Poverty and Vulnerability in Classical Antiquity: Gendered and Life-Cycle Approaches

The Micro-Histories of Rural Romano-Egyptian Households

Hello, thank you for letting me speak here today…

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My paper delves into:

* the fascinating micro-histories of rural households in Roman Egypt.
* By applying ‘livelihood’ and ‘life-course’ approaches, I want to draw out the latent capacities of households to manage poverty and demographic challenges.
* Going to look a community called Karanis in the period between AD 160-180.
* **New slide – where Karanis was in Egypt.**

I selected the period between AD 160-180 because it is viewed as one of widespread crisis in Egypt:

* Karanis, for example, lost 21% of its population in the short period between AD 169-171.
* This was due to several risk-factors but mainly deaths from the Antonine plague.
* It is thought that rural populations couldn’t recover because they were pretty stable and grew at a rate of 0.1% per year. An ‘excess’ mortality event on the scale of 21% requires a 27% recovery. This would take about 200 years.
* Without an ability to recover quickly, catastrophic structural changes occurred in Egypt and the wider Roman empire:
	+ Almost complete socio-economic collapse in the third century;
	+ Concentration of land in the hands of a small urbanised elite.

This narrative:

* Highlights vulnerabilities to demographic threats in high-pressure regimes. Villagers needed to maximise economic productivity and fertility rates to eke-out a living from a challenging landscape.
* Their capacity to manage crises was therefore small.

The publication of new archival papyri and archaeological evidence from Karanis allows us to:

* Assess this view through 2 micro-historical case studies **have plenty more if anyone is interested.**
* Helped with comparative evidence from structurally similar units in the developing world today.
* Examine long-term demographic trends in the village.
* Also gain some insight into age, disability and gendered situational differences.

**Intro slide of main points and themes:**

The main themes I want you to take away from the presentation are:

* 1) Households could be disrupted, but risk-management strategies provided stability, well-being, and protection.
* 2) Comparatively high production levels and fertility control allowed households to flex their resources.
* 3) The community ‘bounced-back’ within around 50 years and even grew in the third and fourth centuries.
* **4) In my view, strong evidence for rural resilience to demographic risks.**

Micro-History #1 – Ptollas-Ptolemais Household

**house pictures – set the scene**

The household is identifiable in the Karanis Tax Rolls archive (which dates to AD 171-175) and a census declaration from AD 175.

In AD 175, things look positive – the household was large **(16 people!)** and possessed lots of property. Interesting features:

* **New slide –** Centred around two brothers (Ptollas-Harpochras), a sister (Ptolemais), a young child, and old grandmother (both Vettia);
* **New slide –** Ptollas married to his sister, Ptolemais;
* **New slide –** Some kinswomen live in the house;
* **New slide –** Lots of female slaves.

However, I propose that:

* The household was disrupted in the crisis. It then restructured to relieve pressures on household resources and accommodate vulnerable family members, especially older and widowed women.
* This allowed for recovery and future generational expansion.

**Before all this…probably only the family members…**

Between AD 171-175, the brothers were rarely in the household and had fled elsewhere.

* As is often the case in modern rural migration, they probably fled to find work elsewhere.
* Indicates that household resources under pressure, but the household was also flexible.
* Seems it was successful because both brothers briefly returned in AD 173 and Ptollas came back more permanently in AD 175.

Having said that, **it isn’t all roses because:**

* Even if temporary-ish, their migration left Ptolemais as the only adult to care for a young daughter and elderly grandmother.
* **Perhaps Ptolemais felt reassured her sibling husband would return home, but** similar scenarios in modern rural Indonesia left those ‘left behind’ at home under considerable psychological stress.

