**The Micro-Histories of Rural Romano-Egyptian Households**

**Synopsis**

This project explores the micro-histories of rural, Romano-Egyptian household (*ca*. 30 BC – AD 400), applying ‘livelihood’ and ‘life-course’ approaches derived from anthropology and developmental economics.

My research offers historical and comparative perspectives on contemporary issues in development theory, livelihood research, and social economics. Sustainable economic development in vulnerable social-ecological systems (SES), for example, is crucial in the fight against climate change. Furthermore, micro-histories of under-represented communities embed subaltern and postcolonial narrative techniques, and have wider applicability in thinking about poverty reduction and international development.

Roman Egypt offers an unparalleled opportunity to study a range of coping strategies adopted by rural households to ensure annual and generational socio-economic reproduction in response to a dynamic and culturally diverse colonial environment. Shifting political and economic contexts (including urbanisation, agricultural commercialisation, and new taxation systems), unstable ecological landscapes, and changing cultural values (as manifested, for instance, within new religious systems) represented new structural risks, uncertainties, and opportunities. Survival required shrewd household management of mortality, reproduction, and agricultural risk in order to adapt to new norms.

The combination of a rich documentary record and abundant archaeological evidence from the villages of Roman Egypt permits a micro-historical approach focusing on internal household dynamics and social relation networks within and beyond villages. These generated concepts of ‘family’ and ‘community’, and contributed to community resilience.

This approach provides us with a unique insight into rural life and the structuring of rural communities in the Roman imperial period from the perspective of individual social interactions and gender and power relations. This approach has not been previously applied to material from Roman Egypt. In a time of climate change, threats to sustainable agricultural supply, urbanisation, and unstable legal foundations for interaction within and between states, this project contributes to addressing contemporary challenges in a rapidly changing environment.

**Research Project Description**

Households underpin economic and social structures. Households are complex decision units in which partners make consumption, work, and fertility decisions (Browning-Chiappori 2014). In vulnerable social-ecological systems (SES), households survive based on their ability to coordinate these activities, manage dynamic personal and environmental factors, and adapt (Wilson et al. 2013). Such dialectical interactions constitute community-based institutional structures, and relations between communities and wider social and political agencies.

This project explores household micro-histories to understand the dynamics of decision-making and resilience in rural societies. It employs ‘livelihood’ and ‘life-course’ approaches that force re-examination of analytical units (households), and dynamic modelling of social relations and community interactions. A key research outcome is methodological and theoretical innovation in approaches to pre-industrial households, particularly in the Roman Mediterranean (building on Alston, forthcoming).

Since the 1980’s, a key issue in historical and economic research has been the changing nature of family structure. The predominant historical model focuses on macro-economic factors: a ‘social breakdown’ of ‘traditional’, complex kinship structures in ‘primitive’, rural societies, into simpler, nuclear family units in industrialised and urban societies (Puschmann-Solli 2014). Consequently, it is often assumed that rural cultures are largely unchanging. Indeed, the smaller and less connected the topographical unit (regions, cities, villages), the more resistant to change it is assumed to be. It further operates with an understanding of households as commensal, without regard to members living away from the main cluster, and as a gendered dichotomy between public and domestic space.

The documentary and archaeological record from Egypt, *ca*. 30 BC–AD 400, allows that model to be tested and challenged. Household structures can be examined in relation to long-term trends, including urbanisation and closer economic and cultural integration into the Roman world, and in respect of more pressing, everyday matters: personal well-being, the achievement of social goals, and concerns for safety. These can be assessed in the context of three distinct, rural SESs which fundamentally affected livelihood options: the Faiyum, the Oxyrhynchite, and the Western Egyptian Desert.

The project feeds into livelihood research and complements the social economics of Sen (1983). Romano-Egyptian society consisted of a large, culturally diverse population, which practised intensive farming and displayed fluid and highly networked social relations. Also manifested was a strong emphasis on familial descent and highly endogamous marriages, including between siblings. The project maps ‘relatedness’ to investigate the nature of ‘social capital’, and the size, structure, and supportive capabilities of social networks among the rural poor. Relatedness includes the biological, performative, and temporal attributes of social relationships (Carsten 2003), and the defining factors of agrarian relation structures: locality and shared household residence, common experience of collective activities, and agricultural practice and land use (Gudeman-Rivera 1990; Gardner-Wallace 2020). These approaches constitute part of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and have not been employed in ancient historical research.

My research contributes to our ability to address contemporary strategic challenges related to poverty and climate change, and complements academic research into relationships between pre-modern societies and ecological factors (Huebner 2020). Historical and comparative perspectives on household strategies and environmental management can indicate long-term continuities in community vulnerability, and addresses tendencies in modern development theory to draw on historical Western experiences of industrialisation, without adequately considering micro-economic development. Moreover, employing the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework in a unique social context, such as Roman Egypt, may influence its application in developing countries.

