

State and Prices in Byzantine Egypt*

I.F. Fikhman

Diocletian's Edict on Prices of 301, a unique and very important text for the economic history of the Roman Empire, has been known for a long time. The discovery of numerous fragments in both Greek and Latin, mainly in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire, has enabled scholars to reconstruct a considerable portion of the text, particularly the so-called "tariff", *i.e.*, the section concerning maximum prices, wages and transport services.¹ Diocletian's intention that the edict be applied throughout the entire empire (*universo orbi*) has suggested to modern scholars a "voluntaristic" approach to economic reality, namely, that the state could exercise omnipotent control over the economy and did not have to take into account a variety of factors, both general and local, influencing prices even within one

* This is a considerably abridged text of the Russian paper entitled "Gosudarstvo i ceny u vizantiyskom Egipte" published in *Vizantiyskiy Vremennik* 52 (1991), 13-26, where the reader will find a detailed analysis of the texts and references to relevant literature.

¹ The main editions are: S. Lauffer, *Diokletians Preisedikt* (Berlin 1971); M. Giacchero, *Edictum Diocletiani et Collegarum de pretiis rerum vanalium in intergrum fere restitutum e Latinis Graecisque fragmentis I. Edictum* (Genoa 1974). Vol. 2 (*Imagines*) contains the photos of the available inscriptions and the reconstruction of the edict on the basis of these inscriptions ("Tavole sinottiche della disposizione dei frammenti latini e greci dell' *Edictum de Pretiis* nel testo ricostruito"). As M. Giacchero informed me (at Genoa, on 3 February 1992), vol. 3 (*Commentary*), which was delayed for personal reasons, is in preparation. For the list of inscriptions, see Lauffer, 14-39 and Giacchero, 37-86; for the essential literature, Lauffer, 53-86 and Giacchero 7-31.

region and within a short period of time. The edict was, therefore, in their opinion, doomed to failure and was consequently abolished some years later. Recent research² has shown, however, that the edict was not the uninformed invention of a detached bureaucracy, but in fact was preceded by the laborious collection and correlation of various data concerning different goods and services; this information was used to set the tariff.³ From the wording of the "Edict", it is hard to know how its prescriptions were supposed to be implemented. On this question documentary data, papyri in particular (so far as Egypt is concerned), have proven to be a very important source of information. Papyri provide quite long lists of the prices of many and various goods and services, but also regrettably sparser information about means of price regulation and control.

In Egypt, price control had existed already in the Ptolemaic period, primarily on the monopolised branches of production; this practice probably reflects, to a certain extent, the influence of the Pharaonic tradition and the Hellenistic *poleis*.⁴ But as M.I. Rostovtzeff wrote, "It is evident that even in those branches of trade for which no fixed prices were officially dictated trade was by no means free, since the prices were thus subject to control".⁵

The papyri of Roman Egypt also bear witness to the existence of price control. In this case it is necessary to distinguish between private control, which was economically motivated, and state control, which was connected with fiscal interests. The data on private control are not numerous, the main source being *SB V 8030 = P.Mich. V 245 = FIRA III*² 46 (Tebtunis, 47 A.D.). This is an agreement on the election of the head of the corporation of salt merchants (ἀλοπῶλαι). In the agreement the Tebtunis salt-merchants fixed minimum prices — in contrast to the state's control of maximum

² E.g., J. Bingen, "L'Edit du Maximum et les papyrus", *Atti dell' XI Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia* (Milan 1966), 369-78.

³ *P.Antin.* I 38 (re-edited by M. Manfredi, *SB X 10257*, 301 A.D.) may be one of these preparatory materials; see now R.S. Bagnall, *Currency and Inflation in Fourth Century Egypt*. *BASP* suppl. 5 (Chico, CA 1985), 63.

⁴ E.g., Cl. Préaux, *L'économie royale des Lagides* (Brussels 1939), 71, 87, 99, 110. M.I. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World I* (Oxford 1941), 304-5, 309, 313-15; II, 1274-5.

⁵ Commentary to *P.Tebt.* III 703, ll. 178-82 = *Sel. Pap.* II 204 = *Pap. Prim.*⁴, 16 (Tebt., late third century B.C.).

prices — in an effort to prevent prices from falling as a result of internal competition. The interdiction imposed on the parties to the agreement against selling salt individually to a merchant (ἔμπορος) at a price higher than one *stater* had the same aim, for when selling a larger quantity of salt to a wholesale buyer the salt seller could ultimately be forced to reduce the price.⁶

The state was involved in price control for three reasons: first, to determine the tax-rate on craftsmen and merchants, and second, to establish compulsory prices on products it ordered and received (these fixed prices were usually lower than the market prices but nonetheless had to be coordinated with market levels to some degree). Finally, during an emergency such as a bad harvest or natural disaster the state had to take extraordinary measures to provide the population with sufficient quantities of goods at more or less reasonable prices.

