

## The “Middle” Ages?: *Prochreiai* as Advance Wages in Late Antique Egypt

Economic models of Late Antique Egypt were originally created to explain the supposed decline of the Roman empire. A wealth of evidence from the aristocratic-owned Apion estate in 6<sup>th</sup> century Oxyrhynchus was used by Harold Idris Bell in 1917 to create an economic model characterized by landlocked serfs, social immobility, low productivity, a weak government, an autonomous aristocracy. Bell argued that this model was feudal and medieval in character and therefore a component of the Roman empire’s decline.<sup>1</sup> This model of aristocratic autonomy and imperial decline was first questioned by Johnson and West in 1949 and put to rest in the 1980s through the work of Jean-Michel Carrié and Jean Gascoü.

With models of decline no longer in favor, scholars have instead pivoted towards models that highlight aristocratic investment in rural production. In 1999, Jairus Banaji began to build such a model in an article titled “Agrarian History and The Labour Organisation Of Byzantine Large Estates.” Banaji later expanded upon this model in his 2001 (rev. 2007) monograph *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance*. This model is characterized by free labor markets, the production of goods for market sale and a profit-seeking aristocracy. Despite criticism from scholars such as Roberta Mazza and Todd Hickey, this model of Late Antique Egypt remains influential in scholarship.

A key component of Banaji’s model is the prevalence of hired labor.<sup>2</sup> This claim is partially built upon the term *prochreia* which is found throughout Apionic papyri and is interpreted by Banaji as an advance of wages. He cites the work of Andrea Jördens who was the

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<sup>1</sup> Bell 1917, 101.

<sup>2</sup> Banaji 1999, 205 nt78

first to claim that *prochreiai* were advance wages in a 1988 publication concerning P.Prag. I 34 then again in the fifth volume of the Heidelberg papyri published in 1990.<sup>3</sup>

This paper is a critical reevaluation of the term *prochreia* in Apionic documentation. An edition of an unpublished papyrus from Oxyrhynchus that contains multiple *prochreiai* will be discussed and the papyrological evidence cited by Jördens will be thoroughly examined in order to demonstrate that there is no concrete evidence of a *prochreia* given as an advance of wages. Rather, it is a sum of money given to laborers in extreme circumstances in order to maintain a constant agricultural output. This finding demonstrates that wage labor was less common than supposed by Banaji and that models of Late Antique Egypt require constant reevaluation with the publication of new papyri.

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<sup>3</sup> Jördens 1988, 164-5; “Da προχρεία auch die häufigste Bezeichnung für einen Lohnvorschuß ist,” (Jördens 1990, 276-7).

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