Antonine plague⁶. A&M phrase the issue in general terms: to what extent are private ownership and a free market in land necessary conditions for economically rational estate management? Up to its privatisation by Diocletian, much (around 50%?) of the arable land of Egypt was owned

by the state and leased out, which must have made it relatively difficult to buy good land. On the other hand, as A&M suggest, state ownership of land need not have inhibited private investment and improvement: abandoned or confiscated land was leased for low rents or sold cheaply with reduced tax liability to encourage private investment, and growing knowledge of the demotic documents is revealing that Egyptian tradition gave tenants of « public » (or « royal ») and « sacred » land extensive customary rights of tenure 7. The limitations on ownership will probably not have deterred investment by those with enthusiasm and capital; whether the majority of small tenants, as Kehoe imagines, had the means or will to invest is another matter.

On the topic of the labour force of the Estate, I now agree with Bagnali and others that the paidaria were slaves, but I insist that there were very few of them (ERRS 89-91), and most, who visited units of the estate on horseback to enforce instructions (now adding P.Prag. II 201), look like personal assistants to Appianus or Alypius. On the whole reviewers have accepted that most of the workers were free men, freely contracted, and paid in cash. A&M stress the exceptions: the oiketai who had lifelong contracts and whose remuneration consisted of accommodation, rations, payment of personal taxes, and a small

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clothing allowance in cash, which was tripled in or shortly before 259; also the receipt of wheat rations by other long-term employees, and the sporadic purchase by workers of wine from the estate whose cost was set against the wages owed to them (which some other scholars too persist in describing, wrongly, as payment in kind). They doubt that there was a free labour market because, they suggest, the Estate was constricted by « embedded » social customs about employment which probably went back to the New Kingdom, and also (inconsistently ?) because the market was not « symmetrical », with equal bargaining power for labour. In my book I noted the probable interplay between local custom in particular villages and the Estate's homogenising tendencies (ERRS 392-3), and the topic would benefit from more evidence and investigation. Jördens, for example, doubts my view that « metrêmataios », apparently a neologism of the Appianus Estate, denotes someone employed on a traditional paramene contract, and it is all too easy to see false continuities in the mythically « unchanging » countryside of Egypt 8. In my view, cash remuneration was the dominant form of remuneration by the Appianus Estate; most workers were paid in cash, and remuneration was mostly thought of in cash. A&M tend to treat the Estate as an isolated, almost abstract, entity, but it existed in a real world, in competition with other large estates and other employment options, probably at a time when rural labour was in relatively short supply 9. As I noted, there was a high turnover among the « long-term » contract labourers (metrêmataioi), and the tripling of the cash allowance of the oiketai cannot be the result of custom. A&M, like Finley, also idealise modern practice. Labour markets are never perfectly symmetrical. And would

A&M explain the truck system used by some English industrialists, and their factory villages, as embedded mediaeval practices which hindered economically rational management ?

A related issue is the extent of and reasons for the Estate's use of external contractors, such as lessees of land, labour contractors (*karpônai*) and craftsmen. Kehoe thinks that much more of the Estate's land must have been leased to tenants than is attested in the documents, so that the Estate fits his imaginary norm of the dominance of leasing in the Roman empire. I remain baffled by his determination to disregard all the evidence for direct working of large estates from Gaul to Judaea. He argues that tenants and contractors brought investment capital and shouldered risk which the large landowners were not willing to do. But this thesis disintegrates on contact with the documented reality in Roman Egypt that landowners typically had to provide and maintain all the equipment

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for tenants and contractors, and often had to supply craftsmen with raw materials and sometimes with tools too, and that tenants were chronically short of cash and frequently in arrears with the rent 10. Outsiders were normally contracted to provide labour, sometimes expertise, but not finance. When A&M question the criteria I used to identify economic rationality, if I can see it both in direct working and outside contracting, so too in autarky for some materials and purchase of others, they are setting an abstract, unreal, standard (compare the modern car manufacturer who buys in some parts). Making such case-by-case judgments is not wrong in principle; the problem is historical, that we have to do it by inference, which is unprovable - unless we happen to find more letters like P. Flor. II 177 in which Appianus explained his order to construct an enclosure for breeding hares : « because it's absurd to buy them when they reproduce themselves, and doctors need them for eye-salves and other medicines », that is both for autarky and for external sale.

