

# **Agronomy and Ptolemaic Public Policy as a Catalyst for Social Mobility in Hellenistic Egypt**

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## **Introduction**

Did a Graeco-Egyptian culture arise in Hellenistic Egypt? McKay et al.'s *History of Western Society* (2011) seems to think so: “while many Greeks and Egyptians remained aloof from each other, the overall result was the evolution of a widespread Greco-Egyptian culture”.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the vast majority of specialized research vehemently avers the *lack* of a Graeco-Egyptian culture, with some works dating back thirty years or more.<sup>2</sup> The Hellenistic world, with its crown jewel of Egypt, was inaugurated in 332 B.C.E. with Alexander's infamous military campaign stretching from Anatolia (modern day Turkey) to Egypt in the south and the Indus River in the east, and abruptly ended in 30 B.C.E. with Cleopatra VII's death. These three centuries in Egypt were characterized by the dynasty of the Macedonian Ptolemies who primarily encouraged Graeco-Macedonian immigration.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a cultural duality emerged: that of the privileged Greek elites and the impotent Egyptian majority.<sup>4</sup> Although cultural assimilation was exceedingly scarce, the Ptolemies' establishment of a cleruchy, land endowed to soldiers in exchange for military service, fostered cross-cultural contact.<sup>5</sup> The evolution of the military in Ptolemaic Egypt inadvertently gave opportunities for social mobility across ethnic and gender status groups because of the relative ease of profit in agriculture and the subsequent accumulation of social and cultural capital.

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<sup>1</sup> 102

<sup>2</sup> Bevan 87; Bingen 246; Lewis 3-4; Puchala 12

<sup>3</sup> Lewis 10-11

<sup>4</sup> Bevan 87

<sup>5</sup> Bingen 108-9

## Ptolemaic Governance

The Ptolemies inherited a remarkably byzantine and elaborate bureaucracy that eventually synthesized the ancient Egyptian governing structure with more familiar Hellenic models. The head of this bureaucracy was obviously the Pharaoh; in addition to supreme authority over the civil populous and military, he managed the land of Egypt.<sup>6</sup> Due to a multitude of officials and the intricacies of the Ptolemaic bureaux, the Pharaoh was able to leave most of the actual governing to subordinates; he would simply write *Ginesthō* (let it be done) on any official proclamation.<sup>7</sup> In Bevan's history of Ptolemaic Egypt, the King's duties are chiefly relegated to the "...*dioikētēs*- the same Greek word which was used for the manager of a private estate".<sup>8</sup> Below the Pharaonic government, Egypt was divided into multiple forms of local governing units. The largest administration, both in magnitude and population, was the nome.<sup>9</sup> While exact figures on the number of nomes vary, it was likely around 40.<sup>10</sup> This middling strata of administration was a very old part of Egyptian government and one of the few changes instituted by the Ptolemies was for the nome to be managed by a *strategos*, viz. a Greek general.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the *strategos* had both civil and military authority, just like the King; they both symbolized the occupational nature of their rule rather than any consent of their subjects.<sup>12</sup>

The primary domestic objective of Ptolemy I and his successors was that a maximum quantity of land was under cultivation and its infrastructure adequately maintained. To this end, almost all land was allotted to temples as sacred land, local cultivators as royal land and to the military as cleruchic land; sometimes the Pharaoh gave land to prized officials.<sup>13</sup> While an insignificant portion of land was considered 'private', Bevan reassures us that "...none of this land was private property in the strict sense; the occupiers had no freehold. It was merely land 'granted to individuals for continuous and sometimes perpetual use'".<sup>14</sup> Cleruchic land arose out of the need for a more loyal and perennial military; the early dynasty had resorted to employing

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<sup>6</sup> Bevan 133

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 136

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 133. Greek terms will be minimized and Anglicized forms will be emphasized instead.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 139

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 140

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 142

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 142

<sup>13</sup> Monson 7

<sup>14</sup> 146. The debate over private land during this period is hotly contested. Most scholars agree that 'private' land was at a minimum at the beginnings of the Ptolemaic Dynasty.

mercenaries.<sup>15</sup> Another reason, as emphasized in Lewis' *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt*, was that in the second century

...the ready supply of mercenaries from abroad showed signs of drying up at that time, the Ptolemaic regime, in a largely successful bid to retain their services, offered its professional soldiery a hereditary option essentially the same as that which the cleruchs enjoyed.<sup>16</sup>

Exact figures on land allotment for the whole of Egypt are nonexistent, but one village, Kerkeosiris, reported that in 118 B.C.E. cleruchic land accounted for 33% of the land area, royal land 52% and temple land 6%.<sup>17</sup> The Ptolemies hoped that these military settlers would not repudiate their fealty to their Sovereign in exchange for a plot of land to develop.

