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Protective interventions by local elites in early Islamic Egypt

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Citation

Scheerlinck, E. (2023, September 13). *Protective interventions by local elites in early Islamic Egypt*.

Version: Publisher's Version

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Introduction

Topic

The setting for the discussions in this dissertation is Egypt, in the seventh and eighth centuries CE, with a focus on the first hundred years after the Arab conquest in 641. During that time, the administration of the province went through some immediate and some gradual changes, including changes in the administrative personnel. Immediately the highest functions of the provincial administration in the capital were mostly filled by Arab-Muslims, while in the countryside, among the administrators of the dozens of districts, populated by towns and villages, Arabic names first appear around the turn of the seventh century. Similarly, an immediate change after the conquest was the introduction of Arabic as a language of administration and communication with the population. Together with Greek, which had been used for administrative purposes since the conquest by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, Arabic became the language of the highest levels of the administration. Coptic, on the other hand, developed as a language of administration on the lower levels of the administration during the first century after the conquest. ensemble combination collection

This period is quite richly documented in terms of administrative practices in the province, which allows us to follow the developments sketched above. The Arabic, Greek, and Coptic documentary papyri available to us from this period were produced and kept in offices at different levels of the administration. Several archives of administrators were found, which included papers signed by the governor in Fustat, as well as those signed by village authorities. Monasteries also provide papers which show their involvement in the administration of the province. Documents found in villages do not only tell us about the private goings on of the village inhabitants, their private legal issues, testaments, sales, and debts, but also about their engagement with the provincial administration, e.g. in the form of tax-receipts. The context of the discussions in this dissertation is the village context, but as part of a broader rural context in which the villages are connected to monastic settlements and other villages around them, as well as to the capital of their district (*metropolis*), but eventually also to the provincial administration and government, and ultimately larger governmental structures, like the Early Islamic empire, as a whole.

The focus of this dissertation is a specific administrative, legal, and social village mechanism, with both written and oral components, which was in the hands of the local

rural elites. I argue that it is a bottom-up development which was not directed, regulated or installed by the administration, but at the same time contributed to the success of the provincial administrative system. It was a mechanism which affected both the local economy and social networks, and the provincial (fiscal) administration, and which shows the rural elites shaping fiscal practice. The mechanism is a testimony of a local response to tax evasion as well as a problem-solving instrument for resolving private conflicts in the village. This mechanism centers around the production and circulation of a type of document, written in Coptic: Coptic protection letter.

The Coptic protection letters were legal documents used in villages in Byzantine and early Islamic Egypt, in the seventh and eighth century, to facilitate the return of people stranded away from home. When someone had left home due to tax evasion,¹ or because of an unresolved private legal conflict, a return could mean being arrested, prosecuted, or facing any kind of aggression. Protection letters, issued by local elites, usually village heads or monastic leaders, provided a promise of amnesty, so that the holder of the letter could return home without facing a penalty. The Coptic protection letters, therefore, were documents which mitigated legal, social, and economic problems within villages (and monasteries). I consider them here as instruments of a mechanism, the Coptic protection letter mechanism (see below), which served to unblock impasses in rural society, and which involved documents and letters, and various actors in society. At the same time, many protection letters were also connected to fiscal practice, which shows how intimately the local Coptic protection letter mechanism was related to the provincial administration of Egypt. The protection letters, therefore, provide a point of entry to our understanding of the ways in which problems of flight, tax evasion and private legal issues, could be solved within villages in Late Antique and Early Islamic Egypt, and how this was connected to broader administrative structures. In other words, they lay bare relationships and networks in the countryside along which documents of protection could travel. At the same time, they also provide a point of entry to our understanding of the provincial administration, and the role played therein by the local elites and the documents which they produced.

While the Coptic protection letters as documents form the starting point of this dissertation, the people who are involved in the Coptic protection letters play an equally

¹ I use "tax evasion" to denote the active non-payment of taxes, whether someone was unwilling or unable to pay them.

important part in the discussions in the Chapters. The local elites, active in villages and monasteries in the countryside, take up the central space. These local elites issue the protection letters, or are asked to do so, or intervene in a different way for someone in need of a protection letter. They provide the protection letter itself, as well as the protection offered by the document, but are also those who can inflict the punishments from which protection is sought with the document. Different types of village officials, as well as monastic authorities, operate in the protection letter mechanism. Their authority to do so came from their position as intermediary between local communities and the central provincial government. These local elites had the authority to settle local disputes, and were generally responsible for running the villages and monasteries, including any landed property. Moreover, they often had responsibilities in fiscal practice, i.e. to assign tax burden, to collect taxes and forward them to the capital. These various functions of the local rural elites gave them considerable power over the local communities, both to abuse and to protect (on local elites see section 1.3).

