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Episcopal networks and authority in late antique Egypt : bishops of the Theban region at work

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General conclusions

The monk-bishops Abraham of Hermonthis and Pesynthius of Koptos represented a new anti-Chalcedonian church hierarchy that gradually reorganized itself, after Peter IV became patriarch of Alexandria in 576, ten years after the death of his predecessor Theodosius I. This Theodosian hierarchy is the forerunner of the present-day Coptic Orthodox Church.

Although it is likely that there were Theodosian bishops of Hermonthis and Koptos before Abraham and Pesynthius, considering the fact that they were ordained in ca. 590 and 599 respectively (§2.3.1), they still faced the challenge of organizing relatively new dioceses. Even if Peter IV ordained bishops for practically every diocese in Egypt, it is far from certain that the first Theodosian bishops of the new hierarchy actually succeeded in fulfilling their office alongside Chalcedonian bishops still in place. In addition, the Byzantine state did not persecute Theodosians, but did not officially approve their hierarchy either.

In ca. 600-630 Abraham and Pesynthius were both engaged in a regional Theodosian network, which centered on eight monastic communities, most of which were located in Western Thebes in the diocese of Hermonthis, and included other Theodosian bishops as well. Supported by this network, Abraham and Pesynthius were able to organize their individual social networks and to establish their authority. They had to deal with a number of problems both in the church and in the Theban society, which was marked by a lack of social stability, caused by violence, poverty and moral offences (§8.1). In addition, a widespread famine and the Persian conquest of Egypt disrupted the public order, and the fall of Jerusalem in 614 shocked all Christians in the Byzantine Empire (§6.1). More joyous events, which Pesynthius witnessed, were the Byzantine reconquest of Egypt and the recovery of the Cross (§8.1).

The aim of this book was to understand how Abraham and Pesynthius contributed to the rise of the Theodosian church in the Theban region by examining three aspects: their position in the Theodosian network and the wider social network in ca. 600-630, the structure of their individual social networks, and how they used their authority while doing their job. After discussing these aspects and the main research question, we will evaluate the use of combining papyrology, SNA and a model of episcopal authority as well as the strengths and challenges of applying SNA to papyrological evidence. We will conclude by proposing other archives and dossiers from Egypt, to which SNA could be applied.

1. THE POSITION OF THE BISHOPS IN THE THEODOSIAN AND THEBAN NETWORKS

The structural position of the bishops in the social network of the Theban region was analyzed by first reconstructing the network in three layers – the Theodosian, extended and Theban networks – on the basis of Dataset 1, in order to check whether differences in network size and population create significantly different results, or that the reconstruction is fairly stable. Then, the procedure for network analysis was applied to each layer and tests were run to correct the impact of documents with a disproportionately large number of social actors, or to check a different identification of certain social actors. It turned out that, apart from the order of the central actors, the networks did not change significantly, which indicates that the doubtful identification of a single person does not distort the reconstructed network much.

For the creation of all four datasets, but Dataset 1 in particular, I benefitted considerably from the recent editions of Coptic letters from the *Topos* of St Mark (*O.Saint-Marc*) and the hermitages at TT 29 (*O.Frangé*) and TT 1152 (O.MMA1152 inv.). Without these texts, the reconstructed networks would have been much less detailed.

Although the Theodosian bishops are prominent figures in the social network of the Theban region, some priests and hermits are central actors as well, and the general structure of the network is egalitarian (monastic) rather than hierarchical (ecclesiastical). In each network layer the bishops Pesynthius and Pisrael, the priests Mark, Moses and Victor, and the hermits Epiphanius, Psan and Ezekiel form a stable core group. Bishop Abraham only appears as a core member in the Theban network, which implies that he was better connected with social actors in the periphery of the network than with his colleagues or Epiphanius. New texts may connect Abraham to them, but as long as such texts are few, the impression will not change.

Since absolute and approximate dates were proposed for several documents relating to Abraham, Epiphanius or Pesynthius (§3.3), the network could also be analyzed by decade. It turns out that the network for 620-630, which is much larger than the networks for 600-609 and 610-619, considerably determined the reconstruction of the Theban network. Abraham is a central actor in the subnetworks for 600-609 and 610-619, whereas Pesynthius, who first appears in the periphery of the subnetwork for 610-619, becomes one of the central actors in 620-630. Bishop Pisrael has high centrality scores, but is less prominent than Epiphanius, a central actor in 610-619 and 620-630, and Psan, who becomes important in 620-630.

