How did the government lease the sequestrated and confiscated house properties in Roman Egypt (30 B.C-A.D.284)?

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We have a good number of references which give some information about the rental payments of sequestrated and confiscated houses[1] and the officials[2] (πρακτορες αργυρικων, απαιτηται, and επιτηρηται) who were involved in collecting these payments. However, we have a dearth of information about the method used by the government for renting these properties.

For the sequestrated houses: P.Col.Inv.326 (A.D.142)=BASP 24 (1987) pp.123-108, from Bacchias, is the only direct piece of evidence which gives one of the methods of renting the sequestrated house properties. The papyrus tells us that: a) the government offered the sequestrated house properties for lease at auction, b) the bidder made two successive offers (his first offer is

1) W.O. 1420 (A.D.119),O.Cairo.GPW.59 (A.D.123), P.Oxy.VI 986 (A.D.132), O.Ashm.Shelton 15 (A.D.134), O.Lips 73 (A.D.136), O.Tait 1101 (A.D.137), W.O. 1580 (A.D.140), O.Wilb.25 (A.D.144/5), Zereteli.O.29=AP.4 pp.177, SB XII 11261 (late half of second cent.), BGU I 293 (A.D. 147/8),W.O.644 (A.D.151), 654 (A.D.160/1), SB VI 9427 (A.D.164),P.Heid.IV 297,A.D. 172/175 W.O.661 (A.D.188/9), O.Amst.53 (A.D.194),), W.O.292, P.Oxy.1519, BGU I 41 A.D. (199) P.Fay.42a, BGU II 653 (A.D.206/7), I 216 (A.D.207/8) P.Lond.972,IIICENT. A.D., O.Tait 1102, (IIIcent.A.D.).

2) D.H.Samuel, New editions of two papyri, BASP 14 (1967) p.123, P.Lond.972 III p.212, P.Heid.IV 297.

and his second is 20 dr.) for renting the property, but we do ıow the period between the two offers, c) the bidder increased cond offer sharply (250%). The editor assumes that there was :ermediate bid (the scribe may have rejected the earlier bid of as too low) and that the bidder was deliberately underbidding ler to get a bargain, so that he then sublet to another party at fit[3]. I shall also suggest the following interpretation: it seems he house property was a subject of real competition between ıdders and this sharply increased their offers. The sum of 8 dr. : minimum sum estimated by the responsible authorities to with the bidding, d) the term of the rent is 5 years, e) from the ment one can assume that offering the sequestrated house erties for lease by auction was the normal method which might been used by the government in the areas in which the rental :et flourished; it could secure the maximum income from the erties and also avoid any frauds from the officials and the ers.

What is the other methods in the areas which suffered pulation ? Before answering the question let us give some ıples for the depopulated areas. Several references tell us that

) see the introduction of the papyrus p.104

some areas suffered from depopulation. For example, one of the results of the Jewish revolt of A.D.115-7 was that the number of the jews were greatly diminished[4]. The Mendesian nome gives a group of papyri which indicate the decline of some villages in the toparchy of Nemare the number of the inhabitants had dropped from 25 to 22 to zero (P.Thmouis I 152 ll, 10, A.D.159/60). At an unknown village from (?) to zero (P.Thmouis I 127,l,4, A.D.166/7). At Psenbienchon-Erkeireos-Choron...; Psenopsemouthis and... in the toparchy of Chiastetes from (?) to 14 to 4 (P.Thmouis I 124,ll.9, A.D.166/7). At Neblamis (Neompsonomoun) Chnoutou and Psenon... in the toparchy of Thmoerketes from (?) to (?) to (?) to zero (P.Thmouis I 120,l.10, A.D.166/7) At Eky in the toparchy of Psanites from (?) to 2 to 2 to zero (P.Thmouis I 116,l.19, A.D.167/8). At Psobthon-Haryteos in toparchy of Phermouphites from (?) to 2 to 2 to zero (P.Thmouis I 114,l.3, A.D.167/8). At Kerkenouphis (?) from ?-?-? to zero (P.Thmouis I 104,9, A.D.168/9). At Petetei Psenharpokratis and Psenbiechis in the toparchy Psanties from ?-?-? to zero (P.Thmouis I 98,l.21, A.D.168/9). At Psen...(ed) from 52 to (?) to (?) to zero (P.Thmouis

4) The number of the Jews of Egypt approximate a million in the reign of Tiberius; 40% of the inhabitants of Alexandria were Jews, while a considerable Jewish minority lived the rural areas possibly as much as 10% of the population. (I.Gendy, Economic aspects of houses and housing in Roman Egypt, Ph.D.London 1990, p.12 and footnotes.