### **Agronomy**

More important than the land itself was the purported profits it would easily yield because of widely-reported favorable agronomic conditions. Andrew Monson's "Royal Land in Ptolemaic Egypt" classifies cultivated land into the Nile Valley, Delta and the Fayyum in Northern Egypt.<sup>18</sup> The Nile Valley, the traditional agrarian center of Egypt, was fertilized by "flood-recession agriculture" that required a relatively minimal amount of irrigation via canals.<sup>19</sup> The Fayyum was reclaimed under the Ptolemies and was less dependent on floods but also in greater need of irrigation; its first settlers were cleruchs.<sup>20</sup> The high cost of reclamation and its subsequent maintenance posed a significant financial risk to the centralized Ptolemaic regime, but as individuals, the cleruchs were able to profit off of their ambition.<sup>21</sup> With that said, cleruchs had a myriad of crops to choose from, although some were legally restricted to grow certain produce.<sup>22</sup> High profit crops, such as grain and corn, remained tightly controlled by the state. While they were usually a cleruchs' first choice, they additionally planted gardens, fruit trees,

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis 24

<sup>16</sup> 24

<sup>17</sup> Pomeroy 153

<sup>18</sup> 26. Monson's article emphasizes the development of private property as more widespread than commonly accepted.

<sup>19</sup> Monson 6

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 27; Lewis 25

<sup>21</sup> Bevan 146

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 147-8

orchards, vegetables, vineyards, or invested in live stock.<sup>23</sup> Even without the cash crops, there were profits to be had and many of those crops required significantly less labor.<sup>24</sup>

## **Graeco-Macedonian Mobility**

Most of the Graeco-Macedonians that immigrated to Egypt were male soldiers in search of socio-economic opportunities; at the same time the Ptolemies were eager to expand their elite strata.<sup>25</sup> At the outset of the cleruchic system, Greeks who entered the military could be given anywhere from 12 arouras (one aroura translates to approximately 0.68 acres) to 100 arouras depending on rank and division.<sup>26</sup> The potential for profit becomes evident with Monson's demographic estimate that "...five arouras would have been sufficient for sustaining a household on royal land in the Fayyum".<sup>27</sup> Even the lowly Greek infantry had almost double the land that was needed for survival, thereby allowing them to accumulate some wealth. However, the relatively prodigious cleruchic land allotments came with a hidden caveat that they were allocated "... a sizable portion of uncultivated land...it was expected that the prospect of profit would induce the cleruch to bring those marginal or waste areas into production".<sup>28</sup> Extant documents from this time period evince that the preferred route for military settlers was to 'lease' the land; the few that actually tried their hand at it quickly abandoned or contracted it out.<sup>29</sup> Economically, renting their cleruch was very profitable; a land survey from 140 B.C.E. recorded that out of ten cavalry settlers, all their land was either fallow or worked by an Egyptian.<sup>30</sup>

Opportunities to aggrandize land holdings and thus economic capital slowly increased as the Ptolemies struggled to remain in control of their extremely stratified society. Greeks in general, cleruchs included, were known to abuse their privileged status for monetary gain.<sup>31</sup> One prominent example, from the middle of the second century, was the practice of cleruchs

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 146-7

<sup>24</sup> Pomeroy 154; Lewis 25

<sup>25</sup> Lewis 21. Edomites from the Dead Sea region and Jews were also favored in the military, albeit on a much smaller scale.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 24

<sup>27</sup> Monson 15

<sup>28</sup> Lewis 25

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 33

<sup>30</sup> Bingen 112. Large sample spaces in Ptolemaic Egypt are hard to come by; this survey supports the general trend.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 198

occupying royal land and neglecting to pay taxes.<sup>32</sup> Instead of a pugnacious crackdown, the Pharaonic government granted amnesty to the usurpers and in exchange for one year's dues, they received the right to work the land.<sup>33</sup> In *Hellenistic Egypt*, Bingen summarizes the numerous amnesties with “these repetitious edicts point up simultaneously the structural character of the disorders and the inability of the government to remedy with new burdens the tensions which the animosities and prohibitions describe precisely”.<sup>34</sup> Further, the underlying nature of the cleruchal milieu evolves from a sense of revocable impermanence, starting in 241, to implicit hereditary land ownership.<sup>35</sup> Soon thereafter, mortgaging became prevalent alongside the rise of hereditary renting.<sup>36</sup> Cleruchic land also benefited from lower tax rates and immunity from “assessments” or compulsory cultivation as seen under Ptolemy VI Philometor ca. 170.<sup>37</sup>

