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# The Beginnings of the Roman Census in Egypt

*Roger S. Bagnall*

A ROMAN PROVINCIAL CENSUS in Egypt, conducted at fourteen-year intervals from at least A.D. 33/34 to 257/258, has been known since the beginning of this century, and published declarations represent every census during that span. The earliest and latest years are the least well documented, but sufficient evidence demonstrates that census declarations were submitted for the years 33/34, 47/48, 61/62, and all years at fourteen-year intervals thereafter through at least 257/258.<sup>1</sup> Nor are any surviving declarations attributable to any year outside the fourteen-year cycle later than 33/34. The scarcity and ambiguity of earlier direct evidence, however, has generated an extensive controversy during the past six decades about the dates at which the Roman government instituted the census in Egypt and at which the census began to be conducted on the fourteen-year cycle. With the discovery of new evidence, it is now possible to show definitively that although there were census declarations before 19, the fourteen-year cycle *cannot* have begun before that year and may even be later. On the other hand, some evidence suggests—without quite demonstrating—an earlier seven-year cycle dating back as far as 11/10 B.C.

## The Problem

The small number of surviving declarations has meant that it is not possible even to demonstrate that the cycle was intended as early as 33/34. The coincidence of the fourteen-year intervals

<sup>1</sup> The discussion of M. HOMBERT and C. PRÉAUX, *Recherches sur le recensement dans l'Égypte romaine* (= *Pap. Lugd. Bat.* 5 [Leiden 1952]: hereafter 'Hombert/Préaux') 47–53, is still the fundamental treatment of the fourteen-year cycle. A revised list of declarations published up to about 1973, prepared by G. Nachtergaele, appears in *P. Brux.* I pp. 51–58. A complete list with critical discussion will appear in R. S. Bagnall and B. W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*, forthcoming.

makes it likely at the least that 61/62 was chosen because the interval since 47/48 was the same as that between 33/34 and 47/48. That, in turn, suggests no full censuses between 33/34 and 47/48, or the interval would not have been meaningful. That view conforms to the silence of the declarations. The registers of taxpayers were periodically updated during the interval between those two years, but no evidence attests that taxpayers were asked to submit new declarations during that interval.<sup>2</sup> None of this, however, tells us anything about official intentions in the 30s and 40s.

The pre-33 evidence is very obscure. The earliest texts with any resemblance to census declarations are documents of 19 and 18 B.C. in which a royal farmer from Theadelphia, one Pnepheros son of Phanemieus, reports himself in what he describes as a ὑπόμνημα (*W. Chr.* 200=*P. Grenf.* I 45-46). Pnepheros describes himself as 63 in the first declaration and 64 in the second; he does not include any other members of his household in his report, and no external evidence tells us if any existed. These apparently annual reports are of uncertain purpose and have neither predecessors nor successors.<sup>3</sup> They may represent an early attempt at a generalized census, but the absence of other family members suggests that self-declaration as a royal farmer may have been the object (as S. L. Wallace thought).<sup>4</sup>

The center of controversy, however, has been another text. *P. Mil.* I 3 (PLATE 1a), since 1928 universally regarded as probably the first surviving declaration, was filed by a fifty-five-year-old public farmer and priest named Harthotes son of Marres, who declares his son and mother along with himself. The papyrus is broken at the bottom in the middle of the oath formula and before the date. The oath is by Κάισαρα, which is the normal beginning of oaths by Augustus.<sup>5</sup> The editor, A.

<sup>2</sup> This whole question will be treated by A. E. Hansen in her forthcoming work on *The First-Century A.D. Tax Archive from Philadelphia*, where she will reedit *P. Mich.* X 578. See also preliminarily her remarks in *P. Congr.* XV 13.6n. (pp.65f).

<sup>3</sup> See Hombert and Préaux 51f on this matter.

<sup>4</sup> "Census and Poll-Tax under the Ptolemies," *AJP* 59 (1938) 432. Curiously enough, Wallace does not cite these papyri in his *Taxation in Egypt* (Princeton 1938).