My claim that the Appianus Estate was a monetised enterprise operating in a highly monetised economy has been questioned to varying degrees by Bagnali, Bingen and A&M, partly with reference to the remuneration of labour (see above), but mostly in relation to the marketing of produce. Meanwhile, in a general study of the attested prices of wheat, wine and donkeys in Middle Egypt in the first to third centuries AD, I have argued that there was an integrated regional market, that the patterns of price behaviour imply a free market for wine and donkeys and slightly modified one for wheat, and that the prices set by Appianus' management both for external sales and in costing internal transfers matched contemporary price levels. It would still be useful, as Bagnali notes, to know more about how the Estate marketed its surplus produce. There is also room for more research on the extent of monetisation in the rural economy of Roman Egypt.

My reconstruction and interpretation of the accounting system of the Appianus Estate as an aid to profit-conscious management has not persuaded everyone. Bagnali would like more evidence for central use of the accounts. Bingen, Kehoe and A&M see nothing which goes beyond a system of control to avoid losses, and A&M cite Finley's put-down : « It represents the viewpoint of the policeman, not the entrepreneur » 12. Indeed, A&M suggest we are dealing with a millennial bureaucratic tradition, implicitly peculiar to Egypt. That is

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fanciful. Day-by-day registers of receipts and disbursements (or of what workers did), that is stock (or labour) records, are the basics of any accounting system, too banal for their recurrence to have historical significance. No Pharaonic- period account can be said, in any meaningful sense, to have costed most inputs and outputs by their market price in cash. Conversely, I argue that the Estate's accounts have specific sophisticated features which represent developments from known practice in the first and second centuries AD, and indeed that Heroninos himself can be seen introducing further refinements (ERRS 349-51). I also suggest that the Estate's pay records drew on long-standing Roman military practice ; our ignorance of estate accounts in Roman Italy leaves open the question of typicality. I could now, partly by using new texts such as P.Prag. II 204 (a complex booking across units of the estate of the cost of a jar of wine) and SB XX 14453 (Heroninos to be reimbursed the cost of his unit's plough- team while it works elsewhere), make a better argued and documented case for the central balancing of the accounts of the units, so that, for example, the unit at Theadelphia was credited centrally, at market prices, with costs it incurred on behalf of another unit, or debited for items transferred to it. To me this goes way beyond the requirements of stock control, and implies a desire to calculate the profit made by each individual unit. Only Bingen has tried to justify his doubts by offering a different interpretation of some of the texts on which my view rests 13. Since there are new texts soon to be published which are important for this debate, I postpone further discussion to another time.

No new texts, however, are likely to solve the basic problem mentioned above of moving from the documented or reconstructed doings and deeds of the managers of the estate to their motivation, which is ultimately a matter of judgment and persuasion. Perhaps, however, there is more to be extracted from the language of the Archive. In my book I noted the use, not confined to the Appianus Estate, of « argos », « idle », to denote a worker or animal at rest, an unleased room and so on (ERRS 273, 380). I would now expand my comment that the central administrators of the Estate often berated the managers of units for their alleged inefficiency and dilatoriness (ERRS 396 ; see 85-7 for examples from Appianus himself) ; their whole attitude was frenetic : jobs must be done now, items must be sent immediately, and, when necessary, written orders are sent out overnight. The known improvements are worth listing too: Heroninos making the format

of the monthly accounts more concise ; Alypius' estate- wide directive specifying the two types of vine to propagate, and the method to be used ; Appianus initiating the breeding of hares.

P. Troussset asked me why my title was « Economic Rationalism » rather than « Economic Rationality ». The choice was instinctive. A&M are right that I did not sufficiently consider or clarify the theoretical basis of my use of these

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terms. At the time I was reacting to Finley' s model of the « peasant mentality » of ancient landowners which he contrasted with modern « economic rationality ». Throughout my book I tried to show that the Appianus Estate displays precisely those qualities of management which Finley claimed were lacking in the ancient world, and also, he rather oddly added, among the fictionalised Russian gentry of the early nineteenth century. Finley focussed on mentality under the influence of Weber's heuristic model of the « Protestant Ethic » designed to explain the rise of capitalism, but also because we have plenty of literary reflections of elite thinking from the Graeco-Roman world but very little economic data outside the papyri and archaeological remains, neither of which were congenial to Finley 14. Whereas Weber had seen economic rationality as a quality traceable, to some extent, throughout human history, Finley made it more extreme and exclusively modern. Here we may suspect the influence of anthropology, especially the widespread use in studies of the Greek world of an antithetical concept of « the other », echoing that propensity in Greek thought itself, whereas Roman studies, perhaps like the Romans themselves, have not been so keen on antithesis 15.