The taxation system of Roman Egypt was complicated. It took into account the kinds of goods, the taxpayer's privileges or lack thereof and the organisation of tax collection. Tax-rates, however, did not vary arbitrarily but were fixed according to the profitability of the profession concerned, as U. Wilcken proved a long time ago for the Arsinoite capitation taxes on trade (χειρωνάζιον).⁷ The rates in *P.Lond.inv. 1562 Verso* (135-6 A.D.)⁸ also show different tax payments which depended on the types of goods. Although it is not clear whether the payments for the right to trade were collected for the state or the town, the differences in the taxation criteria were without doubt based on consideration of the comparative profitability of goods.

In Roman Egypt there were compulsory deliveries of agricultural products and handcrafted goods. Among the former specific mention should be made of πυρὸς συναγοραστικός (*frumentum*

⁶ For details about the text and bibliography, see Fikhman (n. 1), 15-16.

⁷ Fikhman (n.1), 16, n. 27.

⁸ J. Rea, "P.Lond.inv. 1562 Verso: Market-Taxes at Oxyrhynchus", *ZPE* 46 (1982), 191-211 = *SB XVI*, 12695. Analogous texts from Oxyrhynchus: *P.Köln V* 228 (176 A.D.) and *P.Leiden.inv. F. 1948/3.4.* (239-43 A.D.), published by K. Worp, "P.Leiden Inv. F. 1948/3.4. A New Fragment Concerning Market-Taxes in Oxyrhynchus", *Oudheidige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden* 67 (1987), 25-7.

emptum), *i.e.*, grain purchases over and above the regular levies, made on order of the prefect, who usually fixed the prices lower than the market level.⁹ The goods ordered from craftsmen were diverse. Beginning in the third century, town councils became particularly involved in this area of economic activity. A valuable example can be found in the record of the proceedings of the town council of Oxyrhynchus preserved in *P.Oxy.* XII, 1414 (271/2 A.D.), containing the minutes of the discussion of the requests by two corporations involved in clothes production on the account of ἀναβολικόν. The requests were only partially satisfied and the corporations' consent to the final prices is not mentioned. Perhaps, in this case of a state order, the council assumed it had the right to fix prices as it judged proper.¹⁰

Price control could be effected directly in the marketplace, where goods were actually sold by merchants as well as manufactured and sold by the artisans themselves. Thus the administration had above all to oblige sellers to sell their goods openly in the marketplace, *i.e.*, by day. This can be seen in *PSI* VII 798 (Oxyrhynchus?, first century A.D.),¹¹ and a particularly clear instance can be found in *P.Oxy.* I 83 = *W.Chr.* 430 = *Sel. Pap.* II 331 (327 A.D.), where an egg-seller declares in a sworn statement: "... [that] I am to carry on the retailing of eggs in the market-place publicly ... every day without intermission, and that it shall not be lawful for me in the future to sell secretly or in my house". Obviously goods were supposed to be sold according to certain fixed price levels, which could be controlled only in open sales in the marketplace. Thus one of the duties of the head of the local Roman administration, the *strategus*, was to make the rounds of the markets, as testified by entries in his official registers (ὑπομνηματισμοί).¹²

⁹ For details see Fikhman (n.1), 17 and nn. 30-31, and the Introduction to *P.Oxy.* LVII 3910.

¹⁰ Details in Fikhman (n.1), 17-18 and nn. 32-7.

¹¹ On the text, see H.C. Horn, "*PSI* 798. Fragments of Documents Regarding Fishing", *CPh* 24 (1929), 164-8, and in particular J. Rea, "*PSI* VII 798", *Miscellanea Papyrologica* [I] (Florence 1980), 321-6 for a new edition and a new date, accompanied by a persuasive explanation of the context.

¹² See Fikhman (n.1), 18-19 and nn. 38-41 for details.

Diocletian's edict on maximum prices inevitably had to result in the reinforcement of price control irrespective of the extent and duration of its application. This supposition, however logical it may seem, remained unconfirmed by the papyri for some time. Several reasons combined to create this situation.