I 79,ll.14, A.D.168/9). At Psenathre in the toparchy of Ptenchat from 89 to 10 to 8 to 2 (P.Thmouis I 77,l.9, A.D.168/9). At nemero in toparchy of Phernauphites from 150 to 45 to 34 to 11 (P.Thmouis I 70,ll.12, A.D.168/9). At Damsty from 54 to 4 (PSI I 102 ,A.D.170). At another unknown village from 128 to (?) (BGU 903,A.D.168-9-169/70; SB I 8, late second cent.A.D.). From the above examples one can assume that the above areas have no rental market. Here questions arise: What is the situation of the houses in the areas which have no rental market ? Did the government collect the rent from the owners themselves ? How did it estimate the rent ? We can assume that the government nominated a committee to estimate the rent and the price of the sequestrated and confiscated houses (P.Strassb.31 II/III Cent.A.D., P.Petaus 14 (A.D.184/185). We can also assume from P.Heid.IV 297 (A.D.172/175) that when the government finds no bidders, it collects the rent from the owner or his heirs. In P.Heid.IV 297, a landlady,who is a co-owner, asks the Epistrategos to stop the rent collectors from pressing her to pay the sum of 3500 dr. being the accumulated rent of a half share of an old house which is sequestrated. She reported that she did not inhabit it that and appeals to the Epistrategos to order the rent-collectors to collect the rent from the rich heirs of the original

owner. Here some questions arise: What did the government do when the owner or his relatives could not pay the rent ? Did the government give him a limited period during which he had to pay the government's dues plus the interest upon it ? How long was that period ? From the available evidence one can say that the government gave a limited period during which he could pay the public obligations (taxes, debts etc.). However, we cannot specify its term before the edict of Minicius Sanctus (P.Ber.Zilliacus 3 (A.D.177-80). In this edict the prefect gives order to make it clear to everybody that unless the debts due to the Fiscus are repaid within 6 months, the sequestrated property has to be sold by public auction. One can assume that the period was longer before the edict was issued. In another papyrus[5] the prefect Valerius Proculus (A.D.145/7) had given judgement that the property of those who did not return to their home within a year of the proclamation was to be sold. In P.Col.Inv.326 the term of the rent is 5 years. From the large amount of the rent (3500 dr.) in P.Heid.IV 297, it seems the term was more than 5 years.

Here another question requires an answer: what is the situation of the owner who has only one house which has been

5 E.G. Turner, the Papyrologist at work, Duke Univ. 1973; pp. 42.

sequestrated by the government? Did the government offer it for rent at auction or did it impose annual payment on him? It seems that the government tried to collect the rent from the owner (P.Heid.IV 297), and if he could not pay within a limited period it confiscated the property. What is the situation when the owner has more than one house? Did the government take the responsibility alone or did the owner himself share the responsibilities with the government? It was surely in the interest of the both parties to find a taker-tenant to rent the sequestrated house property, so that the owner could reduce or amortize his public dues in a short period. If not, he would have to pay them from his own wealth plus their interest otherwise he would risk losing the property after a limited period. It is also good for the government to find tenants who will pay the rent to the sequestrated houses, so it secured receiving its dues and avoiding to find a new purchaser after confiscating the property.

To sum up, the government offers the sequestrated house properties for lease at auction in the areas where the rental market is flourishing, and when there is no taker the owner was responsible for paying the rent within a limited period after the edict of minicius sanctus.

For the confiscated house properties, we do not have direct evidence about the method the government used in order to rent the confiscated houses. It seems that the government followed the same method which it used when it offered the sequestrated houses and also its public land for lease. It offered the properties for rent at public auction when the rental market was flourishing. When there was no taker, what did the government do in order to lease its properties ? We do not know the government's policy towards the confiscated houses in the areas in which there were large numbers of private uninhabited houses. For example in P.Osl.111 (A.D. 235), from Oxyrhynchus, in the Goose-Keepers' quarter houses were inhabited and uninhabited may have been at the rate of about 7-5, and in the western district of the Hermaion quarter 22 to 37. Did the government impose its house properties on the private house owners who might have a number of empty houses? It seems that the government might use one of the following three methods:

a) It might offer the confiscated houses, which were not rented, for sale. For example, in P.Petaus 14, no income was derived from the houses which were offered for sale and in P.Amh.II 97, the third share of the house which was offered for sale, was described as uninhabited. From these two documents, it

seems that the government usually did not impose its house properties on private owners, and the houses found no tenants, and no income could be derived from them. Consequently the government offered them for sale, so it achieved two goals: 1) the price, and 2) it secured new owners who could bear the compulsory services.

b) It might let some of them to public farmers who were transferred or moved from their homes in order to cultivate its lands in another nearby village in the same nome or another nome (P.Oxy.986).[6]

c) Finally, the authorities might issue special regulations through which the government might reserve the prior right of renting its house properties in the rental market before any private individual. P.Oxy.Hel.10 (A.D.34) and P.Oxy.III 480 (A.D.132) are both census-returns in which the declarants swear by the Emperor that neither stranger, nor Roman, nor Alexandrian, nor freedman, nor any one else dwells or is registered in his uninhabited house or with him. Here one can read between the lines that the government had the prior right of offering for rent its house properties, before the private owners could offer their houses. In other words, if there

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6) See Johnson, The επιβολη of land in Roman Egypt, Aeg.32 (1952) p.67, G.Poethke, Epimerismos, 1969, pp.100-106, A.Stollwerk, Untersuchungen zum Privatland im ptolemäischen und römischen Ägypten, Köln 1971 pp.100-113.

were empty publicly owned houses and empty private houses, then the private owner could not offer the houses for lease before the government's property had been leased. If the owner did let his house and there was an unrented house which belonged to the government, the government might then impose its house on that owner and collect the rent called επιβολη. In P.Lond.III 1157 (197-8) there is a payment of 400 dr. from the account of επιβολη οικοπεδων. The owners might adopt other methods in order to avoid those compulsory assignments, such as loan contracts with the right of habitation, and oral agreements. However, we must await new evidence which could clarify the government's policy towards exploiting its house properties and prove the above assumptions.