The topographical extension of the Theban network was analyzed by applying SNA to Dataset 2, in which persons are linked to localities. It turns out that, although most localities associated with Abraham were in the countryside, he was also in contact with clergymen and civil officials in the city of Hermonthis. Pesynthius' network did not only include villages or

monastic communities, but also the cities of Koptos, Qus, Hermonthis and Ape. Wipszycka's impression that the localities under their jurisdiction were located in the countryside is mainly based on *P.Pisentius*, which does not record explicit ties between Pesynthius and social actors at Koptos. This book highlights the bishop's implicit links with the cities in *P.Pisentius* and the more explicit links in groups of related texts, namely *P.CrumST* and *P.Mon.Epiph.*, which were previously overlooked. The episcopal documents create the impression that Pesynthius temporarily supervised the diocese of Qus, perhaps as an administrator, until Pisrael became bishop of Qus. That Pesynthius' jurisdiction extended beyond the formal boundaries of his diocese is not evident from the *Encomium*.

2.A ABRAHAM'S SOCIAL NETWORK

Abraham's social network was reconstructed in two layers (the ecclesiastical and complete networks), again in order to test whether or not differences in size and network population led to considerably divergent results. The complete network is more than twice as large as the ecclesiastical network and also includes monks, civil and military officials, women and unspecified groups or individuals, but the basic structure remains the same. It is a highly centralized network that has a low density (3% of all possible ties is realized) and disintegrates into many small components, when Abraham is removed from Dataset 3. Since Abraham was the head of a hierarchical institution, this result is expected, but the analysis of Pesynthius' network shows that it does not always have to be like this (see 2.B below).

Apart from Abraham himself, the central actors in his network are the priest Victor, who assisted the bishop, the monks of the Monastery of St Phoibammon (in the complete network only), the episcopal secretaries "Hand E" and "Hand F", the deacon Peter, the priests Patermoute and Papnoute, and the archpriests John and Dioscorus.

In addition to the undirected ecclesiastical and complete networks, which connect all persons attested in the same text, although not all of them were necessarily in direct contact, I also created a directed network, which only includes recorded or reconstructed reciprocal or one-directional ties. The directed network is less dense than the complete network (1.3%), and has a larger diameter, but again, Abraham is the main central actor, and he and Victor form the actual core of the network. Patermoute, Peter and the monks of the Monastery of St Phoibammon are also identified as central actors in the directed network.

On the basis of the absolute and approximate dates proposed for Abraham's documents I could create subnetworks for the periods "before 600", "600-610", "619-620" and "620-621". They formed the basis for a reconstruction of the ecclesiastical apparatus of

the Hermonthite diocese. This reconstruction was facilitated by studying the *ego networks* of Patermoute, a professional scribe who sometimes acted as an episcopal messenger, and his colleague Papnoute. It was also important to establish the order of the archpriests included in Dataset 3, and to determine whether they were active at Jeme and Hermonthis, since there were not many of them at the same time. Once they were placed in a chronological order, the people directly associated with them could also be arranged. Archpriests are known by name for all periods, except for 600-610.

The subnetworks were reused for creating a similar overview of civil and military officials in the district of Hermonthis, arranged by location and period. Again, there is less documentary material for AD 600-610 than for the other periods.

The analysis of Abraham's directed *ego network* reveals that he was in direct contact with most actors in his network (73.7%), and that most of his ties were reciprocal (66.8%). These high scores confirm Wipszycka's impression that the bishop was close to the faithful in his diocese. This is not a surprise, since half of the network population consists of clergymen, who were supervised by the bishop, but he was also close to the other half, which comprised monks, civil and military officials, women and unspecified social actors, since he was abbot of the Monastery of St Phoibammon: it lay near the town of Jeme and was the principal monastery in seventh-century Western Thebes. In addition, it was a *martyrium* that claimed to possess relics of St Phoibammon, and a charitable institution (§6.6, end).

