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Joy and sorrow in early Muslim Egypt : Arabic papyrus letters, text and content

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CONCLUSION

“When we write histories of the past in which feeling is omitted, we implicitly disregard fundamental aspects of the terms on which people act and interact, and we thus deprive ourselves of important evidence for the framework of understanding in which our subjects conducted the business of their lives.”²⁷²

With this clear cut statement, Catherine Peyroux puts the study of emotions on the right track. Emotions are “social products” as Barbara Rosenwein always likes to call them.²⁷³ They are usually responses to external cultural, social, religious, economic and political structures.²⁷⁴ Thus, the representation of past generations’ emotions in written texts and the information to be gleaned from them should not by any means overlooked or underestimated. Talking about the early Muslim society in Egypt, the major obstacle for the study of emotions there lies obviously in the lack of contemporary narrative sources. Papyri form unique and reliable contemporary source material which makes it possible to tackle this area of research. Against this backdrop, this study opens up new doors for researchers who are keen to know more about the emotions of Arab-Muslims who lived in Egypt after the conquest.

In addition to editing forty-three letters relevant to the study of emotions, this study investigated and analyzed the representation of people’s personal feelings in almost all published Arabic private and business letters on papyrus covering the first four centuries of Muslim rule in Egypt (1st-4th/7th-10th), but focusing mainly on the earliest two and a half centuries. The study also used some of the unpublished letters which are relevant to the main theme of this study.

In order to tackle the main and sub-questions raised in this research, the thesis has been divided into two main parts, besides the introduction and the conclusion. The first part included two chapters devoted to the historical analysis of the letters’ contents. The second part constituted the edition of the letters. Chapter one has investigated the practicalities of letter-writing in early Islamic Egypt. This chapter has showed how important writing was for the early Arab settlers in Egypt to bridge the short and long distances separating them and to regulate their trade properly. In this chapter, it was argued that letter-writing was a widespread practice within the Arabic speaking milieu in early Islamic Egypt; to such a degree that it was a regular routine of daily life, especially from late 2nd/8th century onwards. The chapter has also provided new explanations and insights in the process of letter-writing in early and medieval Islamic Egypt. It has showed, on the basis of a number of arguments, how letters changed from one style of writing to another in the course of time resulting in radical changes in formulae, layout and format. For instance, the presence of the internal address, naming both correspondents, and the prescript section including the initial *salām* greeting, the *ḥamdala* and the transitional element *ammā ba‘du* immediately

²⁷² C. Peyroux, “Gertrude’s *furor*: reading anger in an early Medieval saint’s *life*,” in: B.H. Rosenwein (ed.), *Anger’s past: the social uses of an emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 54-55.

²⁷³ Rosenwein (2001), 231; Rosenwein (2006), 15, 27; Rosenwein (2010), 8-9.

²⁷⁴ Rosenwein (2006), 197.

following the *basmla* have been always proposed as an important device for dating Arabic private and business letters on papyrus. It has been argued that no internal address is given in letters after the turn of the 2nd/8th century and that this address was either placed above the *basmla* or omitted altogether with the other elements of the prescript, and replaced by long prayers and blessings for the addressee in letters from the 3rd-4th/9th-10th centuries. On the other hand, this chapter held that letters with prescripts continued to be written till the beginning of the 3rd/9th century, but totally disappeared from the late 3rd/9th century onwards. With regard to writing in letters' margins, the chapter challenged the idea that *marginal notes* were written due to a general aversion to continue the letter on the verso. It has been rather argued that writing in the margins was part of the new style of writing letters that became dominant from the late 3rd/9th century onwards resulting in radical changes in formulae and layout such as replacing the prescript with initial blessings and the tendency toward cursiveness in writing. The issue of *topoi* was also dealt with in this chapter. It was argued that explanations of apparently stereotyped expressions can be made. For instance, the complaint about lack of prompt replies to one's written messages has always been explained as a mere *topos*. The chapter has showed that this explanation cannot be taken without reservations. It was argued rather that the chance of losing written messages during long and complicated delivery processes of private letters was undoubtedly high, and thus this complaint can be taken as real. The argument was strengthened by the observation that the senders, i.e. the complainers, sometimes mention how many letters are unanswered, possibly lost.

