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REVIEWS

David A. WARBURTON, *State and Economy in Ancient Egypt: Fiscal Vocabulary of the New Kingdom*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 151, University Press Fribourg, and Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht Göttingen, 1997. 379 pp. ISBN 3-7278-1080-7 and 3-525-53787-5. DM 158.

Starting from the premise that a fiscal system defines the practical role of the state in the functioning of the economy, Warburton sets out to examine the nature of the fiscal regime for New Kingdom Egypt on the basis of a philologically oriented survey of terms that refer to categories of state revenue, and to present a fiscally based vision of the nature and historical development of the state in Egypt. His avowed purpose is to present an evidence-based foundation for a reassessment of theoretical frames appropriate to analysis of the pharaonic regime. The core of his approach is an attack on analyses inspired by the model of "redistribution," derived from the theories of Karl Polanyi. Against this he stresses the importance of state investment in Egypt, creating demand-led expansion in an economic cycle with patterns of economic depression correlated to collapses in such investment. His model is inspired by the theories of John Maynard Keynes.

In simple terms, the author's insight is that one does not build a pyramid by collecting agricultural surpluses that happen to be lying round doing nothing, since peasants do not normally create a useless surplus beyond their needs, but that the fiscal requirements of the state to invest in public works and the state machine are what stimulate the rural economy from its economic norm of chronic underemployment into a more intensive production, able to finance a greater economic diversity and complexity. His assertion is that this process is best understood as market-based: a proper fiscal regime in which taxes are collected, or *corvée* imposed, to create investment and to pay wages.

The book as a whole reflects the uneven development of the author's research goals as he wrote the thesis from which it derives. He presents extensive documentation, but this is done as a central core to the book, largely dissociated from the theoretical argument, and often failing to integrate the necessary exemplification for key points in the argument. A dozen major texts are presented in Part II, in whole or partial translation, or in summary, as a sampler of types of document relevant to fiscal terminology. Then Part III surveys the usage of this terminology, listing examples from all categories of New Kingdom text: *jnyt* and *jnw* from the root "bring," the standard term for "income"; *b3kw* from the root "work," the standard term for the product of labour; *h3qt*, literally "what is plundered"; *htrj*, from the root "bind," the standard term for regular fixed assessments; *š3yt* from the root "fix," "order," used of assessments; and *šmw*, from the root "harvest," used of revenues derived from the annual crop.

In so far as controversy exists about these terms, it lies in the attempt to narrow their meaning to a technically defined, narrow fiscal categorisation: the discussion of a rare usage of the phrase *b3kw-rmt*, "work of people" (pp. 258-260), or identification in the term *tp-drt* of reference to a kind of office-holding tax (pp. 287-291) derive entirely from the author's search for technicality, and are not grounded in the reality of usage. Warburton recognises that common words do not boil down to the desired single narrow technical meaning; but this is the perception from which analysis should have begun, rather than emerge as a conclusion.

At core the author argues (rightly in this reviewer's opinion) that "ancient Egypt can be understood as a pre-capitalist market economy" (p. 300), yet at no point does he discuss the reality of the market: indeed, his rather deficient bibliography lacks basic references to

markets, market mechanisms, land tenure and productivity. His claim that the issue of "money" is not relevant, and that its removal from the equation allows him to apply a simplified model based on Keynesian theory (pp. 121-124), is not convincing. Warburton's analysis is based on the assertion that "a fiscal system is an administrative system which represents the practical expression of the ideological conception of a state" (p. 295); an assertion that leads him to the extraordinary conclusion that royal inscriptions are the best point of departure for philological summary, and at times to a thoroughgoing confusion between ideological and economic analysis, buttressed by an exaggerated assertion of the insufficiency of micro-economic data (pp. 79-80).

To object that an analysis of macro-economic structure does not focus properly on micro-economic processes may not seem entirely fair, but the obsession with macro (interpreted to mean structural) analysis leads precisely to a dissociation from ordinary economic behaviour, the micro level of real data, for which he so severely criticises attempts to fit the Egyptian economy into an *a-priori* theory of "redistribution." He writes persuasively, and usefully, of the relevance of a "General Theory of War, Custom and Technology" as a frame for the discussion of issues of investment and production, but signally fails to investigate the reality of the underlying issues of government and bureaucratic efficiency, transport, communications and material technology. Absorbed in issues of ideology—both ancient self-presentation and modern "theory"—he does not even try to address the issue of the efficiency of the state. He treats it as both given and monolithic. He consequently pays no more than lip-service to the role of the private sector, and none to regional variation, as he stresses the role of the state as main investor in a mixed economy.

His key argument is the absence of any evidence for economically significant "redistribution" in the technical sense. He stresses rightly, for instance, that the funding of the necropolis workers of Deir el Medina is at least as well interpreted as wages paid from fiscal revenue, and that a "redistributive" interpretation of the mechanisms of payment is forced. The key to global understanding is defined rather as the practice of "assignment" of resources—fiscal duties—at an ideological level: jobs for officials with fiscal responsibility that provide an assigned income, combined with an ideology that stresses their duties to peasants; wage payments to workers.