The first piece of evidence published, *P.Oxy. I, 85 = Sel. Pap. II 332* (338 A.D.), was published (in 1898) with incorrect word-divisions, causing the corporation's declaration, "the price of the commodities which we handle is as given below for the present month", to be interpreted as a declaration about the value of the goods in stock at the end of the month, according to their own estimate. The analogous texts published in 1914 (*PSI III 202*) and in 1936 (*P.Harr. [I] 73*) suffered the same fate; these papyri were also assigned the same date (30 Hathyr 338 A.D.), on the basis of *P.Oxy. I 85*.¹³ Although A.S. Hunt, in his republication of *P.Oxy. I 85 = Sel. Pap. II 332*, and A. Segrè (cf. *BL III, 79, 129*) introduced proper corrections in the relevant lines, scholars continued to follow the interpretation of the *editio princeps* until the mid-sixties and even later.¹⁴ Given that for almost 70 years there were only three published declarations from Oxyrhynchus (*P.Oxy. I, 85; PSI III, 202; P.Harr. [I], 73*) and that they were all assigned to the same date (30 Hathyr 338 A.D.),¹⁵ I concluded that they represent a procedure

¹³ These texts have been reedited with considerable corrections and additions by R. Coles, "*P.Oxy. I.85 Revised*", *ZPE* 39 (1980), 115-23; *id.*, "*P.Harr. 73 and 160 Revised*", *ZPE* 37 (1980), 229-36; *id.*, "Some Corrections to *PSI III.202*", *ZPE* 39 (1980), 124-5. For further details, Fikhman (n.1), 19-20 and nn. 42-8.

¹⁴ I took cognizance of Hunt's corrections in "Nekotorye voprosy khozyaystvennoy deyatelnosti remelennykh korporatsiy pozdnerimskogo Egipta" ("Some Problems of the Economic Activity of the Artisanal Corporations of Late Roman Egypt"), *Vestnik drevney istorii* (1965) N3, 148; *id.*, *Egipt na rubezhe dvukh epokh. Remeslenniki i remeslennyi trud v IV-seredine VII v. (Egypt on the Confines of Two Epochs. Craftsmen and Artisanal Work from the Fourth to the Middle of the Seventh Centuries)* (Moscow 1965), 184-5.

¹⁵ *P.Harr. [I], 73* was recently redated by R. Coles to 329-31; the date of *PSI III 202* is conjectural because the year and the name of the *logistes* are not preserved, cf. R. Coles, "*P.Oxy. I.85 Revised*", *ZPE* 39 (1980), 122.

both temporary and local.¹⁶ But the publication of *P. Oxy.* XXXI, 2570 II, III (329 A.D.) by J.W.B. Barns in 1966¹⁷ forced me to revise this conclusion and assume instead that the measure was not unique but “a practice implemented for at least a decade (329-38 A.D.) and most likely over a longer period of time”.¹⁸ The subsequent publication of many other texts of the same type (*P. Oxy.* LI 3624-3626 [359 A.D.]), as well as of price summaries (*P. Oxy.* LI 3628-3633 [fifth century A.D.]) and a great number of declarations and related texts in *P. Oxy.* LIV (1987),¹⁹ widened the known chronological range of the practice to the years 310 to 359 and took into account that such declarations were used for compiling summary lists until the fifth century. The territorial limits of the declarations also became wider, for the summary lists published in *P. Oxy.* LI, 3628-3633 record the price levels for different goods in several *nomoi* of Arcadia, a province of Egypt. The fact that the acknowledgement in earlier declarations that they were compiled “according to instructions” (ἀκολουθῶς τοῖς κελευθεῖσιν) disappears from later ones²⁰ also indicates that submitting declarations became a standard procedure for the corporations.

The very procedure by which the documents were officially registered confirms the permanent and routine nature of the corporations’ submission of declarations on prices. As R. Coles noted, the declarations had not been written by the corporations themselves, nor had they received a registration number in the office of the *logistes* to whom they were submitted nor had they been glued together to form a so-called τόμος συγκολλήσιμος.²¹ Obviously the

¹⁶ Fikhman, “Nekotorye voprosy...” (n. 14), 153; *id.*, *Egipet* (n. 14), 190.

¹⁷ See his introduction to *P. Oxy.* XXXI, 2570; he, too, accepted Hunt’s corrections; *cf.* also R. Coles, *ZPE* 37 (1980), 229.

¹⁸ I.F. Fikhman, “Eshcho raz o remeslennom proizvodstve v pozdnerimskom Egipte (Po materialam *P. Oxy.* XXXI)”, (“Once More on Handicraft Production in Late Roman Egypt [On the Content of *P. Oxy.* XXXI]”), *Vestnik drevey istorii* (1968) N3, 146; *id.*, *Oxirinkh — gorod papyrusov (Oxyrhynchus — City of Papyri)* (Moscow 1976), 172.