Chapter two has also shown that formulaic expressions and conventions can properly be used to voice *true* feelings and can be very helpful and useful for the study of emotions.²⁷⁵ In this chapter, an attempt was made to explore social and emotional aspects as they appeared in the letters with the aim to show how people in early Muslim Egypt expressed themselves, their joy and sorrow, how they responded to misfortunes in their writings, what interested and stirred them and what they worried about and believed in. The study has shown that in private and business letters some topics are represented to be constant sources of joy and sorrow; four for them -studied in this chapter- always come to the fore, i.e. familial relationship, feasts and festivities, sickness and death. Throughout this chapter, the letters were frequently allowed to speak for themselves and were given the central place in the discussion. The study has resulted in several useful analysis not only for the history of emotions but also for general history of early Islamic Egypt.

Starting with family construction and familial relationships and emotions and stories stemming from them, the letters brought us close to familial relationships and shed light on very personal emotions between spouses, parents and children, brothers and sisters. In letter 1, for example, we saw the spectacular joy between two fiancées with very personal expressions of longing. Conversely, letter 2 pictured one of the moments in which conjugal life broke up due to mismatch between the two spouses. The letter showed how at times family disputes encroached family arbitration to courts resulting in separation. Besides bringing the experiences of engaged and married individuals in the life of early Islamic Egypt, letters 1 and 2 contain plenty of useful information about the legal practice of

²⁷⁵ See Cubitt (2001), 226; Rosenwein (2001), 232; Garrison (2001), 247.

marriage and divorce settlements in early Muslim society in Egypt and thereby provided a glimpse into the relation between what is recorded in Islamic legal literature on marriage and divorce and local Egyptian practices in the crucial formative period of Islamic Egypt. In addition to these two letters, a good number of marriage legal acts written on papyrus, paper, parchment and silk have been published. These legal documents were mostly drawn up by notaries and thus represented the state and legal practice in the society. The two letters, on the other hand, were written in the private realm and therefore filled the gaps in our knowledge about the actual social practice surrounding marriage and divorce and marriage settlements before drawing up the marriage contract. In other words, the published legal documents and the two private letters of our corpus gave a more comprehensive picture of how Islamic marriage and divorce were socially and legally perceived and conducted in the early Muslim society in Egypt.

The letters have also informed us about the feelings of responsibility and accountability on the part of the *paterfamilias* towards their children, wives and other male and female members of the family. The letters have shown that in case of the *paterfamilias*' absence, they ask relatives, friends and business partners to contact and take care of their families until they come back. In most cases, the caretakers seemed to do the work properly. They wrote back to the absent patrons with information about the wellbeing of their families. About one certain family we knew more, the personal letters of the Banū 'Abd al-Mu'min archive (P. Marchands II) gave us glimpses of the Banū 'Abd al-Mu'min's personal family life and their familial relationships. The vast majority of the letters is full of expressions of painful and pleasurable feelings. Passionate expressions and words of endearment are lavishly expressed. On occasions, the members of this family, both males and females, exult in happiness out of passion and affection and burst into tears out of grief and anxiety. The impassionate and unaffectionate Abū Hurayra is indeed the exception that proves the rule. The series of letters he received from his father, mother, step-mother and half-sister Anūbīs, blaming him for his carelessness, ruggedness and aversion and urging him to be serious about taking care of the family during the father's absence is an indication of an emotional distance between Abū Hurayra and the rest of the family.