2.B PESYNTHIUS' SOCIAL NETWORK

Pesynthius' social network was reconstructed in six layers, including undirected and directed versions of basic, extended and complete networks, in order to test the impact of the inclusion of probable and indirect ties. The extended network, which is limited to certain and probable ties, is the best approximation of the actual network, but since Abraham's complete network also includes indirect ties, I still decided to use Pesynthius' complete network for comparison.

Pesynthius' complete network is less compact than that of Abraham, but significantly stronger, since it is less centralized: without the bishop the network would disintegrate into relatively few but large components. Alternative scenarios involving Cyriacus and Bishop Pisrael were tested on the extended network, but the results of the analysis were not much different, which again indicates that a few doubtful identifications hardly distort the network.

Central actors in Pesynthius' network are Bishop Pisrael, Epiphanius and Psan, the priests Cyriacus and Mark, the deacon Phanes, the Pshenhorites, headed by the *lashane* Abraham, and the estate manager Patche (on the basis of one direct tie and an indirect one).

The reconstruction of Pesynthius' trans-diocesan ecclesiastical apparatus resulted in overviews of clergymen in the dioceses of Koptos, Qus and Ape, and in some additions to the ecclesiastical apparatus of the diocese of Hermonthis. A similar overview was made for the civil and military officials in the district of Koptos, and some state officials (or at least men of social standing) were added to the overview relating to the district of Hermonthis.

During the Persian period (620s), Pesynthius stayed in Western Thebes, in the diocese of Hermonthis, for a while. Although he was much less close to the faithful in his diocese than Abraham to his flock, both in terms of physical distance and the number of direct ties, he actively interacted with most direct ties and with various social groups. He received several requests from female petitioners, including a widow belonging to Abraham's diocese, who did not hesitate to call the bishop "Pesynthe", which is quite informal. In other words, Pesynthius was physically more distant from the people in his diocese compared to Abraham, but he was still relatively well approachable on account of his strong network.

The Arabic version of the *Encomium* states that Pesynthius attracted large crowds every day, when he dwelled in his monastery in the Mountain of Tsenti, and that only four people knew where in Western Thebes he stayed during the Persian occupation. Network analysis reveals that even in the 620s Pesynthius was far from isolated. On the contrary, he even received requests to contact civil or religious authorities outside his diocese (on his own or together with Epiphanius and one or more colleagues), or to solve practical or financial problems. This is a clear indication that the bishop was considered accessible and influential, even if he was not physically close to his flock and did not "jump on a case" immediately.

3. HOW ABRAHAM AND PESYNTHIUS EXERCISED THEIR AUTHORITY

In the present secularizing Western society, which highly values individuality and autonomy, episcopal authority (or religious authority in general) is often viewed with skepticism, since many people have a negative impression of the social role of churches in the Western past. In their view, religious institutions imposed doctrines and models of behavior on the common man, whereas their representatives did not always live up to the best standards themselves. In addition, traditional religious institutions are often called paternalistic and misogynistic. If we project modern impressions on the role of bishops in a traditional society, we will not be able to fully understand how Abraham and Pesynthius functioned within their social context.

Even in traditional societies episcopal authority was not just imposed, but constructed. It was a process of social interaction, in which bishops – particularly those who represented a new hierarchy – tried to earn the respect of others, and to stimulate their cooperation, by

meeting their expectations of what bishops should do. This also implied solving mundane problems and conflicts, and disciplining transgressors. If a bishop failed to do so, the people could take action themselves and aggravate the problem, as the Pshenhorites did, when they stole cattle, after the bishop let five years pass without solving their problem concerning cattle thefts (§7.3.3). In addition, episcopal authority is not a monolithic concept, but covers five modes of authority, the proportions of which may differ from bishop to bishop, depending on their personality, skills, means and circumstances.

