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# Protective interventions by local elites in early Islamic Egypt

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## Chapter 1: Context and Methodology

### *1.1 Introduction: Protection*

#### *1.1.1 Jeremias' protection letter*

In 725, in a village called Djeme, nearby modern day Luxor, a scribe named Aristophanes wrote this text in Coptic on a shard of pottery:

> *"From Georgios and Aron, village headmen, they write to Jeremias, son of Basileios and his children: here is the promise by God* (logos mpnoute) *for you. Come to your house and appear, and we will not do any harm to you because you fled, nor will we prosecute you because of this instalment, nor your children, except for half a gold coin. So you will not doubt, we drew up this* logos *(promise, protection letter) and we sign it. Phaophi 6, indiction year 10. ⸗ Aristophanes, I wrote".* [3]

This pot sherd featured a so-called "protection letter" for Jeremias and his children, who remain anonymous. It was signed by the headmen of the village of Djeme, Georgios and Aron. By the power of this letter, Jeremias and his children, who apparently had fled from the village, were allowed to return home without facing prosecution by the village heads, although they still had to pay half a gold coin of tax payment. One can imagine that this letter would have made a big difference in the life of Jeremias and his children: the fiscal references in the text make it likely that they had fled because Jeremias had defaulted on his tax payment and feared the legal consequences. With the document in hand, he had a promise of at least some reprieve: seemingly only partial payment was needed at this time, and Jeremias and his family would be able to live in their home. This document calls itself a *logos (mpnoute)*, a "word" or promise given while invoking God, but in the scholarly literature this type of document has come to be known as a protection letter.[4] The protection letter for Jeremias and his children is one of the protection documents which form the core of this dissertation.[5] The image in Figure 1 below shows another example of such a

[3] *SB Kopt.* III 1368± + ⲡⲁⲣ ⲅⲉⲱⲣⲅⲓⲟⲥ ϳ ⲁⲣⲱⲛ ⲙ̣ⲉ̣ⲓ̣ⲍ̣ⲍ̣ [...] | ⲡⲉⲩⲥⲍⲁⲓ ⲛⲓⲉⲣⲏⲙⲓⲁⲥ ⲛⲃⲁⲥⲓⲗⲉⲓⲟⲥ | ⲙⲛ ⲛⲉⲫⲱⲏⲣⲉ ⲭⲉ ⲉⲓⲥ ⲡⲗⲟ[ⲣ] ⲙⲡ|ⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲛⲧⲟⲟⲧⲕ ⲛⲧⲟⲕ ⲛⲅⲉⲓ ⲉⲍⲟⲩ|ⲛ ⲉⲡⲉⲕⲏⲓ̈ ⲛⲅⲟⲩⲱⲛⲍ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ | ⲭⲉ ⲛⲛⲉⲛⲉⲣ ⲡⲉⲑⲟⲟⲩ | ⲛⲁⲕ ⲭⲉ ⲁⲕⲡⲱⲧ ⲟⲩⲇⲉ | ⲛⲉⲛⲡⲁⲣⲁⲅⲉ ⲙⲙⲟⲕ ⲍⲓ | ⲡⲉⲓⲉ̈ⲁⲅⲓⲛ ⲙⲛ ⲛⲉⲕⲱⲙ|ⲣⲉ ⲛⲥⲁ ⲟⲩⲡⲏⲱⲉ | ⲛⲍⲟⲗⲟⲕ ⲭⲉ ⲛⲛ|ⲉⲕⲁⲙⲫⲓⲃⲁⲗⲉ ⲁⲛ|ⲥⲙⲛ ⲡⲉⲓⲗⲟ[ⲣ] ⲁⲩⲱ | ⲧⲛⲥⲧⲟⲓ[ˣ] ⲉⲣⲟⲩ | ⲫⲁⲱⲫⲓ ⳋ ⲓ[ᴬ] ⲓ | Ἀριστοφ | ἔγραψα.

[4] The formulary of the documents is analyzed in more detail in Chapter 3.

[5] Chapter 2 gives a detailed overview of this core corpus of Coptic protection letters.

protection letter (*O.Bachit o. Nr.*), very similar to Jeremias' document. In this chapter I discuss broader issues of context and methodology, but I will use Jeremias' protection letter as a reference point, linking the various aspects of my discussion to this concrete example. This way, Jeremias' protection letter anchors my contextual and methodological remarks to the focus point of this dissertation: the protection letters and their actors. I will discuss the following points: the concept of protection offered by this document (1.1.2); the document's historical and legal backgrounds, both Roman and Islamic (1.1.3); the provincial administrative system Jeremias' protection letter fits in (1.2. 1.2.2), including the use of Coptic, the language of the protection letters, in that administrative system (1.2.3); the Georgios and Aron, the village headmen issuing Jeremias' protection letter and their status as "local elites" (1.3); the challenges which come with using Jeremias' protection letter as a historical source (1.4); my approach to the document, compared to existing scholarship (1.5): how I categorize the document, and which functions I believe it had in its context.