Research questions

This dissertation aims to examine the mechanism of the Coptic protection letters and how this highlights the role of the local elites early Islamic Egypt. The Coptic protection letters will be questioned in order to garner information on social cohesion, interaction with the state, the self-regulation of the local communities and the role played by the local elites therein. This objective consists of three major research issues:

1. Can the Coptic protection letter be considered an institution of village life? In other words, was a Coptic protection letter a result of a routine, predictable and regulated, or rather an ad-hoc procedure? Can we identify patterns in their production (including their language) and circulation? This issue is the focus of Chapter 3.
2. What was the role and place of the Coptic protection letters in their contemporary documentary landscape, i.e. compared to (contemporary) Greek, Arabic, and Coptic documents with seemingly similar functions? This issue is the focus of Chapter 4.
3. What can the Coptic protection letters tell us about the role of local elites in Early Islamic Egypt, both as wielders of power in their own communities and as members of an administrative system in service of an Arab-Muslim provincial government? How does the study of Coptic protection letters help us understand that role? This issue is the focus of Chapter 5.

Embedding Conquest

This dissertation was written in the context of the ERC Consolidator project “Embedding Conquest. Naturalising Muslim Rule in the Early Islamic Empire”, led by Prof. Dr. Petra Sijpesteijn. The project aims at understanding the success of the Early Islamic Empire, with marked attention to documentary sources from various provinces as sources of history. Moreover, the project examines the history of the empire and its institutions through the lens of social relationships and the use of language to express such social relationships. While the focus on documentary sources, social relationships and language use are important methodological pillars of the project, one of the main research goals within the project is a better understanding of the role of local elites within the empire, and how they contributed to its success. The project started from the assumption that local elites formed an important link between the local population in which they carried a certain authority, and the central authority of the province or empire, and aimed to examine the variety of relationships between local elites and central authorities in different provinces.

This dissertation brings together many of the methodological and thematic aspects of the Embedding Conquest project, and contributes especially to its research goal related to local elites in the provinces. Through the lens of a particular type of document in use in seventh and eighth century Egypt, the Coptic protection letter, it examines the local elites in the social fabric of their own communities and their relationship with the state and its demands. A strong emphasis is placed on the patterns of language use in the documents. The language of the documents allows us to understand their importance and functions within the communities, as well as the social relationships which they activated. This local mechanism was one way in which the local elites, village and monastic authorities, exercised power within their own communities, solved problems of legal, fiscal, economic, and social nature, and navigated their position in the fiscal administration. The dissertation shows how the success of the early Islamic Empire was supported by Egyptian village and monastic elites participating in the protection letter mechanism and allowing tax evaders and other wayward absent community members a safe return to their homes. The Coptic protection letters did not belong to the sphere of the central administration, and yet, they

contributed to the security of the tax revenue, and the fiscal and economic health of the province, and as such to the success of the Early Islamic Empire.²

Structure of the dissertation

Chapter 1 serves as an introductory chapter, providing context for the analyses in the other chapters and addressing some methodological issues. I discuss the context in which the protection letter mechanism operated. The protection letters have connections to both Roman Byzantine legal mechanisms and are akin to Islamic legal concepts. The chapter gives the background of the consequences of the Arab-Muslim conquests of Egypt in the mid-seventh century, including a discussion of Coptic as an administrative language. A section is devoted to the meaning of “elites” in this dissertation, as the local, rural elites of Early Islamic Egypt are the protagonists of my analyses. After that I examine some of the opportunities and pitfalls of studying papyri. In the last section of Chapter 1 I discuss what is new about my approach to the protection letters.

Chapter 2 gives a detailed overview of the corpus that is central to this dissertation, the Coptic protection letters. I give an overview of the main studies and editions of Coptic protection letters which also provide a categorization of subgroups of Coptic protection letters. I also discuss dating and provenance of the corpus, as well as related methodological issues. The last part of the chapter explains terms that I use throughout the dissertation for certain elements of format and content of the protection letters.

Chapter 3 examines patterns in the Coptic protection letter mechanism: how standardized or uniform were the documents and the procedure to issue or obtain a protection letter? To that end, I first study the language of the documents, determining the key formulaic elements of the protection letters, identifying the various ways in which the documents express protection, and examining the uniform and the specific in the documents. I also compare a particular subset of the corpus, i.e. the protection letters penned and signed by village scribes of the village of Djeme. The second part of the chapter examines the procedural aspects of the protection letter mechanism: how and by whom were they circulated?

² Reza Huseini’s PhD research within the Embedding Conquest project has shown the local elites of Bactria in a similar role as small but important pieces within the administration, between the local population and the government: “Framing the conquests: Bactrian local rulers and Arab Muslim domination of Bactria 31-128/651-748”.

Chapter 4 delves more deeply into the content of the protection letters. It discusses 4 themes or societal areas and their relationship to the Coptic protection letters: taxation, travel, private legal issues, and the release of prisoners. For each area, I firstly discuss how these issues come up in the Coptic protection letters, and secondly how they come up in other, contemporary documents. The third element of the analysis is then a comparison: what was the specific role of Coptic protection letters when it came to solving those problems, compared to other documents with similar functions?

Chapter 5 looks at the Coptic protection letters and the local elites producing them in the context of Egypt as a caliphal province, between the village and the provincial capital. The chapter starts with orders from the capital and how they were transmitted, translated, and adapted by local elites in the countryside. The chapter moves on to argue that the local elites were connected to administrative processes and institutions beyond their own village context, through two case studies on Coptic protection letters. The last part of the chapter examines the interests of the local elites in their interventions through the protection letter mechanism. These interests are related to the relationships of the local elites in the village and in the fiscal administration of the province.