### **Social Capital**

Surprisingly, Greeks and Macedonians found it relatively easy to procure social capital upon arriving in Egypt. Immigrants tended to have friends or relatives already living in Egypt; they would seek them out for letters of recommendation as a way to find a good job or just to reassert their social status.<sup>38</sup> This technique is highlighted in a letter circa 250,

Asklepiades to Zenon, greeting. Erasis, who will hand you this letter, happens to be a relative and friend of mine. He brings with him his nephew Erilochos, a candidate for a land assignment... Please, then take care of the gentlemen...that in the land measurement they are not cheated...they are deserving of your special consideration...<sup>39</sup>

Erasis is using his social capital to receive a profitable cleruchy that would provide for eventual social mobility. Besides familial connections, social capital could be fostered at Greek social clubs that celebrated Greek cultural traditions and especially cults.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 196. Bingen's work is a thorough look at the entirety of the period, not just the monarchy.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis 33

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 34

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 35-6

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 25

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 31

## Cultural Capital

The last component to social mobility was the accumulation of cultural capital. In Ptolemaic Egypt, this meant becoming Greek, socially and culturally. Bevan simplifies these implicit requirements by elucidating that “a family which had Greek names, which talked and wrote Greek and had learnt something of Greek literature, which followed the Greek tradition in manners, would count as belonging to the privileged race...”.<sup>41</sup> This obviously favored Graeco-Macedonians at the inception of the Ptolemaic dynasty due to their exclusionary employment policies.<sup>42</sup> Only Greeks could aspire to the higher echelons of government like the *dioikētēs*.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, with highly disproportionate distributions of cultural capital, according to Bingen, “...mental customs and behaviour were a source of solidarity in an environment where the Greeks were a heterogeneous minority, and they formed a source of efficiency in concerted action”.<sup>44</sup> With their elite status, this solidarity was reflected in the landed aristocracy that most Greek cleruchs skillfully entered.

## Alternatives to Graeco-Macedonian Hegemony: Egyptian Pathways

Egyptians, in contrast to their Greek counterparts, struggled to improve their socio-economic status over a much longer period of time. Lewis notes that the Ptolemaic norm of excluding the Egyptian majority gradually made less economic sense as in 217 “...a hurriedly assembled phalanx of 20,000 native Egyptians fought side by side with units of Graeco-Macedonians to repel a Syrian army poised to invade Egypt”.<sup>45</sup> As previously mentioned, immigration was plummeting, making a purely non-Egyptian military ever-more expensive; these new Egyptian recruits were comparatively cheap and could bolster support for the regime and increase legitimacy.<sup>46</sup> Bowman's *Egypt after the Pharaohs* makes the distinction that “...soldier-cleruchs were at first drawn exclusively from the Greek-speaking elite and the less favoured royal tenants were mainly native Egyptians”.<sup>47</sup> Now that Egyptians were allowed to enter the military, cleruchic status and its aforementioned privileges followed. However, the time

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<sup>41</sup> Bevan 87

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 80

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 80

<sup>44</sup> 106

<sup>45</sup> Lewis 29

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 30

<sup>47</sup> 63

it took to accumulate capital must have increased significantly since Egyptian cleruchs were typically awarded only 5 to 30 arouras.<sup>48</sup> Overall, in the latter years of Ptolemaic Egypt, the perquisites of tax breaks, quasi-ownership, renting and even mortgaging like the Greeks had done aggrandized the Egyptian cleruch's financial resources.

Similarly, the accretion of social and cultural resources was slow at first, but eventually increased with their involvement in the cleruchy. Socially, Bowman asserts the rise of a cleruchic social group which didn't strictly form a social barrier for Egyptian military settlers.<sup>49</sup> The more Greek institutions, like the social clubs used by Greek cleruchs for mobility was probably not an option for most Egyptians. The most expedient method to overcome the Egyptian stigma was to become Hellenized and Lewis concludes that “the designation 'Greeks born in Egypt' was an ingenious straddle, affirming their right, though they were not ethnic Greeks, to enjoy the privileged status they inherited from a forebear of Greek or Macedonian ancestry.”<sup>50</sup> Under Bevan's criteria for Hellenization, the adoption of Greek names was at the forefront and by the middle of the second century names ceased their role as indicators of ethnic and thus social status.<sup>51</sup> The Greek culture in the context of the Ptolemaic government, i.e. the dominance of the Greek language and economic customs, made it essential for any aspiring Egyptian cleruch to Hellenize.<sup>52</sup> Luckily, the need for Hellenized Egyptians in the lower governmental (including the military) positions made the cultural transformation worthwhile. Lewis affirms that “...with the passing decades a few of them even rose to army generalships and other top level offices, such as those of *strategos*...”<sup>53</sup> Hence, a few privileged Egyptians were able to join the traditionally Greek landed aristocracy.