¹⁹ See Fikhman (n.1), 20-1 and notes 50-9 for details.

²⁰ The expression is used in *P. Oxy.* LIV 3755, ll. 15-16, from 320 A.D., but it does not appear in *P. Oxy.* LIV 3760, from 326 A.D., and later texts.

²¹ *P. Oxy.* LIV 3732 (310-11 A.D.) is probably an exception. On *logistes* see the literature cited by I.F. Fikhman in *Vvedenie v dokumental’nyu*

text had been prepared in advance in the office of the *logistes* by his staff, who had copied the declarations for the current month from analogous declarations for the previous month. Only the new date, *i.e.*, the last day of the current month, had to be inserted. Blank spaces were also left in the text for the name(s) of the head(s) of the corporations, for the prices of the goods in question and for signatures. As we see in the declarations for different years, the order by which corporations were listed could vary; in no instance was it alphabetical.

Although the list of professions mentioned in the declarations published to date does not cover all the specialities testified by the *Oxyrhynchus papyri*, it nonetheless presents a general picture of rigorous specialization in handicrafts and trade and shows beyond doubt that price control, inferred from the declarations, was universal and compulsory and covered all kinds of handicrafts and trade. Sometimes the declarations also specified the origin of goods, their kind, size, colour, quality, type, etc. This classification resembles the one adopted by the compilers of Diocletian's Edict on Prices and confirms, on the one hand, that the administration took into consideration the realities of production and, on the other, that the Edict had a continuing influence on the phraseology of the declarations.²²

At one time it was thought that the declarations submitted by the corporations show that the state transferred its right to control and fix prices on goods to the corporations. But the declarations mention prices not for the coming month, as W.L. Westermann thought,²³ but for the current month (ἐπὶ τοῦδε τοῦ μηνός), or

papirologiyu (Introduction to Documentary Papyrology) (Moscow 1987), 213 n. 332, esp. B.R. Rees, "The curator civitatis in Egypt", *JJP* 7-8 (1953-4), 83-105; J. Lallemand, *L'administration civile de l'Égypte de l'avènement de Dioclétien à la création du diocèse (284-382)* (Brussels 1964), 107-114; I.F. Fikhman, *Oxirinkh — gorod papirusov* (n. 18), 242-247; list of *logistai*: B.R. Rees, *loc. cit.* 104-5; K.A. Worp, "Two Papyri from the Vienna Collection", *BASP* 13 (1976), 38-40; P. Coles, ed., *P. Oxy.* LIV 222-229 (Appendix 1: The *Curatores Civitatis* of *Oxyrhynchus* 303-346 A.D.); on τόμος συγκολλησίμος see Fikhman, *Vvedenie ...*, 13.

²² For further details see Fikhman (n. 1), 22-4 and notes 66-85, and also the list there of the corporations whose declarations are published.

²³ W.L. Westermann, *Price Controls and Wages. The Age of Diocletian. A Symposium* (New York 1953), 32-33. It is strange that such an opinion

stricto sensu for the previous month, as E. Seidl correctly noted, since all declarations in which the day of submission is indicated are dated to the 30th of the month. Thus the corporations did not fix prices but only reported existing prices. We must add that the corporations as a rule reported the prices not of manufactured goods but of raw materials and of the goods bought by them for resale. So, for example, bakers report the price of wheat, beer-sellers the price of barley, makers of earthenware pottery the price of dry pitch, bleachers (λευκανταί) the price of linen, fish merchants the price of fish, and so forth.

The question naturally arises, what was the aim of such a complicated monthly procedure which did not even allow the state to discover the prices of finished products? Obviously the procedure had a purpose, given the fact that it functioned from at least the fourth to the fifth century, as we have indicated above. This purpose, we think, was two-fold. First, the declarations could be used indirectly to control the prices of raw materials and some goods bought by craftsmen and merchants, such as wheat, barley, meat, fish, honey, spices, textiles, metals, glass, etc. Thus the administration had a clearer picture of the availability and price of basic goods in the market. Secondly, the declarations allowed partial control over manufactured products as well as over the rate of retail prices. The cost of raw materials was an important factor in determining the price of manufactured products²⁴; workers' wages and other production expenses also depended on the prices of principal items of production. The papyri do not preserve any information on the permissible rate of profit, but the idea that excessive profits were immoral and even illegal can be found in the introduction to Diocletian's Edict on Prices. The notion of a "just price" (*iustum pretium*, δίκαιον

was also expressed recently, cf. e.g., B. Palme in his review of *P.Oxy.* LIV in *Tyche* 3 (1987), 38 ("... am Ende jedes Monats die Fixpreise ihrer Waren für den folgenden Monat unter Eid bekanntmachen mussten"); H. Chouliara-Raios and G. Wagner, "Στάγμα", *ZPE* 84 (1990), 69ff. ("... Les σταγματοπῶλαι de la ville d'Oxyrhynchus s'engagent à vendre le στάγμα à un prix fixe ...").