**Research Questions**

Theoretical

* How do we understand and define ‘the household’/basic familial unit through dynamic historical analysis?
* How do social networks enhance social/household resilience?
* How do we account for dynamic change within particular households with regard to micro-economic/demographic shifts and within slowly changing cultural/economic contexts in pre-industrial economies?
* How can we employ livelihood research to identify and analyse risk management strategies within pre-industrial societies?

Historical

* How did village household dynamics relate to economic models; gender relations; demographic constraints; community forms?
* To what extent did Egyptian families practice endogamy and how can we explore the decision-making processes involved?
* How did households adapt to changing economic and cultural circumstances?
* Can we detect (and explain) regional diversities in household practices?

**Methodology**

It is only through engaged, inter-disciplinary research that we can progress on these questions. For the Classical material, I summarise by different evidence types.

**Papyrological**: Papyrological archives organised by Romano-Egyptian families and administrative officials provide detailed records of village-level economic activities unparalleled in the ancient world, spanning several centuries. It is possible to assess emergent behaviours and outcomes over an individual household’s life-course in the light of quantifiable resource and institutional (social and legal) constraints, and facilitates the application of social network tools (UNICET). Non-archival texts provide individual instances of decision-making behaviour which can be combined to support micro-economic/sociological investigation.

This approach synthesises the discursive methodology of Alston (2005) with the social-network based analysis of Ruffini (2008), and employs the perspective of New Institutional Economics. Crucially, micro-analysis improves upon current approaches which draw on isolated evidence from literary works, epigraphy, and census papyri, and tend towards homogenised models of the ‘Roman family’ without reflecting the life of any single individual (Saller-Shaw 1984; Bagnall-Frier 2006).

**Archaeological**: Newly published data from well-excavated sites in the Faiyum and Western Egyptian Desert provide insights into the material conditions of domestic life in rural communities (e.g. Karanis, Tebtunis, and the Dakhla/Kharga Oases). Simpson’s (2014) spatial analysis technique is applied to examine the use of space within and between households (e.g. shared walls and, when present, communal spaces), cultural markers of identity, and household adaptations to local conditions. Particular attention is paid to interpersonal relations, interactions with the Roman state, and processes of water management and desertification.

**Comparative Demographics & Anthropology**: Ongoing research of structurally similar units in pre-modern/modernising societies in the Mediterranean, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia provides comparative evidence for household economic behaviours, livelihood strategies, and subsistence institutions, as well as demographic data to bridge evidentiary gaps (Beck 1989; Clarysse & Thompson 2006; United Nations 2019). Applications of social network analysis in marginal rural communities provide further comparative evidence for household connectivity and resilience (Cassidy-Barnes 2012).

Evidence and insights from these sources will be used to consider the following issues: household formation and marriage strategies (member addition/fertility decisions vs. migration; endogamy and the ‘marriage market’; gender/age relations); factors influencing decision-making processes (individual roles, disputes, negotiation, cooperation and resource sharing); education and investment in children; management of social and material resources; transaction decisions (property sales/rentals); inheritance patterns; and agricultural strategies (diversification, subsistence vs. cash cropping, and the use of labour resources). Such research also facilitates consideration of the household as an institution of reproduction and socialisation, with ‘the house’ as a physical locus for social capital generation between kin and society (Wallace-Hadrill 1994; Baird 2014), and an assessment of ‘social breakdown’.

**Project Timetable**

Completed: Literature Review

Year 1: (Completion) Chapter 5 ‘How did households build and negotiate community relationships?’; (Draft) Chapter 1 ‘How was the ‘household’ constructed?’

Year 2: (Draft) Chapter 2 ‘Capability: why the ‘household’ was constructed’, Chapter 3 ‘How were decisions made and social relationships mediated within the household?’

Year 3: (Draft) Chapter 4 ‘How did households mitigate economic and demographic risk, and ensure resilience?’

Year 4: (1st Draft Completion), including Chapter 6 ‘Macro-economic effects’, Introduction, and Conclusion; (Final Draft) 6 months prior to deadline.

**Resources required**

The primary requirement for the project is access to library resources. Archaeological excavation reports are often printed, rather than published online. In the short-term, I can mitigate travel and access restrictions through inter-library and postage loan services from the library at RHUL and the Institute of Classical Studies. In the long-term, however, I will require sustained library access to these publications. Fortunately, anthropological, economic, and papyrological publications are often published online, which are accessible digitally through the RHUL student intranet. The Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri (Papyri.info) and Trismegistos.com are especially useful because they provide published editions of papyrological texts in Ancient Greek, though also in English on some occasions. I can prioritise these aspects of the project during periods of travel and access restrictions.