## **Alternatives to Graeco-Macedonian Hegemony: The Role of Women**

Women, whilst usually viewed as just a background for male mobility, found ways to benefit economically and then socially in the cleruchy. Pomeroy's *Women in Hellenistic Egypt* evinces that one of the most apparent adaptations of cleruchic land inheritance was that “...in the

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<sup>48</sup> Lewis 24

<sup>49</sup> 62

<sup>50</sup> 154

<sup>51</sup> 87

<sup>52</sup> Bingen 106

<sup>53</sup> Lewis 154

first century B.C., a brotherless girl inherited her father's *kleros* [cleruch]”.<sup>54</sup> Another manner of acquiring capital was intermarriage. Due to the high frequency of Egyptian women in the rural cleruchic milieu, Lewis assures us that Greeks were often forced to marry Egyptians.<sup>55</sup> By the third century, soldiers were habitually bequeathing their land to their wives.<sup>56</sup> Less prevalent, but perhaps all the more important, was the development of women leasing and owning land. One disadvantage for these women, like Coite and Oxyrhynchus, was that they paid higher taxes than normal cleruchs for this privilege.<sup>57</sup> This system was confirmed by Ptolemy VIII in 118 to placate his subjects and ensure that all 'his' land was in cultivation.<sup>58</sup> As to agronomy, women preferred crops that were relatively easy to cultivate.<sup>59</sup> For instance, Pomeroy emphasizes that “even when neglected for years-barring calamities such as floods-trees and vines continue to yield a crop”.<sup>60</sup>

Unlike Greek and Egyptian men, women were never permitted to enter the military and consequently created a different paradigm for social mobility. One potent tool for women, as highlighted by Schiff's *Cleopatra*, was “well before her [Cleopatra] and centuries before the arrival of the Ptolemies, Egyptian women enjoyed the right to make their own marriages”.<sup>61</sup> If they married the 'right' man, namely a Greek, they could be brought up into the Greek milieu and then pursue more (as it was needed to be married) social and cultural capital. One instance is that of Dryton, a Greek cavalry officer.<sup>62</sup> Lewis avers that Dryton's Egyptian wife, Apollonia “...relished her new status, even flaunted it, and cleverly used it to establish herself in the years to come as a woman of substance and independent means, a woman to be reckoned with”.<sup>63</sup> In fact, she also used a Greek name and emphasized her new Greek family, as Bevan suggests.<sup>64</sup> The maturation of women using cleruchs for advancement is also evidenced by a marriage contract wherein the woman had equal property rights and “...if he did not do as written, he was

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<sup>54</sup> Pomeroy 151

<sup>55</sup> 28

<sup>56</sup> Pomeroy 151

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.150. Of the 372 known 'exploiters' of the cleruchy, only three are women.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 157; Lewis 35

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.154

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.154

<sup>61</sup> 24

<sup>62</sup> Lewis 93. Keep in mind that Dryton's status came from his ethnicity and professional career, not as a cleruch.

<sup>63</sup> 93

<sup>64</sup> Lewis 93



forthwith to pay back the dowry with a 50 per cent penalty”.<sup>65</sup> Even for the women without direct ties to the military, their cleruchic status automatically opened the doors to social mobility via the landed aristocracy that were closed to most farmers and land lenders.<sup>66</sup> Taken as a whole, the plight of social mobility for women in Hellenistic Egypt was primarily determined by the women themselves, as opposed to the banality of female dependence found in the majority of Antiquity.<sup>67</sup>

## **Obstacles to Social Mobility**

Social mobility in Ptolemaic Egypt is still a very contentious area of research. For example, the prevalence of Graeco-Macedonian cleruchs is seemingly at odds with their culture. Greeks were renowned for their pride in the polis and preference for city life. As such, Bingen reminds us that “...there clearly existed among the Greeks a tendency to stay in an urban environment, a nome metropolis or the administrative centre of a toparchy, for instance, or to go to one whenever possible”.<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, this supposed migration to towns and especially cities coincides with the rise of cleruchic renting and mortgaging.<sup>69</sup> They weren't used to the agrarian lifestyle and quickly opted to have others do the menial labor and then reap the profits.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, the Greeks had a knack for making a profit and their cleruchic land was an easy way to indirectly raise capital.