Abraham was both bishop of Hermonthis and abbot of the newly founded Monastery of St Phoibammon, which became an important religious and social center in Western Thebes, since it claimed to possess relics of the martyr saint Phoibammon and provided for the poor, on account of an early agreement with the town of Jeme. It is likely that Abraham's pragmatic authority, based on his leadership at this monastery, enhanced his professional authority, which gradually increased in the course of time. Abraham did not always feel taken seriously, for instance when people did not reply to his letters, and he was opposed at Timamen (in the neighboring diocese of Ape). He often used written sources as instruments of authority to confirm his professional authority, by putting important things in writing and by citing from the Bible, adding that it were not his words, but those of God or the Apostle John. No special spiritual abilities were attributed to him, but people appreciated his prayers and his ascetic authority. As a bishop, Abraham is best described as a zealous and conscientious teacher, who wanted to educate his flock by insisting on obedience, the observance of God's commands and church regulations, and the prevention of negligence for the sake of their souls. Like Pesynthius, he felt personally responsible for the spiritual well-being of his flock, but saw that many people in late antique society, including clergymen, were negligent in their behavior or work, or that they committed serious offences that could endanger the salvation of their souls. Abraham was involved in all aspects relating to the episcopal office, which indicates that he bore the full responsibility of the office, in addition to being an abbot.

In Pesynthius' case, we had the extraordinary opportunity to compare the image of the historical figure based on his professional Coptic documents with his representation in non-documentary texts. In general, the documents confirm the impression given by the *Encomium* that the bishop's spiritual, ascetic and pragmatic authority were extraordinary. Both sources indicate that he was considered as a Spirit-bearer, who interceded with God and diffused the odor of sanctity, that he was admired for his extraordinary ascetic authority, and that his social involvement (care for the underprivileged and intercession with authorities) extended beyond the boundaries of his diocese. The *Encomium* explains that his spiritual authority was based

on special spiritual abilities, such as the reading of souls, telepathy, foreknowledge, healing and knowledge of the divine, which make him comparable with Shenoute of Atripe and Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. In Western Thebes his spiritual authority was equaled by that of Bishop Ananias of Hermonthis and Epiphanius only (§3.2.1, 8.2.1). Both the *Encomium* and the *Homily on St Onnophrius* attributed to him present Pesynthius as a conscientious bishop, who repeatedly taught his flock to be sincere, to show mercy to the poor, to avoid sexual offences, and that parents should correct their children in case of unchaste behavior for the sake of their souls. The bishop insisted on purity, not because he simply wanted to impose doctrines or an ascetic model of behavior on the faithful (presenting the example of St Onnophrius is not the same thing as imposing it), but because he wanted to prevent social problems and the perdition of his flock. His documents reveal that he lived in a society where adultery, abduction and rape regularly happened, that betrothal and marriage did not protect women against such offences, and that victims ran the risk of being rejected by their fiancés and the local church. Pesynthius promoted chastity, since he knew the disruptive effect of sexual offences on the individuals involved, their families and their communities in general. Modern, emancipated readers may be shocked by the solutions that he proposed according to the *Encomium* and blame him for being a misogynistic “man in a skirt” (Donker van Heel): he exhorted a father to let his son marry the girl who was expecting his child, in order to make up for her humiliation (the son ruined her chances to marry another man unblemished, but he did not necessarily rape her); and when two women were accused of adultery, he proposed the test of “the water of the curse” or holy oil, adding that the liquid would harm adulteresses (but he did not let them drink it). These solutions are attributed to Pesynthius in different versions of a hagiographical text, which were composed after his death by editors who consciously created images of Pesynthius as they wanted their audiences to remember him, which may, but did not necessarily correspond with reality in all details. These anecdotes were included in the *Encomium*, in order to demonstrate Pesynthius’ ability to distinguish people who had secretly been unchaste from those who were innocent. It appears that the Arabic version of the *Encomium* and the Arabic *Letter of Pseudo-Pesynthius* present a harsher picture of the bishop than the early Sahidic version of the *Encomium*. In the latter, Pesynthius made a jealous husband wait, “until he had taken his punishment well” (§8.2.2), and he shocked a soldier by revealing a murder (§8.4.D.2), but he did not predict his imminent death in hell, as he allegedly did, according to the later Arabic texts (§8.4.E.3, 5).

All aspects of the episcopal office appear in the *Encomium*, but there are no examples for missionary activities in the documents. Compared to Abraham, Pesynthius was limited in

his possibilities to fulfill his office, since he stayed outside of his diocese for a while in the 620s, and since he was probably an elderly man with health issues. At the same time, he received various requests to contact civil or religious authorities outside his diocese or to solve practical problems, which indicate that he was considered accessible and influential, even if he could not solve all problems. It even appears that he acted as the administrator of a vacant see, and that his professional authority was more extensive than the *Encomium* suggests. In view of these conditions, it can be argued that the episcopal office was a heavy load for him, as the editor of the Arabic version of the *Encomium* made him confess (§8.7).