²⁴ *P.Oxy.* XII, 1414 (see above, p. 142), shows that the rise in prices of raw materials (πλεοσιμία τῶν εἰδῶν) was taken into account even in state orders for goods.

τίμημα) already existed in the proto-Byzantine period and continued into the Byzantine period.²⁵ Thus information on the prices of the raw materials for different kinds of goods enabled the state to control price levels in the market.

That the state needed the information in the declarations for specific ends is confirmed by the fate of the declarations themselves. They were grouped by *nomoi* and sent to the office of the *praeses* of each province, where a "schedule (βρέουλον)²⁶ of purchasable goods on sale in the market-place, for each city in accordance with the schedules submitted by the *tabularii* of each city" was compiled.²⁷ For every *nomos* the prices were grouped separately by four-month period, according to the Egyptian calendar; only eleven staple commodities were listed from the total variety of goods: gold, silver, unworked silver, wheat, barley, lentils, chaff, wine, meat, salt and radish oil. Only six such inventories are preserved (*P.Oxy.* LI 3628-3633), containing information from the Cynopolite (*P.Oxy.* LI 3628), Oxyrhynchite (*P.Oxy.* LI 3629), Arsinoite (*P.Oxy.* LI 3631), Aphroditopolite (*P.Oxy.* LI 3633) nomes and two others whose names are not preserved (*P.Oxy.* LI 3630, 3632). Analysis of the information in these inventories²⁸ shows that prices varied between nomes and, within each nome, according to the season. The smallest fluctuations were in the prices of precious metals, the widest in food prices, especially of wheat (less so of barley); wheat prices varied from nome to nome (the lowest occurring in the Arsinoite nome, the highest in the Aphroditopolite and unnamed nomes). Such tables were probably compiled in the other provinces of Egypt as well and then sent to Alexandria. From Alexandria the summary tables of the whole of Egypt were sent to Constantinople. J. Rea, the editor of *P.Oxy.* LI, 3628-3633, noted that the data for

²⁵ For further details, see the literature cited by Fikhman (n. 6), 25, n. 90 and J. Hermann, "Der Gedanke des *iustum pretium* in der Antike — Der 'Gerechte Preis'", *Beiträge zur Diskussion um das "pretium iustum"* (Erlangen, 1982), 9-19 = *Kleine Schriften zur Rechtsgeschichte* (Munich 1990), 384-94.

²⁶ On βρέουλον see D. Bonneau, "Βρέουλον (breve) 'liste fiscale' dans les papyrus", *Studi in onore di C. Sanfilippo V* (Milan 1984), 109-203.

²⁷ *P.Oxy.* LI 3628, ll. 1-3, translation by J. Rea.

²⁸ See the tables on separate kinds of goods in different nomes in *P.Oxy.* LI, pp. 72-4.

each four-month period (*quadrimenstruum*) “have some connection ... with the *quadrimenstrui breves*, which were reports on taxation compiled by the provincial administrations and returned to the praetorian prefects, who used the information contained in them to control the progress of the collection of taxes in the current year and to form the basis for assessments for the following year”.²⁹ Thus the Egyptian data are well-integrated into the imperial accounting system on which the central power relied in making financial decisions.

In sum, the data now available on prices and price control clearly show that control was carried out universally and on a permanent basis. The professional corporations were of great importance in this matter: every month they reported the prices of raw materials and goods which they had to buy. The corporations themselves did not fix prices, nor were they responsible for setting price levels, but they did take responsibility for the accuracy of the information they reported. The local administration, in turn, obviously checked, at least sporadically or selectively, price levels and the “fairness” of price-setting on orders from superiors or during an emergency. The information on prices was sent around to the relevant departments and a summary of the most important data was sent to the central administration. It is to be assumed that the Egyptian practice, which was first revealed by papyri, reflected in certain measure the general practice throughout the Empire. Thus the data regarding the economic and administrative history of Egypt have a wider importance for the history of the Empire as a whole.

Jerusalem

²⁹ See Rea's commentary to *P.Oxy.* LI 3628, ll. 5-6.