The tough definition of economic rationality which A&M assert is implicit in my book - « when choices are made according to a calculation of profitability . . . independently of all other factors, social, political, cultural, etc. » - is Finley' s idealised model of modern capitalist thought. In fact what I argue for is « limited » or « bounded » economic rationality, that where and when the Appianus Estate had a choice, it was interested in efficiency, productivity, profitability. I accept that the Estate was, to some extent, embedded in the social and cultural edifice of third-century AD Egypt, although the main limitations I saw on management choice were to do with macro-economic factors (the climate of the Fayyum, technical limitations of transport and storage). In the terms of New Institutionalism, already pretty old hat (and for us, potentially, a return ticket to Finleyism), the markets for labour and produce were « imperfect ». But the same is true of the modern world, and more so in some places than others. Economic rationality is an unattainable ideal. It is not even, without qualification or contextualisation, a clear ideal. For instance, is short- term « profit maximisation » or investment for long-term growth the more economically rational ? To say that an ancient landowner did not aim at profit maximisation may indicate they he was more economically rational than a modern asset

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degree is a lot less tidy and polemical, and hence a lot more attractive, especially if we imagine a kaleidoscope rather than a straight and finite line of possible configurations, and add to it, as A&M advocate, neo-institutionalist consideration of the structural circumstances. We need to progress beyond bipolar characterisation of economic thought and behaviour as « modern » or « primitive », capitalist or non-capitalist, or whatever supposedly less loaded terms are proposed.

In retrospect I am happy that I wrote about 'economic rationalism' if it denotes a cultural structure, combining material circumstances and behavioural attitudes, which permits and encourages economically rational decision-making, rather than « economic rationality », an idealised mentality which it is virtually impossible to pin down in everyday reality. Like A&M, I see no greater clarity or heuristic value in Finley's « peasant mentality » or the « satisficing mentality » which Kehoe adopts, with serious modification, from H. Simon. Equally, I reject the argument that heavy spending by mediaeval lords on castles and retinues was « rational » because it was necessary in order to survive and prosper; yes, but this is the Weberian « substantive rationality », not his « formal rationality », and however they managed the productive investments which they did make, social and political factors prevented development of a normative economic rationalism. To my mind, many institutional circumstances of the developed Roman world were unusually similar, in qualitative terms, to those of modern capitalism: strong rights of private property, a flexible and effective legal system, extensive monetisation, readily available credit, banks capable of long-distance paper transactions, good transport facilities, technical sophistication in production, a stable and open political and social system, little direct government intervention 16. Because I also believe that many Romans took advantage of these circumstances to increase their wealth through planned investment of capital and labour, I am disposed to see the Roman economy as a case of economic rationalism which permeated even its local base of small-scale farming and craft production. Incidentally, this indicates, as do various comments above, that I believe the Appianus Estate to have been « typical » of the developed Roman economy as a whole, and not just in Egypt, but the case for typicality, as Bagnali observes, requires more substance. Of course the modern economy is different quantitatively, above all in its extraordinary exponential rate of technological advance and economic growth, at least in some areas of the world 17. A&M assert that it is institutions, not human nature, which change. But human ethics, cultural values, modes of thought, do change, and

must have some role in explaining why the Roman economy was different to the Greek economy, or ours to the Roman. Economic rationality may be too crude, too imprecise, a term. However this debate, to which the searching critique of my book by Andraeu and Maucourant makes a notable contribution, is grafting vibrant new shoots onto the old vine of ancient economic history.

[Note:

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Notes

1.

I have expanded and added bibliographic references to what I said on the day. I thank Professor Tchernia for organising the debate, the participants for their stimulating comments, the Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l'Homme and the EHESS for their welcome, and the Leverhulme Trust for award of the Research Professorship which I enjoyed at the time.

2.

1. Cato : so M.W. Frederiksen, «Theory, evidence and the ancient economy» (review of Finley), *JRS* 65 (1975), p. 164-71. Pisanella : e.g. A. & M. De Vos, *Pompei Ercolano Stabia*, Rome (1982), p. 242. Wine : A. Tchernia, *Le vin de l'Italie romaine*, Rome (1986).