4. HOW ABRAHAM AND PESYNTHIUS CONTRIBUTED TO THE RISE OF THE THEODOSIAN CHURCH

Abraham and Pesynthius contributed to the development of the Theodosian church in the Theban region by organizing the Theodosian dioceses of Hermonthis and Koptos (Pesynthius probably supervised that of Qus as well for a while), by normalizing the relations with state officials in the region, and by making a memorable impression. After their deaths, they were both commemorated and invoked as spiritual intercessors in prayers, as is shown by the Moir Bryce diptych and the *Encomium* respectively.

Abraham was well remembered on account of the charitable fund that he established at the Monastery of St Phoibammon for the provisioning of the poor, in accordance with an early agreement between the monastery and the Jemean authorities (§3.1.1, 6.5). In his testament he decided that his successor, the priest Victor, should continue to provide for the poor, which the latter and his successors Peter and Jacob did. The fund still existed in the first half of the eighth century, and it is likely that Abraham was commemorated as long as the monastery was inhabited. However, since there was no hagiographical tradition linked to his person, he was forgotten for centuries, until the discovery of his testament.

By contrast, Pesynthius made such a memorable impression that he became the object of a cult already in the second half of the seventh century and was remembered as a powerful intercessor with God (§3.1.2). In a circular letter from ca. 643/4-665 a bishop confirmed his belief also by invoking the “thrice blessed” Pesynthius, who “brought the correct order of the celebration from the beginning” (§8.4.A.2). In addition, the Sahidic version of the *Encomium* argues that he was truly a saint by demonstrating his spiritual abilities and extraordinary generosity towards the poor. Since this hagiographical text was copied, reedited and translated in Bohairic and Arabic in order to be read in different parts of Egypt, Pesynthius’ cult was not limited to his tomb in the mountain of Tsenti, but expanded throughout Egypt, and he was even included in the Ethiopic *Synaxarium* (introduction). What makes the case of Pesynthius

special is that the image of a holy bishop does not only appear in hagiographical sources, which were created after his death, but also in the letters that he received during life. To the widow who feared to be expelled from her house, he was “our patron who intercedes on behalf of us before God and men”, “the one whom God made a true high priest”.

Apart from the bishops’ efforts to organize their dioceses, another important factor for the success of the Theodosian church in the Theban region was the presence of a monastic network that supported them. This network developed gradually and was particularly well-connected in the early 620s, when it was centered on the *Topos* of Epiphanius, where there were no less than two holy men, namely Pesynthius and Epiphanius himself. Epiphanius was already revered as a man with extraordinary spiritual and ascetic authority, when Pesynthius became associated with the *Topos* and increased its appeal as a center of spiritual power, where people could address their petitions and pleas. Psan and the priest Mark assisted in more practical matters, such as transmitting requests to the holy men or delivering messages.

5. THE COMBINATION OF PAPYROLOGY, SNA AND A MODEL OF EPISCOPAL AUTHORITY

This book, which presents an ethnographic study based on documentary papyri, combined three approaches. The papyrological approach made it possible to select relevant documents, to identify the members of the Theodosian network of the Theban region, to place central actors in a social, spatial and chronological context, to reconstruct social and topographical networks, and to prepare relational data for further analysis. Without this preparatory study the networks and episcopal authority could not have been analyzed.

Special software from SNA was used to examine networks that were too large and too complex to handle without computer assistance. *Ucinet 6* has the advantage that it can easily import Excel-files and offers enough tools for calculating the properties of the networks, and *NetDraw* makes the large amount of data visible in one image, which you can manipulate by using algorithms or rearranging nodes. SNA enabled us to study the structure of the networks and the relative centrality of Abraham, Pesynthius and other members of the Theban network therein. In addition, it helped us to see the important roles of less well-known social actors, such as the priest Moses of the hermitage at TT 29, who was a central actor in ca. 610-619.