Another argument that can be made is that the Ptolemaic superiority complex, as was manifest with the Egyptians, actively prevented their socio-economic advancement. One such manifestation that Lewis invokes is that “they restricted severely the number of Egyptians admitted to officer rank or to the cavalry, which was more prestigious than the infantry” in addition to decreased land allocations as described earlier.<sup>71</sup> This explicit discrimination, however, becomes little more than an undercurrent when juxtaposed to the economic needs of the Ptolemies. As the dynasty aged, Egyptians were granted more opportunities vis-à-vis the military. The amnesties of the second century reflected the precarious nature of Ptolemaic

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 28

<sup>66</sup> Pomeroy 158; Bowman 62-3

<sup>67</sup> Schiff 24-5

<sup>68</sup> Bingen 113

<sup>69</sup> Lewis 32

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 32

<sup>71</sup> 30

authority and the willingness to encourage land cultivation at the expense of social norms.

Women in Egypt, like in the rest of Antiquity, faced multiple social barriers to become participants in the cleruchy. Pomeroy reminds us that

Greek tradition would discourage them [Greek women] from business contacts with strange men. Egyptian women, on the other hand, though not inhibited from associating with men, would tend not to be part of the milieu in which important men-cleruchs and bureaucrats-were found.<sup>72</sup>

It is for this very reason that the prevalence of cleruchic lending is largely limited to men in extant documents. With that said, some women transcended this milieu, like the aforementioned Coite and Oxyrhynchus. Moreover, this explains the occurrence of cross-cultural marriage. Greek men marrying Egyptian women wouldn't lose any status and adapt to their primarily Egyptian environment, while the women would gain Greek status.<sup>73</sup>

## **Parallels to Modern Colonialism**

As can be observed with any colonizing movement, the emergence of Egyptian opportunists was undoubtedly coupled with a much larger anti-Hellenization resistance movement. In “Colonisation and Cultural Resistance”, Puchala concludes that the arrival of the Ptolemies led to cultural fragmentation amongst the indigenous population that further spurred the dissociation of 'Greeks born in Egypt' compradors and resisters.<sup>74</sup> For the compradors, this was ultimately beneficial since the growing resistance movement led to civil disorder which aspiring Egyptians utilized to indirectly institute massive changes in Ptolemaic public policy, as described earlier.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the resistance movement formed an alternative pathway to join an elite stratum; this was very appealing to Egyptian families suffering from downward mobility under the Ptolemies.<sup>76</sup> A question naturally follows: why, if Egypt had a mature, nuanced culture that was arguably equal to that of Greece, did some choose to Hellenize? Puchala gives us an abridged response, that “the Hellenization that did occur was linked to social-political opportunism, aspirations for economic mobility, and admiration for the 'modernity' of the

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<sup>72</sup> 154

<sup>73</sup> Lewis 28

<sup>74</sup> 28

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 17, 19-20

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 16

conquerors or respect for their power".<sup>77</sup> The Pharaoh was still the Pharaoh, after all.

## Conclusion

Graeco-Macedonians, Egyptians and women all found ways to take advantage of the increasingly severe cycles of civil unrest and foreign invasion under the Ptolemaic regime. Social mobility for the Greeks was quite logical since the Ptolemies were in need of Greek soldiers and military administrators like *strategos*; upon arrival they already had friends and family to procure social capital for them. Egyptians inherited all the perquisites of cleruchic land that aided the Greeks and used Hellenization as a means to obtain the 'Greeks born in Egypt' status. Since women could not use military service to their advantage, most aspiring social climbers utilized cross-cultural marriage with Greeks and inheritance of cleruchic land to assimilate into the Greek milieu. While this evolution led scholars to purport the development of a Graeco-Egyptian culture, notably with Johann Droysen's *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (1836), we now know that this 'Graeco-Egyptian' social group was much more limited than first believed.<sup>78</sup> Ergo, the majority of these two communities remained disparate during the Ptolemaic regime. Looking at the Ptolemies' colonizing efforts in the context of modern colonialism, the Egyptian resistance movement, cultural and political fragmentation of the natives and their eventual cultural renaissance has been replicated, more often than not.<sup>79</sup> Upon closer examination, the modern trend of cultural resistance and subsequent revival is most prominent in the traditional non-Western cultural epicenters of China, Egypt, India and Persia.<sup>80</sup> Actually, our post-colonial world might be evolving into a more culturally heterogeneous society, rather than a homogenous 'global' society dominated by Eurocentrism.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> 27

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 3. Documents discovered in the second half of the twentieth century have refuted this hypothesis. Earlier evidence proved to be the exception, not the norm.

<sup>79</sup> Puchala 26-9

<sup>80</sup> Puchala 30

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 30

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