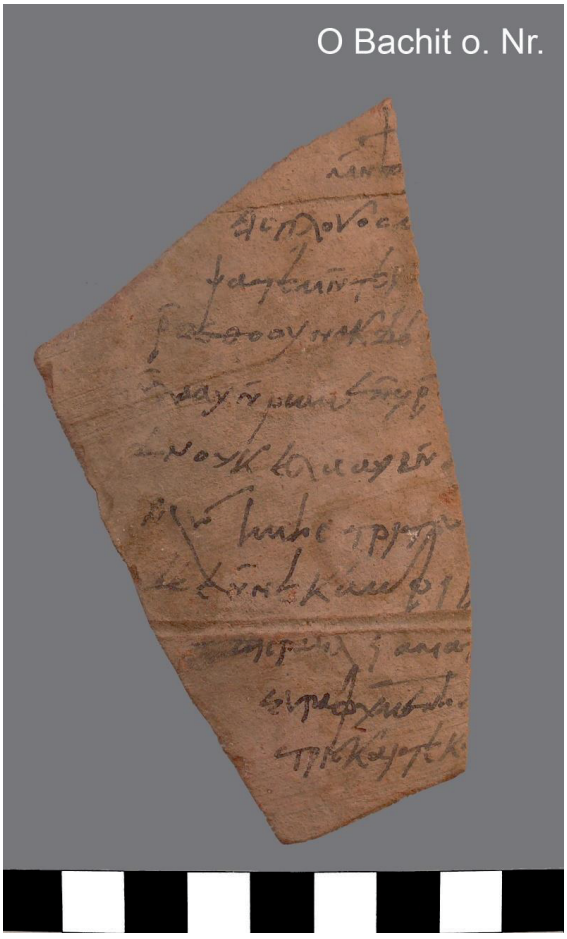


*Figure 1: Coptic protection letter : O.Bachit o. Nr., Deir-el Bachit, Theban area. © Koptische Ostraka Online, München, Münster 2011-2014.*

### *1.1.2 Protection in this dissertation*

While no words related to "protection" are used in Jeremias' protection letter, the document states that he will not be harmed or prosecuted. While "harm" is a rather general and vague term, the threat of prosecution is more specific.. The letter explicitly protected Jeremias from prosecution related to his tax evasion.

Generally, protection allows one to "avoid a threat or danger to one's property, health or life".[6] Protection has an important social aspect, as it is an expression of social

[6] Hayes and Scheerlinck, "Introduction," 4.

relationships of reciprocity (see sections 1.5.3 and 1.5.4). Protection mechanisms created or maintained an asymmetric but often interdependent social relationship between the protector and the protectee.

I consider protection at three levels: the act of protection, the mechanism of protection, and the system of protection. The act of protection is an action: e.g. an offer or request for protection, or as in Jeremias' case, the issuance of a Coptic protection letter. The mechanism of protection involves procedure, written and oral interactions, and acts of protection from various individuals or groups in society. The Coptic protection letters are the instruments used in a protection mechanism: the Coptic protection letter mechanism. The system of protection involves the whole range of integrated protection mechanisms in the Early Islamic Empire.

While I focus on the Coptic protection letter mechanism in this dissertation, I also discuss other protection mechanisms. The various protection mechanisms discussed in this dissertation are linked to the administration of a village as well as to the administration of an imperial province. The relationships examined here are therefore often those between – in a general sense – ruler and ruled: e.g. between rural authorities in charge of local taxation and the tax payers,, but also between the higher provincial administrators and the tax payers, or ultimately between the caliph and the inhabitants of his territories. In section 1.1.3.2 I briefly discuss protection mechanisms between ruler and ruled in the Islamic Empire, including their shared characteristics with the Coptic protection letter mechanism of the Egyptian villages. Many protection mechanisms operated in the system of protection in early Islamic Egypt and in the empire generally, and the Coptic protection letter mechanism was just one mechanism.[7]

The Coptic protection letter mechanism is a protection mechanism in which the rural clerical or non-clerical authorities interceded for someone apparently in trouble who had left their home, and promising (partial) amnesty or some other protection when the latter returns home. I consider the Coptic protection letters as the instruments of this mechanism, while acts of protection in this mechanism are e.g. the issuing, requesting, forwarding, respecting such a protection letter, or negotiating the contents thereof. The context of this Coptic protection letter mechanism: the villages, monasteries, and monastic settlements making up

[7] Chapter 4 compares the Coptic protection letters to documents used in other contemporary protection mechanisms.

the countryside of Egypt, especially those of the Theban region (section 2.3.1). The timeframe for this Coptic protection letter mechanism most probably starts in the first half of the seventh century and ends somewhere in the eighth century, possibly the 9th, with a marked spike in the evidence for the first half of the eighth century (see section 2.3.2). The term "protection letter" is a literal translation of the German term *Schutzbrief*, the term by which documents like Jeremias' letter were designated in the most influential early study dedicated to them, Walter C. Till's *Koptische Schutzbriefe*.[8] This term – and its translations – is still the term mainly used in the literature for these documents. I use the term "protection letter" in this dissertation, as well as the emic term *logos (mpnoute)*, which is how the documentary sources themselves identify the protection letters.[9] While I will question the nature of the protection offered, I do consider the Coptic protection letters instruments of a protection mechanism, i.e., the protection letter mechanism, both in the specific sense as well as in the general sense stated above. Jeremias was protected against the threat of harm from Georgios and Aron, but through a specific mechanism, that of the Coptic protection letter. The next section considers other protection mechanisms that operated in the background of the Coptic protection letter mechanism.