<sup>5</sup> E. Seidl, *Der Eid im römisch-ägyptischen Provinzialrecht* I (= *Münch Beitr* 17 [Munich 1933]) 11, 18ff. An additional example has since appeared in *P. Amst.* I 28.

Calderini, cited parallels for the oath formula only from the reign of Augustus, but he took no account of these in his discussion of the date, in which he left open the choice of 19/20 or 33/34. In his book on oaths, Seidl, *assuming* that the fourteen-year cycle had begun already under Augustus, took the date of the papyrus, with its oath by Augustus, to be A.D. 5/6.<sup>6</sup> This date might have won acceptance had not the publication, while Seidl's book was in press, of *P. Oslo* II 32, from A.D. 1, presented scholars with further evidence for the declarant. Harthotes son of Marres was in this papyrus stated to be 40. In 5/6, of course, he would have been 44, not 55. The editor of the Oslo papyrus, S. Eitrem, pointed out the anomaly and suggested a date in A.D. 16, accepting the evidence of his new text; a declaration at such a date would indicate that the fourteen-year cycle was not yet in place. Calderini essentially accepted this view in a subsequent article, but expressed doubts about the accuracy of the age indications in the Oslo papyrus and cautiously left any conclusion to the future and the appearance of new evidence.<sup>7</sup> Hombert and Préaux (50), however, pointed out that the age given in the contract of A.D. 1 had the appearance of a rounded figure and need not be taken as precise. They offered no date of their own for *P. Mil.* I 3.

The controversy was relaunched by the republication of *P. Mil.* I 3 by S. Daris, in the second edition of the Milan papyrus (1967). Daris pointed out the problem posed by the oath formula and the Oslo papyrus, as a result of which he left open the date. In a review of Daris' work, John Rea proposed taking the oath formula to refer to Tiberius, allowing a date of 19/20, in which case there would be a three-year discrepancy in Harthotes' ages, readily explicable by age-rounding.<sup>8</sup> Rea's hypothesis also would explain why Harthotes' daughter Taphaunes, born *ca* 1 B.C. and thus 38 in A.D. 38 (*P. Mil.* I 7), is not mentioned in the declaration: she is already married and living in her husband's household. Since she had a son Aunes, described in A.D. 38 as 22 years old (*P. Mil.* I 7), in A.D. 44 as 25 (*SB XIV 11279*), and in A.D. 47/48 as 28 (*P. Mil.* I 8), thus presumably born *ca* 16–

<sup>6</sup> Seidl (*supra* n.5) 47, 136 (*BL* 3.117).

<sup>7</sup> "La più antica scheda di censimento Romano proveniente dell' Arsinoite," *RendIstLomb* 64 (1931) 551–58. "Altre ricerche o altri documenti che i papiri ci rivelino potranno dichiarare meglio la cosa dimostrarlo vera o chiarire per altro mezzo la realtà dei fatti," he concluded.

<sup>8</sup> *CR* ns. 19 (1969) 95 (*BL* 7.101).

19, that is very plausible.<sup>9</sup> But Rea's proposal requires us to assume an otherwise unattested blunder in the oath formula, and only a presupposition that the census was already at this time on a fourteen-year cycle could justify such violence.

When Orsolina Montevocchi took up the question again in 1976, these considerations led her to look to the latter part of Augustus' reign for a date for this declaration. Pointing to the reference in *P.Oxy.* II 288.35 to an ἐπίκρισις of the forty-first year (11/12), which was the basis of a list of persons with their ages, and a succeeding reference to ἐξ ἀπ[ογραφήσ κω]μογραμμάτων μβ (ἔτους), she proposed that a census was held in 11/12, with declarations due in 12/13, and that the Milan declaration refers to this census.<sup>10</sup> Hombert and Préaux (49) had already suggested the likelihood of a census in 11/12, but they had not drawn the conclusion that *P.Mil.* I 3 belonged to that year. Montevocchi thus took *epikrisis* to refer to the census.<sup>11</sup> There is, however, no reason to think that at this time declarations were filed in the year following the census as was later the case.<sup>12</sup> One could therefore take the phraseology of *P.Oxy.* II 288 in the most straightforward manner, as pointing to two processes, an *epikrisis* in 11/12 and declarations in 12/13. Now C. A. Nelson has argued that the first known general status *epikrisis* in Roman Egypt took place in 4/5,<sup>13</sup> and points out that

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. Casanova, *Aegyptus* 55 (1975) 129. This sequence gives a good indication of the inexactitude of age indications in contracts.