A secondary requirement is a paid licence for the social network analysis software, UNICET. However, this licence has been purchased through use of School of Humanities Research and Scholarship Funding at RHUL, and is therefore not required as part of the Technē application. In order to conduct social network analysis, I require data from Trismegistos.com. At first, I intended to include a subscription to the site and its functionality as part of the Technē application, but I am now a contributor to the site and can readily access this information without need for financial support.

**14: Additional Training needs**

My Technē application is submitted on the basis of a part-time PhD. Consequently, I am flexible in response to uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and can devote more time to formal training, access resources during periods of restricted library access, and integrate within Technē. I require additional training in key areas to support my PhD and career objectives in academic research. I must be trained how to edit and subsequently publish papyrological material. This can be accessed through members of RHUL staff who received training as papyrologists, such as Dr. Kremmydas and Prof. Rubinstein, and through the inter-collegiate collaboration between UCL, KCL, and RHUL. I can also audit ‘Greek Papyrology Reading’ (KCL). ‘Space Syntax Methodology and Analytical Design’ (UCL) also strengthens my background in space syntax theory.

Technē training in ArcGIS in AutoCad (University of the Arts London) is vital to my long-term development so that I can visually represent, interrogate, and understand spatial relationships in Classical houses. AutoCad expertise is equally important for branching into new aspects of the ancient world and crucial in the job market in commercial and research archaeology.

I have practised extensively with UNICET, Dr. Natal (RHUL, Department of History) is an expert in the application of social network analysis tools, and The Digital Organisation and Society Research Centre have invited guests to present on the use of UNICET software. Nevertheless, I require access to short formal courses and taught modules on social network analysis tools only available through the Technē Doctoral Training Partnership programme (e.g. ‘Social Network Analysis’, SOCM058 – Dr. Giulia Berlusconi, Sociology, University of Surrey).

Technē also provides opportunities to organise student-led research events around theoretical economic models and approaches in ancient history, and develop other skills, such as presentation skills and the strategic use of data.

**Student Personal Statement**

I am a Classics PhD candidate supervised by Prof. Richard Alston. I have applied to Technē to take advantage of a mutually-beneficial relationship. I possess a unique and complementary perspective which I want to communicate to policymakers and researchers. In return, Technē provides a training environment in which to develop skills, access innovative interdisciplinary engagements, and prepare for a diverse range of career pathways.

Through my studies, I developed essential research skills and background knowledge. I received the department’s highest mark in ‘Bureaucracy and Oppression in Roman Egypt’ (MA, 95%). After collating 170 Greek documentary papyri, I investigated the social-ecological adaptations and effects of state economic activity. Moreover, I examined epigraphic agricultural evidence through the perspective of New Institutional Economics (‘The Economy of the Roman Empire’, MA, 75%), and attended RHUL’s ‘Family Economics’ module.

I utilise the strengths of traditional and new approaches to fully engage with complex issues in the ancient and modern world. In dissertations focussed on the eastern Mediterranean (BA, 80%; MA, 83%), I analysed paleoclimate archives and documentary (literary, epigraphic, and papyrological) and archaeological evidence in the context of sociological theories of ‘intergroup relations’. I concluded that climate variability was a catalyst for social conflict, *ca*. C1stBC–ADC4th.

Practical archaeological skills allow me to approach classical material using methods beyond textual engagement. In addition to studying ‘Democratic Spaces’ (BA), I helped train archaeologists in geophysical survey techniques and processing software, and currently supervise excavations at archaeological field-schools on rural, domestic sites: Norton Priory (UK), Olynthos (Greece) and Tell Dhiban (Jordan).

Furthermore, I engage with university colleagues. At Liverpool, I was a member of the Student Society Committee. Identifying a lack of departmental cohesion in a University Guild project, I made recommendations which re-introduced external departmental trips and greater careers support. The project was identified as ‘outstanding’ by the Humanities Faculty. I am now a RHUL departmental representative focussed on community-building through digital events.

My project fits the inter-disciplinary philosophy of Technē. Sustainable, rural economic development and micro-histories of under-represented communities have wider applicability in thinking about poverty reduction and international development, the Social Sciences, and Economics.

This philosophy is reflected in expertise at RHUL. Prof. Alston published pioneering work on Romano-Egyptian households and has two major publications in press. He has a successful record of supervision and expertise in economic history, whilst my advisor, Dr. Rowan, applies concepts from Roman and Environmental Studies to international development. The Classics Department has research strengths in the study of place and local cultures within an imperial setting, with collaboration opportunities in History (Prof. Cooper, an expert in late Roman households) and the Centre for Household Interaction and Economics. London is an international hub for Romano-Egyptian research: Prof. Rathbone (KCL), Prof. Gonis (UCL), Dr. O’Connell (British Museum). Technē institutions also embody this philosophy with postgraduate International Development courses (RHUL, Westminster, Kingston), and the Centre for Environment and Sustainability (Surrey).

Understanding historical perspectives on these issues preserves the scholarly capacities of the arts and humanities, and secures their future relevance and importance.

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