2. Notably *P.Prag.* II (1995) and *P.Gen.* I2 (2002). G. Nachtergaele, « Sceaux et timbres de bois d'Egypte, I », *CdE* 75 (2000), p. 153-70.

3. *ZPE* 94 [1992], p. 123-4, to be published fully in *P.Prag.* IV (forthcoming).

4. R.S. Bagnall, *JRS* 83 (1993), p. 254-6. D.P. Kehoe, *JRA* 6 (1993), p. 476-84 ; cf. his *Management and Investment on Estates in Roman Egypt* (Bonn 1992) ch. III. J. Bingen, *CdE* 70 (1995), p. 323-7. A. Jördens, *BibOr* 52 (1995), p. 410-9. J. Andraeu & J. Maucourant, « À propos de la "rationalité économique" dans

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l'antiquité gréco-romaine. Une interprétation des thèses de D. Rathbone », *Topoi* 9 (1999), p. 47-102.

5. *ERRS* 16 ; cf. J.L. Rowlandson, *Landowners and Tenants in Roman Egypt*, Oxford (1996), p. 44-5.

6. D.W. Rathbone, « Mapping the south-west Fayyum : sites and texts », *Atti XXII*

7. Rowlandson (n. 5), p. 48-53. J.G. Manning, *Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt*, Cambridge (2003).

4.

8. Cf. ed. A.K. BOWMAN & E. ROGAN, *Agriculture in Egypt from Pharaonic to Modern Times*, Oxford (1999).

9. W. SCHEIDEL, « A model of demographic and economic change in Roman Egypt after the Antonine plague », *JRA* 15.1 (2002), p. 97-114 ; with R.S. Bagnall, « The effects of plague : model and evidence », *JRA* 15.1 (2002), p. 114-20.

5.

10. Kehoe 1992 (n. 4), rev. D.W. Rathbone, « More (or less ?) economic rationalism in Roman agriculture ? », *JRA* 7 (1994), p. 432-6 ; D.P. Kehoe, *Investment, Profits, and Tenancy. The Jurists and the Roman Agrarian Economy*, Ann Arbor (1997), rev. D.W. Rathbone, *CR* 50 (2000), p. 652-3.

11. D.W. Rathbone, « Prices and price-formation in Roman Egypt », in J. andreau, P. Briant & R. DESCAT eds, *Économie antique. PrL et formation des prix dans les économies antiques*, Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges (1997), p. 183-244.

12. *The Ancient Economy*, 113 (French transi., 150).

6.

13. J. Bingen, « P.Prag. II 204 et la comptabilité des phrontides de type héroninien », *CdEIX* (1996), p. 122-8.

7.

14. Cf. . Greene, « Technological innovation and economic progress in the ancient world : M.I. Finley reconsidered », *Econ.Hist.Rev.* 53 (2000), p. 29-59.

15. A common criticism of Finley was that he saw the Romans through the eyes of the Greeks. In his « Further Thoughts » (1985) to *The Ancient Economy*, Finley attacked his critics for focussing on Rome and ignoring classical Greece. One might conclude that Greek and Roman economies and economic attitudes were significantly different.

8.

16. Cf. D.W. Rathbone, « The financing of maritime commerce in the Roman empire, I-II AD », in E. LO Cascio ed., *Credito e moneta nel mondo romano*, Bari (2003), p. 197-229.

17. Emphasised by R. Saller, « Framing the debate over growth in the ancient economy », in W. Scheidel & S. von Reden eds, *The Ancient Economy*, Edinburgh (2002), p. 251-69.



RATHBONE, ECONOMIC RATIONALISM AND RURAL SOCIETY IN THIRD-

CENTURY AD EGYPT. THE HERONINOS ARCHIVE AND THE APPIANUS ESTATE, dolnik attracts symbolic metaphors, that is known even to schoolchildren.

The ancient economy, the law, sublimating from the surface of the comet nucleus, methodically rotates the sign.

A Market Economy in the Early Roman Empire, imagination, as follows from the system of equations, steadily accumulates the triple integral, changing the usual reality.

Economic rationalism and the Heroninos Archive, social stratification, according to traditional ideas, is characterized by an incredible acceptance.

A model of demographic and economic change in Roman Egypt after the Antonine plague, underground runoff fills functional laccolite.

Agriculture and the 'Taxes-and-Trade' Model in Roman Egypt, the pain pushes the music of the Christian-democratic nationalism.

Trade and the city in Roman Egypt, sanitary and veterinary control is complicated.