<sup>10</sup> O. Montevocchi, "Il censimento romano. Precisazioni," *Aevum* 50 (1976) 72-84 at 73f.

<sup>11</sup> Following Hombert and Préaux 48f; the question is dealt with in detail by H. Braunert, "Zur Terminologie der Volkszählung im frühen römischen Ägypten," in *Symbolae R. Taubenschlag dedicatae* III (=Eos 48.3 [1956: Bratislava 1957]) 53-66, who concludes similarly that "in der frühen Prinzipszeit wird die Volkszählung als ἐπίκρισις bezeichnet" (56).

<sup>12</sup> No regularity can be observed before 89 in the date of filing of returns. All three of those for 89 were filed in 90/91, but for earlier censuses no such pattern is found. For the previous census, *P.Oxy.* II 361 was apparently filed in 76/77 (I have seen a photograph), but the year number in the date is uncertain. For the two Arsinoite declarations for 75, *BGU* XI 2088 and *P.Harr.* I 70, there is no indication that the census year is past, nor is the exact date preserved. Both declarations for 61 were filed during 61/62. The only declaration for 47 was filed early in 48/49. *P.Oxy.Hels.* 10, for 33/34, was filed during 33/34, as were the two Arsinoite declarations for that year, *SB* X 10759 and I 5661.

<sup>13</sup> A register compiled in the 34<sup>th</sup> year of Augustus (4/5) is mentioned in several Oxyrhynchite documents, cf. *Aegyptus* 54 (1974) 29 and see below.

this would be the year preceding a putative census in 5/6.<sup>14</sup> The next such benchmark general *epikrasis* seems to have been carried out in year 7 of Nero, 60/61, the year preceding the general census of 61/62.<sup>15</sup> The *epikrasis*, establishing privileged statuses, would be held reasonably enough before a general registration was required. But that hypothesis demands a regularity, a distinction between *epikrasis* and declaration, and a respect for technical terminology that cannot be demonstrated for the time of Augustus, and it also embodies a desire for cyclical regularity dovetailing into A.D. 19.

At this point a discussion of the text commonly assigned to the census of 19 is necessary. This declaration, *P.Oxy.* II 254, preserves neither any reference to a year of the census nor a date for the declaration. Grenfell and Hunt, who supported an early introduction of the fourteen-year cycle, dated this declaration to the census of 19/20 on the basis of its address to Eutychides and Theon, *topogrammateis* and *komogrammateis*, a pair known to them also from *P.Oxy.* II 252, dated to 19/20, a notice of the *anachoresis* without property of the declarant's brother. The same pair, but with the names in reverse order, are the addressees of *P.Mich.* X 580, a similar declaration of *anachoresis* in the [...]tov year of Tiberius. The editor refrained from restoring the numeral (third, fourth, fifth, sixth, ninth, and tenth are possible), evidently on the grounds that these offices had a five-year term. The length of term is in fact unknown, but a minimum of six years is attested in one and perhaps both of the only other known pairs of officeholders, all Oxyrhynchite.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> C. A. Nelson, *Status Declarations in Roman Egypt* (=Am.Stud.Pap. 19 [Amsterdam 1979]) 23 with n.70. On no hypothesis would there have been an Egyptian census in 6/7, the probable year to which Luke credits that carried out in Judaea by Quirinius; but since Quirinius' arrival marked the imposition of direct Roman rule, such a non-coincidence is hardly surprising. See H. Braunert, "Der römische Provinzialzensus und der Schätzungsbericht des Lukas-Evangeliums," *Historia* 6 (1957) 192–214.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. e.g. *W.Chr.* 147 (94/95), in which the declarant refers to his parents' marriage before year 7 of Nero and his mother's registration in the census of the next eighth year (lines 25–28).