Beyond the family, there were small and wide complex networks of tribal relations, friendships and business partnerships which extended sometimes beyond the borders of Egypt and were conditioned by strong emotional ties. Business letters studied in this thesis have suggested that some kind of social and emotional ties might have existed between business partners.²⁷⁶ As it was argued in this chapter, letters sent to close friends and relatives were more or less emotional in tone and content, with some of them apparently serving no other purpose than strengthening the bonds of kin and friendship between the two correspondents. Besides blood, social and financial ties that held the Arab-Muslim society together in early Muslim Egypt, the bond of religion (Islam) seems to have been emotionally important and affective, as letter 25 of our corpus made it clear. Apart from that, the letters have made it clear that kinship terms such as brother and sister were widely used in an imprecise way, different from their lexical meaning.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ See the discussion on children.

²⁷⁷ See the discussion on children.

Now, what did the letters tell us about people's personal representation and treatment of emotions during festivities and feasts, in response to being sick, and when the misfortune of death struck one or more of their relatives. To start with feasts and festivities, the letters have clearly shown the significance of the emotional dimension in worship and in the creation of emotional communities of believers, worshippers and pilgrims. They have given us a shape to the way emotions were expressed, developed and utilized during these occasions. The references of *ḥajj*, for instance, show a community of pilgrims eager to undertake the holy journey regardless of all its difficulties seeking spiritual satisfaction. The papyrological references to sickness, on the other hand, have indicated a community whose members were very much concerned about wellbeing and health and were always worried about illness, lack of medicine and death.

A good and careful examination of letters connected with death has improved our understanding of how death was announced, perceived and dealt with in early Muslim Egypt. Collective responses and views on death, dead ones and the afterlife have indicated a warm emotional community. The letters have shown that death in the family brought deep sadness and distress to those left behind. Particularly for females, the death of a male member of the family added worries and fear to their grief not only because of the blood ties and emotional bonds between the mourners and the deceased but also because of their financial need and dependency on him. One letter published in this thesis (letter no. 18) has showed us, with very warm expressions of grief and distress, the way mothers lamented and mourned their sons.

It is perhaps worth grouping together words and gestures of emotions in order to see which words and gestures occur frequently and which are absent. Emotions as they appeared in the letters can be classified in the following categories: (1) terms refer to joy such as *surūr*, *sa'āda* and *farḥ*, (2) words and gestures signifying sorrow, i.e. sadness (*ghamm/ḥuzn*), weeping (*al-bukā'*) and tears (*dam'*), (3) words of passion, affection and sentiment such as longing (*shawq*), passion (*maḥabba*), affection (*mawadda*), tenderness (*riqqa*), compassion (*shafaqa*), (4) words of fear (*khawf*), (5) anxiety (*hamm*), (6) aversion (*jafā'*), (7) ruggedness (*ghilaz*). The survey has shown that terms such as *surūr* signifying happiness and *ghamm* and *hamm* indicating sadness are lavishly expressed in the letters. On the other side, words signifying feelings such as rapacity, jealousy, envy and malice are absent. As Rosenwein reminds us "if an emotion word does not appear, the silence itself is significant."²⁷⁸ In other words, people in early Islamic Egypt intentionally avoided expressing these negative feelings.

The representations of people's personal feelings as they appeared in the letters have suggested more than one emotional community that did exist contemporaneously within the same society, as Rosenwein proposed in *emotional communities*.²⁷⁹ Some of these communities were more emotional than the others. The emotional norms, standards, codes and modes of expressions indicated a larger society whose members shared in one religious affiliation and common values, interests and concerns.

²⁷⁸ Rosenwein (2006), 195.

²⁷⁹ Rosenwein (2006), 2, 23, 191.

Finally, while this thesis has only touched on the surface of the information locked in the original Arabic private and business letters written on papyrus, it shows how rich and fruitful the letters are for social, cultural and economic history of early Islamic Egypt (1st-4th/7th-10th). Written correspondences, as it was argued in this dissertation, penetrated almost every social and geographical layer of the society and thereby provided a clear and reliable view from below. This thesis is to be considered a novel step forward in the study of the letters' contents which is greatly needed. A logical next step would be a comparative study of the Greek, Coptic and Arabic texts in order to fully understand the striking newness of the early Arab-Muslim society in Egypt after the conquest and the impact it had on the diverse cultures it superseded.