Another interesting aspect to this story is that the household absorbed another dissolved household:

* **Usual marital age was 15-25 and pattern for women was to leave the household.**
* The unusual location of 38 year of kinswomen in this household suggests that their natal & marital homes were obliterated.
* **New slide –** The kinswomen’s brother, Valerius Aphrodisios, and their probable brother-in-law, Sempronius, were absent soldiers who could not protect their female relatives whilst they were away.
* It made me wonder if Ptollas, Ptolemais, or their elderly mother, Vettia viewed the protection of extended family members as their responsibility. **But perhaps selfish needs going on too.**
* **New slide** The transition to a new, larger structure made up for the men’s absence, and also brought in many livelihood assets and probably also military connections.
* Everyone was more likely to experience stability and receive mutual support.
* And the household now possessed strategic options for future growth through the marriage market.

**So disruption, restructuring and recovery.**

Micro-History #2 – Household of Ninnaros and his father Isidoros

Attested in the Ninnaros papyrological archive which was recently identified in 2021:

* **slide** Ninnaros, Isidoros, and 3 other close family members can be found in the Tax Rolls archive and remaining family members in a census declaration from AD 161.
* In the AD 160s, the multi-generational household possessed several vulnerabilities, including elderly grandparents, young children, and a disabled adult.
* This is one of the few examples I would feel relatively confident suggesting Mysthas’ disability was caused by successive generations of sibling marriages **point out on PP Petheus-Dideis & Isidoros-Taonnophris**).
* **Most importantly,** this micro-history is another example of disruption and recovery.

The shock killed at least one grandparent (**Isidoros and maybe Dideis)**. Nevertheless, the large household persisted.

**New slide** Isidoros even flexed household resources in AD 177 took advantage of new economic opportunities.

* He bought properties that were confiscated from villagers who had defaulted on debts.
* Isidoros consequently became a neighbour of prestigious individuals, including an army veteran, a doctor, and a high-priest.

I propose that the source of their resilience was found in their marital decisions.

* The successive sibling marriages kept everyone together without needing to risk new relationships with outsiders.
* The household’s size large allowed it to be flexible and sustain losses without any need to restructure.
* Isidoros’ may have also used his social connections to help his son become the manager of the estate of a Roman citizen in AD 186. **social capital**

Population Size in the Late C2nd – Late C4th

* **Stepping away from the micro-histories for a moment**, the new archaeological evidence suggests a rapid recovery within around 50 years and a growing population in the third and fourth centuries.
* **New slide** The central areas of the village (KAC, KAT, KAG – possibly KAN) were inhabited throughout the second, third and fourth centuries.
* **New slide** The papyri and archaeological evidence attest to expansions of the in every direction from the early third-century (KAW, KAN, KAE, KAS).
* Altogether, this doubled the occupied area of the settlement which doesn’t really make sense if the population size was falling.

**About 13 minutes here**

Conclusion

To bring this all together, the demographic threat to Karanis between AD 160-180 must have also caused exceptional socio-economic impacts, especially if we compare it to something like the Black Death in the medieval period.

It is difficult to imagine how any rural society under high-pressure conditions responded to such events.

Karanis, however:

* Rapidly recovered to stability and growth.
* This suggests that households had relatively significant reserves of economic and demographic resources to reduce risk, take advantage of new opportunities, and recover over the course of several generations.

The recovery of Karanis provides strong evidence for household and community-level resilience to demographic risks.

**From comparative analysis, need to bring in new ways of thinking…plausibility,**

I propose that the traumatic social memory of the shock in Roman Egypt triggered a population-rebuilding mechanism.

* When comparative populations suffered devastating losses, there were psychologically motivated behavioural responses. Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, childless women or women who lost children in high mortality communities were significantly more likely to marry earlier and more bear more children.
* In Haredi communities, high fertility rates are often viewed as essential, in part to compensate for the demographic impact of the Holocaust.
* **For Egypt…**Death and inhumation were deeply important and costly activities in Egypt. I’ve found many examples of Egyptian households which have mothers who rapidly bore multiple children in the wake of the shock. **Seems plausible.**