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ROGER S. BAGNALL

The Periodicity and Collection of the Chrysargyron

As is the case with many institutions of late antique taxation, the tax on commercial activity — normally referred to as the χρυσάργυρον or πραγματευτικὸν χρυσάργυρον in Greek sources — is known to us from several different types of sources, the connection of which to each other poses many difficulties. Imperial constitutions preserved in the codes offer a variety of enactments regulating the tax; ancient authors refer to it in a variety of mainly tendentious contexts; and the papyri show the tax in everyday operation in the cities of Egypt. In an article of 1985, Roland Delmaire showed convincingly that the evidence usually cited in support of the view that the tax was collected every five years (Libanius) was compatible with a four-year cycle instead, and that other evidence made a four-year periodicity — penteteric on inclusive reckoning — much more likely¹. In Delmaire's view, this cycle was based on 314 or 318 (and probably begun by Licinius) and can be traced at four-year intervals thereafter until 498, when the tax was abolished. Delmaire's arguments derived mainly from the literary sources, although he takes some of the papyrological evidence into account. His attempts to square the papyri with his four-year cycle, however, encounter difficulties. Since he wrote, moreover, a number of new documents have been published which complicate matters further, not all of them included in his subsequent book. Since neither Delmaire's discussion nor the comments of the editors of these recently published papyri reconcile the evidence satisfactorily, it seems worthwhile looking afresh at the old and new evidence in light of Delmaire's hypothesis.

We may begin with Delmaire's essentially sound observation, at the end of his article, that „il faut en conclure que la levée de l'impôt n'était pas encore commencée à cette date [May, 498], et sans doute que le chrysargyre est levé durant le courant de l'indiction qui commence en septembre: cette hypothèse est confirmée par le fait que la lettre du gouverneur d'Augustamnica à la fin de janvier 342 montre que la levée n'est pas encore commencée à cette date et par le papyrus de 391 qui affirme une levée pour l'indiction 10 et non pour une année civile“ (p. 129). The papyri in fact refer rather consistently to the *chrysargyron* as being of a particular indiction, as we shall see, and it would be remarkable if this tax alone were *not* collected on an indictional basis. (This indiction need not, of course, be calculated from

¹ *Remarques sur le chrysargyre et sa périodicité*, *RevNum* 6 ser. 27 (1985) 120–129. See 120 n. 1 for the various terms used to describe the tax. Delmaire demolishes the notion that the tax was connected to imperial anniversaries, although he is somewhat misleading in suggesting that this hypothesis has normally been a necessary accompaniment of the five-year cycle thesis. The gist of the article is repeated, only partially brought up to date, in Delmaire's *Largesses sacrées et res privata: L'aerarium impérial et son administration du IV^e au VI^e siècle*, Paris 1989, 354–374 (Coll. École Française de Rome 121).

September; that depended on the indiction start in use in the place where a particular document was drawn up².)

Now it might seem a simple matter to draw up a list of papyrological attestations and see if they in fact fit a quadrennial cycle beginning with 314/5 or 318/9, and Delmaire cites texts which he believes to fit with such a cycle. His conclusion is reaffirmed by Peter van Minnen in the introduction to *Pap.Lugd.Bat.* XXV 65: „It is to be noted that the fourth-century documents that bear an exact date conform to the four-year pattern established by Delmaire from A. D. 314 (or 318) onwards; *P.Oxy.* 3577 is for A. D. 342, PSI 884 is for A. D. 390.“ Unfortunately, this construction cannot stand. Van Minnen’s formulation speaks in terms of julian years, ignoring the indiction years which Delmaire rightly established as the basis of the collection of the tax. It also ignores *P.Mich.inv.* 3708, published in the same year as Delmaire’s article³. Here are the pertinent documents⁴:

<i>Text</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Ind.</i>	<i>Julian</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
<i>P.Oxy.</i> L 3577	28.i.342	15	341/2	<i>Praeses</i> instructs city
<i>P.Lips.inv.</i> 362 ⁵	369/70	?	?	Former collector apptd. to liturgy
<i>P.Lips.</i> 64	369/70	?	?	About past collections
<i>P.Oxy.</i> XLVIII 3415	?	5?	376/7?	Arrears for ind. 3–4, current tax
<i>P.Mich.inv.</i> 3708	26.vi.386	14	385/6	Guild collects via <i>kephalaiotai</i>
<i>PSI</i> VIII 884 ⁶	12.ix.390	4	390/1	Paid for a mill
<i>Pap.Lugd.Bat.</i> XXV 65	?	15	?	Account of collection
<i>P.Med.inv.</i> 71.66 ⁷	20.xii.421	5	421/2	Guild appts. collector
<i>PSI</i> XII 1265	27.xii.426	10	426/7	Guild appts. collector
<i>P.Rainer Cent.</i> 122	19.ix.429	13	429/30	Guild appts. collector

Delmaire had set aside the evidence of *PSI* XII 1265 on the grounds that it fell „à une époque où le paiement peut être mensualisé“ (128). As he remarks earlier (127), „En réalité, au V^e siècle, il était permis de payer le chrysargyre sous forme de versements échelonnés annuels ou même mensuels⁸.“ This practice is clearly attested in the other two texts from the 420s also. Delmaire cites *CTh* 13.1.20 for official sanction of this practice from 410 onwards. That constitution in fact makes such installment payments mandatory, but it gives no indication when the practice may have become normal. At all events, it may be agreed that the evidence of the 420s does not bear on the cycle of assessment (as opposed to collection).