<sup>16</sup> Apollonios and Didymos are known in *P.Oxy.* XXXIII 2669 (41–54) and *P.Mich.* III 170 (49); if the Didymos and [ ] known in *P.Oxy.* II 251 (44) and 255 (48) are the same, a span of at least 44 through 49 would be attested. Apollophanes and Diogenes are attested at least from 62 (*SB* XII 10788B) through 63/64 (*P.Gen.* II 94) and 65 (*PSI* VIII 871) to a date that at earliest can be 66/67 and may well be as late as 72/73 (*P.Genov.* I 12, cf. Youtie, *ZPE* 24 [1977] 138f=Scr. Post. I 400f), since it involves a royal scribe whose (apparent) predecessor is attested through 65/66 and who is himself attested in 72/73.

A date for *P.Oxy.* II 254 in 19/20, then, is an economical hypothesis, but not a necessary one, since a date within six years, or even more, on either side of that date would also be acceptable.<sup>17</sup>

Thus despite the lack of secure evidence for a census in A.D. 19, it remains attractive on the basis of *P.Oxy.* II 252 to date *P.Oxy.* II 254 to or near that year. This evidence would not seem to show more than indications of government attempts to establish population lists around 4/5 and 11/12, with years 34 and 41 acquiring a certain benchmark status justifying their later citation.<sup>18</sup>

### New Evidence

Only one month after I had written a draft of the preceding pages, concluding that the most likely (or at least most attractive) hypothesis was a pair of seven-year intervals before A.D. 19 and a date in 12/13 for *P.Mil.* I 3 (like Montevicchi, though for different reasons), I had the extraordinary fortune to find the missing lower half of the papyrus while browsing in the Columbia papyrus collection (PLATE 1b). With the inventory number 8,<sup>19</sup> it is a near neighbor to inv. 6, published in 1928 by C. W. Keyes and now republished as *P.Col.* VIII 209.<sup>20</sup> *P.Col.* inv. 6 is a petition to the *basilikos grammateus* by Marsisouchos, the brother of the Harthotes of *P.Mil.* I 3, dated A.D. 3. It was noticed and its significance seen by Eitrem in his commentary

<sup>17</sup> G. M. Browne, in the introduction to *P.Mich.* X 578, argued that the census list published there referred to a census in 19/20, thus strengthening the argument for dating *P.Oxy.* II 254 to that year. Hanson's reedition (*supra* n.2) will present an argument that the list in fact refers to the census of 47/48; but removing that prop to the argument does not help to establish any particular date for the Oxyrhynchos declaration.

<sup>18</sup> Braunert (*supra* n.11) 65 argued that the census was still annual as late as 12/13. His basis was *P.Oxy.* II 288 and 314, in which declarations of year 42 are mentioned. Since then *P.Oxy.* II 314 has been published in full (*Aegyptus* 46 [1966] 77 [SB X 10220]); the ages are given as in year 42, and at the foot is stated τετέλ(εσται) μβ (ἔτους). This seems to me compatible with a two-part process and not to require the hypothesis of annual declarations.

<sup>19</sup> Described in Bell's inventory simply as a *hypomnema*.

<sup>20</sup> See the introduction there for other versions of this petition. Inv. 7, unpublished, also belongs to the archive. It is a loan dated 9/10 in which Harthotes is the borrower. It is difficult to repress surprise that inv. 6 was published without anyone's noticing that the next two items in the collection were connected. Inv. 7 will be included in *P.Col.* XI.

to *P. Oslo* II 32. Both Columbia papyri were purchased in 1923 through the British Museum consortium, as was the Oslo papyrus.

Dated to year 41 of Augustus, Tybi [?]6, or 22 January A.D. 12, the Columbia fragment justifies fully the view of Hombert and Préaux and Montevocchi that there was a census in 11/12. Since a considerable number of improved readings in the first part of the text have appeared since Daris' publication,<sup>21</sup> I give the complete text of the papyrus here. Lines 1–13 belong to the Milan papyrus, lines 15–27 to *P. Col.* inv. 8; they share line 14, and a vertical marker has been put there to show the point of juncture (see PLATE 1).