The model of episcopal authority, which is an expanded version of Rapp’s model of leadership by monk-bishops, was introduced as an analytical tool for establishing how bishops justified their agency and, as it turned out, how respectfully others addressed them. The model made it possible to get a balanced image of Abraham and Pesynthius, since we did not focus on the most evident characteristics of the bishops, but evaluated the relative weight of all five

modes of authority, namely spiritual, ascetic, professional, pragmatic and legal authority. In the present research the modes of authority are defined in a traditional Christian (catholic and orthodox) way, but if they are taken more broadly, the model could be used to analyze religious authority in other cultural contexts as well.

6. THE STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF APPLYING SNA TO DOCUMENTARY PAPYRI

For several reasons it is worthwhile to apply SNA to papyrological evidence. Firstly, special computer programs can visualize complex networks and quantify their properties with a swiftness, accuracy and completeness that humans cannot achieve. Secondly, even if a dossier is fragmentary, and the exact nature of the relations are unclear, it is still possible to conduct a general analysis, since the co-appearance of two individuals in a document is already significant: it indicates that they were approximate contemporaries. Thirdly, SNA can be applied both on huge datasets, as Ruffini did for the analysis of the social networks in Oxyrhynchus and Aphrodite, and on smaller datasets, which make it easier to follow the social actors and to create directed versions of the networks. Fourthly, the use of quantitative tools generates concrete data that can support or contradict general impressions. The analysis of the directed *ego networks* confirmed Wipszycka's impression that Abraham and Pesynthius were close to their flock, although the proportions of their direct and reciprocal ties varied. Fifthly, the analysis may reveal that less well-known persons occupy structurally important positions in the network, such as the shepherds in Ruffini's study and Bishop Ezekiel in this book (§4.2.3). Sixthly, the reliability of a reconstructed network can be evaluated by testing alternative scenarios. If the results do not change considerably, the network is fairly stable and the results can be trusted. Finally, the visualization of subnetworks by period can facilitate a chronological reconstruction.

However, the application of SNA to documents also requires patience and endurance. Firstly, it requires a thorough prosopographical study, in order to carefully identify the social actors and the nature of their social ties. When the documents are fragmentary, this can be a difficult task and may necessitate the researcher to make his/her interpretations and choices explicit in the form of summaries and schematic representations. Secondly, the organization of the relational data requires precision and consistency, especially when the researcher plans to reconstruct directed networks. He/she must decide when a tie is defined as a reciprocal or one-directional tie. Thirdly, it is time-consuming to prepare datasets, particularly when they include *matrices* for the reconstruction of directed networks. Errors are easily made and not easily detected. During the analysis it may turn out that newly edited texts should be added to

the datasets, or that a text can be interpreted in a different way. Fourthly, it is economic to replace names of persons and documents by numbers, but when new texts are added to the datasets, all these numbers need to be corrected. Finally, it takes time to develop a procedure for analysis that generates results that can be used to answer research questions.

7. DESIDERATA FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

SNA can be useful for the analysis of various Egyptian networks. The anecdotes in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (fourth-sixth century) are an important source for establishing relations between the monastic communities at Nitria, Kellia and Sketis, whereas other networks reconstructed on the basis of archives or dossiers. When combined, the Coptic documents relating to Epiphanius, Psan, Victor, Mark, Moses, Ezekiel and Djor can be used to reconstruct the monastic network in seventh-century Western Thebes into more detail than in §4.2-3; the Coptic dossiers of Frange of TT 29 and Isaac II and Elias II of the *Topos* of Epiphanius should be combined for a similar network for the eighth century. Other potentially interesting archives are those of the hermit John of Asyut (Greek; fourth century); Flavius Patermouthis, son of Menas, from Syene (Greek/Coptic; late fifth-early seventh century); the tax collectors Theopemptos and Zacharias, perhaps at Hermonthis (Greek; 624-626; §2.1.1); the Monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit (Greek/Coptic; sixth-eighth); Qurra ibn Shariq, the governor of Egypt (Greek/Arabic; early eighth century); and the archives of various individuals and families in Western Thebes from the eighth century. Once the professional scribes, clergymen and civil officials of Jeme are arranged in a chronological order, it will be possible to analyze the social network of Western Thebes in the course of the eighth century. Such a chronological study is exactly what I plan to do in a following research project.