But when did this practice begin? It is immediately apparent from the table above that *P.Mich.inv.* 3708 and *PSI* VIII 884 cannot support a four-year cycle, being payments for

² See R. S. Bagnall and K. A. Worp, *Chronological Systems of Byzantine Egypt*, Zutphen 1978, 17–29 (Stud. Amst. 8).

³ P. J. Sijpesteijn, *ZPE* 61 (1985) 73–75.

⁴ I omit those texts concerning the *chrysargyron* offering no information useful for present purposes.

⁵ *Archiv* 32 (1986) 39–46.

⁶ See *P.Rainer Cent.*, p. 424 n. 13. Not indiction 10 (Delmaire 129; correctly in *Largesses* 359). B. Kramer, *Archiv* 32 (1986) 41, repeats the editor’s errors of taking indiction 4 as 389/390 and the date as 391 (cf. *BL* 7.237); so too Delmaire, *Largesses* 369.

⁷ Published in *Aegyptus* 62 (1982) 65–68; see the restored text in *ZPE* 59 (1985) 67–70. Delmaire was unaware of this text and *P.Rainer Cent.* 122 when he published his article; they are cited in *Largesses*, but the Milan text only from the reprint of the ed. pr. as *SB* XVI 12260.

⁸ Cf. *Largesses* 359, where he sweeps aside all evidence dated after the end of the fourth century on these grounds.

indications five years apart. Either they support a five-year cycle or they represent already a collection in each indiction year just like the documents from the 420s. A clear indication that the latter is the case may be derived from *P.Oxy.* 3415, in which Diogenes writes, „I have sent our assistant Eudaimon so that you can pay the twenty-four solidi, the twenty from the account of the chrysargyron and the four from the account of Constantinople; and in addition (pay) the arrears from the 3rd and 4th indications, both for the sitologoi and for the komarchs.“ As the editor remarks, the text implies that it was itself written in a 5th indiction, which he shows is probably 376/7. That would not be compatible with a five-year cycle embracing the texts from 385/6 and 390/1. Neither, of course, is it compatible with a four-year cycle. The logical conclusion, then, is that the collection was carried out by indiction at least as early as 376/7, and that no document concerning collection of that date or later is of any use for the establishment of a four-year cycle.

The two Leipzig papyri are not sufficiently explicit about the years for which the *chrysargyron* was collected to give precise information for our purposes, but the years in question must be earlier than the 13th indiction (369/370), and the 11th and 12th seem most likely. Neither (367/8 and 368/9) will fit the supposed four-year cycle, thus providing some hint that already at this point annual collection was normal.

P.Oxy. 3577 is the earliest dated witness for our inquiry. As we have seen, Delmaire argues that it shows that in January, 342, the collection had not yet begun, and he connects this view with a cycle including 342/3 as an assessment year. But in fact the letter of the governor gives no indication that the collection is yet to start. It is, rather, an order not to collect the tax from those who are not subject to it; as the editor points out, „This sentence [lines 7–8] looks as if it was drafted to suit the case of a particular person and it may well be that an individual precedent formed the basis for a general ruling.“ The *praeses* goes on to say ἀποκαταστήσατε τὸ χρυσίον καὶ τὸν ἄργυρον, „give back the gold and silver“, presumably to the taxpayer(s) from whom it had been wrongly exacted. This shows that the collection was already well underway at this time. The collection must then be for 341/2, indiction 15. This year does not fit into Delmaire’s cycle. If one shifts the cycle slightly, to make (e. g.) 317/8 the base year, this text can be made to fit. But that will not help the two Leipzig papyri, nor *P.Oxy.* 3415, nor yet *PSI* 884.

The evidence taken together, then, even with the exclusion of that from the 420s, cannot legitimately be made to fit any 4-year or 5-year cycle. The safest conclusion is that the papyrological references do not bear on the periodicity of assessment, and that it was *always* collected in Egypt in annual installments. The papyrological attestations must thus be left out of account in determining a multi-year assessment cycle. This is hardly surprising. They concern retail collection, and many of those subject to the tax would have had difficulty setting aside money to pay a large sum once every four years. The state was far more likely to collect the full amount due if it took it in over smaller intervals. Whether the same was not true also in other provinces, we lack the evidence to say, but it seems *a priori* likely; Egypt was certainly not among the poorer provinces.

None of that excludes assessment on a multi-year cycle, of course, although neither does it support it. The literary evidence is so explicit on this point that it would be foolish to reject the cycle on the basis of the collection practices in the papyri. Such a multi-year assessment remains remarkable all the same, and it is not obvious what its point was. Other taxes were assessed annually just as they were collected. A good explanation remains to be found.