Ἰσιδώρω κωμογραμματῆ Θε-  
 αδελφίας παρὰ Ἀρθώτου  
 τοῦ Μαρήους δημ[ό]σις γεωρ-  
 4 γός καὶ εἰερεὺς Τοθοήους θεοῦ.  
 ἔχω ἐν Θεαδελφία οἰκίαν  
 ἐντὸς περιβόλου εἰ[ε]ροῦ, ἐν ἧ  
 ἐγὼ αὐτὸς Ἀρθώτης μητρὸς  
 8 Ἑσερσύθεος {(ἐτῶν)} πεν[τή]κοντα πέ[ν]-  
 τε, Ἀρπατοθοήους υἱὸς (ἐτῶν)  
 ἐννέα μητρὸς Τάανχορί-  
 φιος καὶ ἡ μήτηρ μου Ἑσερσύθ[ι]ς  
 12 Πασίωνος ἐτῶν {ἐτῶν} ο. Ἀρθώτ[η]ς  
 ὡ πρωγεγραμμένο[ς] ὠμνύω  
 Καίσαρα [Α]ύ[τ]οκράτ[ο]ρα Ἐλευθέρ(ιον)  
 θεοῦ (υἱὸν) Δία Σεβαστὸν ἰ μὴν  
 16 ἐξ ὑγιῶς καὶ ἐπ' ἀρηθείας ἐπι-  
 δεδωκέναι τὸ προκείμενον  
 ὑπόμνημα μηδὲν ὑποστει-  
 λάμενος. εὐορκῶντι μὲν  
 20 μοι εὖ ἦ, ἐφιορκῶντι δὲ τὰ ἐν-  
 ἀντία.  
 Ἀρθώτης Μαρήους ὡ πρωγε-  
 γραμμένος κ<sup>λ</sup> (ἐτῶν) νε οὐ(λή) φακῶ μῆ-  
 24 ρω ἀριστερῶ.

<sup>21</sup> Corrections by J. Bingen and D. Hagedorn, reported in *BL* 6.75, and M. Vandoni in *BL* 7.101. Some were merely recovering the correct readings given by Calderini in the first edition.

23 οὐ(λή) seems superfluous, since the mole (φακός) is the distinguishing mark. An example of the normal phraseology is *P.Köln* V 227 B.5: φακ(ός) μήλ(ω) ἀρ(ιστερῶ).

It is difficult to know how to interpret κ<sup>L</sup>. The L sign<sup>22</sup> can hardly indicate the age, which follows shortly afterward. Nor can it indicate the regnal year of birth or first registration, since the figure for the son (line 25) is fourteen *lower* than for the father. If it cannot refer either to age or to regnal year, the only possible solution seems to be that we should take it as κ (ἔτει) in the case of the father, ζ (ἔτει) in the case of the son, *i.e.*, twentieth year and sixth year respectively. These figures might mean, *e.g.* "twentieth year of registration" in the father's case.<sup>23</sup> Cf. below for the implications of this interpretation.

27 I restore a *kappa* because the space in the lacuna is easily sufficient for one and seems too large for an *iota* or nothing. It is, however, always possible that the scribe left blank space.

With the help of *P.Col.* inv. 8, it now begins to be clear that indeed year 41 of Augustus was a census year, and that declarations were filed during that year. The references to year 34, therefore, seem likely to signal a similar operation during that year. We can come back now to the implication of "twentieth year" and "sixth year." There is no indication whether inclusive or exclusive reckoning is meant. Since we know that a registration took place seven years before year 41, in year 34, it is an attractive hypothesis that in the case of the son we are to take