The author takes pride in asserting his radicalism and heterodox approach: an authorial discourse reinforced by his taste for gnomic generalisation. In reality his radicalism is defined by his initial research process of setting up an Aunt Sally as target, and crowing when he scores a hit: the target of Karl Polanyi, as his work provides a point of reference, particularly for Jac. Janssen and Renate Müller-Wollermann in assessing the Egyptian economy and for Johannes Renger in assessing Mesopotamian data. His case carries conviction at a general level, although his criticism often gets bogged down in the most nit-picking of detail. The real fault is that he failed to move his argument beyond this initial target as his research developed. The discovery that a significant proportion of writing about the Egyptian economy has never been in any very serious way contaminated by the theoretical approach of Polanyi, so that in this detailed refutation he is not infrequently flogging a dead horse, only appears to strike him in asides made in his introduction, and is not properly represented in his bibliography.¹⁾

Warburton's great merit is the way he is explicit that the "difference" of Egypt, and the "ancient economy" as a whole, does not mean that one has to posit a "different" set of economic structures, as if there was something fundamentally different in ancient attitudes to wealth and labour. Unfortunately his self-proclaimed heterodoxy does not go so far as to dump the baggage of an out-dated social-Darwinism that underlies both the Marxist and Polanyi theoretical approaches. Indeed, at the end of his work he even tries to seek a degree of resolution with "Polanyi-theory," summed up in his conclusion that "the birth of the ancient Near Eastern Market Economy can probably be assigned the relatively arbitrary date of 2000 B.C.". This failure to escape from a Marxist-evolutionary perspective is a major methodological error.

He attacks ferociously theoretical approaches that have envisaged Egypt as a “primitive,” “simple,” apparently efficient central economy capable of “redistribution”: a vision created entirely as a convenient construct to fit grand theories of human evolutionary progression from simple to complex. He demonstrates that such approaches are inappropriate for periods with documentation.²) He nevertheless allows the contradictory implication that a non-market economy might be envisaged for earlier periods, for which he does not analyse the data, merely to push the relevance of evolutionary theories back beyond his period of study. The vision Warburton presents in Part I is that of an Egyptian prehistory and early economic development which depends entirely on such models. Here his perspective fails utterly to address the non-simple, non-primitive reality of actual economic behaviour of any kind, and his vision of the process of state formation is defective.

The faults of the book, in both its structure and its very partial and distorted presentation of the current state of discussion of the Egyptian economy, are considerable. This does not, however, vitiate the importance of its basic thesis, nor the importance of repeating that thesis in explicit form: that the ancient economy was neither irrational, nor organised centrally on principles of “redistribution,” but must be examined in terms of ordinary principles of economic behaviour; and that a description of a pre-market economy based on the work of Polanyi is simply irrelevant to pharaonic Egypt.

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1) Characteristically he cites extensively work he wishes to attack, and ignores or omits detailed reference to anything which might reflect on the originality of his analysis.

2) Barry J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt. Anatomy of a Civilization* (London, 1989), chapter 6 “The Birth of Economic Man,” stresses clearly the irrelevance of Polanyi to the market-oriented data from the Middle and New Kingdom.

Jan Gerrit DERCKSEN, *The Old Assyrian Copper Trade in Anatolia*, Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1996, 279 pp. 85 NLG.

It is a well-known fact that copper played a major role in the overall framework of the commercial activities run by the Old Assyrian (OA, hereafter) merchants in Anatolia. However, the distinctive features of this trade have never been adequately investigated but only briefly touched on in previous studies of more general kind: see e.g. P. Garelli, *AC*, pp. 294-298; M.T. Larsen, *OACP*, p. 178 (and compare the resumptive sketch at p. 172, also reproduced in id., “Commercial Networks in the Ancient Near East”, in: *Centre and Periphery in the Ancient World* [Cambridge, 1987] 52); id., *OACC*, esp. pp. 77-78, 91-92; etc. Dercksen’s book—whose text was originally submitted as a Ph.D. dissertation under the supervision of K.R. Veenhof (Leiden)—now adequately fills this lacuna. While full personal credit is due to the author, Veenhof’s tutorial presence is discernible to everyone who is familiar with his renowned philological accuracy and historical concern, since long time displayed by the “Leiden school.”

In this regard, one should appreciate the welcomed opportunity which enabled Dercksen to make use of several unpublished texts unearthed by Turkish archaeologists in the *kārum* Kanesh since 1948 and presently housed in the Ankara Museum. Notwithstanding the fact that the tablets made available for study, to quote the author, represent only a limited and selected sample out of some 20,000 texts—15,000 of which are still out of reach—the documentary basis of Dercksen’s work enables the author to accomplish a large-scale, detailed and reliable analysis.

After an introduction (pp. 1-3), chapter 1 (“The geographical background”, pp. 4-17) deals with the topographical and archaeological evidence related to ancient copper mining