<sup>22</sup> The sign might be interpreted in a pinch as a drachma-sign, but signifying what? Cultivators of public land in the early Roman period were liable to an obscure charge called χαλκοῦ εἰκοσίδραχμος, of which the most recent discussion is by G. Messeri, in M. Manfredi, ed., *Papiri dell' Odissea* (Florence 1979) 73; the evidence is difficult and ambiguous. Another possibility might be a rate of poll-tax paid, but that also is highly problematic. The standard rate of 40 dr. was certainly in effect before the date of our declaration, as 44 dr. and change are paid for *syntaximon* (including poll-tax) in *P.Fay.* 45, of year 39. Moreover, Harthotes is attested paying that rate in *P.Mil.* I 9, in year 43, just two years after our declaration. Twenty drachmas (plus extra charges) was the rate for privileged metropolitans, which was certainly not the case with Harthotes (*cf.* most recently *P.Köln* II 95 on the reduced rate). Some priests were exempt, but Harthotes obviously did not belong to that category either. The matter is complicated further by the figure six given for Harthotes' nine-year-old son in line 26. No poll-tax was paid by boys younger than fourteen. For all these reasons, interpretation of the L sign as drachmas seems excluded.

<sup>23</sup> I owe this point to Ann Hanson, but she is not to be held responsible for my interpretation of it.

sixth year as exclusive reckoning, meaning that he was registered in year 34. It may follow, then, that these indications refer to registration in a periodic or occasional (rather than annual) census, since otherwise he would presumably have been registered at least a year earlier. Two points about the father's registration year now demand attention. First, the interval between his figure and his son's is fourteen. Second, his first registration would have been in year 20, when, according to the present declaration, he would already have been thirty-four years old. Since it now seems probable that there was a seven-year interval between the census of year 34 and that of year 41, it is a reasonable guess that two such intervals explain the fourteen-year difference between father and son, and that there were also censuses in years 27 (4/3 B.C.) and 20 (11/10 B.C.), but not before that year (or else Harthotes would have been registered in an earlier one). By implication, then, four general censuses were held under Augustus at seven-year intervals, for three of which (all except that of year 27) there is direct evidence.

As yet there are too few points of evidence to make this reconstruction more than suggestive. But it has a reasonable claim to explain the scanty evidence and does not contradict any of it. Some significance, however, must equally be attached to the year following 41, mentioned as that of the "declarations of the *komogrammateis*" in *P. Oxy.* II 288.42f. Even if this is not, as Montevicchi proposed, the year when the individual's declarations were filed, it must have some significance. It is possible that the officials proceeded in the following year to draw up their registers on the basis of the declarations. That hypothesis would help explain *P. Köln* V 277, an official journal recording transfers of katoikic land, which in line B.1 appears to be dated to year 42 of Augustus. Moreover, B.5 refers to the volume and *selis* in the records of year 35 of Augustus where a particular parcel was recorded. That would suggest that the same procedure was followed in 4/5 and 5/6 as in 11/12 and 12/13: declarations in the first year, official register compiled in the second and then used for reference until the next register. The lack of evidence for any such general collection of data before year 34 on the basis of the previous censuses that I have hypothesized renders it possible that these compilations did not begin until 5/6. But subsequent evidence may yet turn up to show that the process antedates that year. *If* there was a census in 19/20 (which remains to be demonstrated), the choice of that year (if not purely fortuitous) may have depended on the

interval since the last compilation of registers. But nothing at this point entitles us to claim that any such census was held, let alone that it followed any regular pattern.

Now that we have the correct date for the declaration, it can also be seen that indeed age-rounding occurred. In *P. Oslo* II 32, Harthotes and Marsisouchos are forty and thirty-five respectively in A.D. 1. A decade later, in 11/12, Harthotes is fifty-five. The roundedness of the numbers makes them suspect, and it is entirely likely that *both* are rounded, probably the former down and the latter up. Esersythis' age, seventy, is also likely to be an approximation; ages over sixty are particularly prone to rounding.

In conclusion, I append a table of what I suppose to have been the major instances of registration under Augustus:

<i>Regnal Year</i>	<i>Julian Years</i>	<i>Event</i>
20	11/10 B.C.	Declarations
27	4/3 B.C.	Declarations
34	4/5	Declarations (ἐπίκρισις)
35	5/6	Establishment of registers
41	11/12	Declarations
42	12/13	Establishment of registers

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