### *1.1.3 Backgrounds of the protection letter mechanism*

The protection letter mechanism did not exist in a vacuum, and the background against which it operated was a rich tapestry of different political and legal systems, traditions, and practices. The four named actors in Jeremias' protection letter: Jeremias, Georgios, Aron, and Aristophanes, as we understand from their non-Arabic names, were part of the at that moment still majority Christian population of Egypt. Egypt had been a province of the Islamic Empire for about 80 years in 725, when Jeremias' protection letter was written, but it had been territory of the Roman empire for over six centuries, during which it had been Christian for three centuries.[10] Jeremias and his peers were subjects of the head of the Islamic Empire, the Umayyad caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (r. 724 - 743), who ruled his territories from his imperial seat in Damascus. This section discusses relevant protection mechanisms tied to the two main facets of that background. First, the Coptic protection letter mechanism can be linked to late Roman law related to asylum practice in Egypt. Second,

[8] Till, "Koptische Schutzbriefe". See sections 1.5.1 and 2.1.2.
[9] On the meaning of ⲗⲟⲅⲟⲥ ⲙⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ (*logos mpnoute*), see section 2.1.2.
[10] From 619 to 629 Egypt was part of the Sassanian Empire.

the protection letter mechanism continued and flourished in the first centuries of Egypt as a province of the caliphate. Therefore, certain concepts from Islamic law related to protection and the relationship between ruler and ruled, and how we see those concepts in practice in the province, form part of the background against which the Coptic protection letter mechanism continued to operate.

#### *1.1.3.1 Late Roman law: the logoi asylias*

The Coptic protection letters were first studied for their value for legal history, and as such their possible link with late antique legal practice has been discussed in a number of publications.[11] Specifically, the discussion centers around the possible connection between the Coptic protection letters and the so-called *logoi asylias* (lit. word of asylum), an asylum mechanism known from late antique legal texts. I will give a brief overview of the discussion and state my opinion.

The *logoi asylias*, also simply called *logoi* in the sources, are mentioned first in legislation from the first half of the sixth century, namely several Edicts and Novellae of the Roman emperor Justinian (d. 565).[12] The *logoi (asylias)* were instruments of a protection mechanism which allowed people who had found asylum in, e.g., a church, to leave their place of asylum, e.g. to pay their taxes, for a limited period (30 days) without losing their immunity. They were issued by high-level civil administrators of the province, but also by bishops. In practice they were also issued by lower-ranking officials and clerical or monastic authorities, as is made clear by the Justinian texts which contain many restrictions to the use of *logoi (asylias)*, e.g. on who was allowed to issue them, and in which cases. The laws discouraged the issuance of *logoi (asylias)*, especially by lower officials in the countryside, and stipulated that they would be liable for any tax deficit that might occur because of the *logos (asylias)*. The legislation was especially strict in the case of tax defaulters. The emperor seems to have wanted to diminish the use of this particular protection mechanism as it was stemming the flow of revenue to the treasury.

There are several aspects of the *logos (asylias)* mechanism which are similar to the Coptic protection letter mechanism, and scholars have argued for a strong link between the two mechanisms or even have considered the Coptic protection letters as Coptic versions of

[11] Schiller, "Coptic ⲗⲟⲅⲟⲥ ⲙⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ documents"; Böhlig and Böhlig, "Einige Bemerkungen"; Steinwenter, "Koptischen Schutzbriefen"; More recently, Palme, "Asyl".

[12] Manfredini, "Taluni Aspetti".

the Greek *logoi asylias*.[13] Both instruments are called a *logos*, and seem to have functioned on the basis of someone giving someone else their "word", a promise, although *logos asylias* has also been interpreted as "letter of asylum" rather than "word/promise of asylum".[14] Both instruments give the holder a certain immunity, and both instruments allow the holder to move away from their current place of residence, with immunity. They are both mechanisms that protect people who have left their home. In case of the *logoi (asylias)*, they left to find refuge in an official place of asylum, e.g. a church. The Coptic protection letters do not tell us where the person who needs the document is. Jeremias' protection letter cited at the beginning of the chapter is an excellent example of this. We know Jeremias had fled his home, presumably with his children, but the document does not identify where Jeremias was when he received his protection letter. However, in some cases, it seems that the person in need of a protection letter had sought refuge with local monastic or clerical authorities, which is a similarity between the *logoi asulias* and the *logoi mpnoute* or Coptic protection letters.[15]

While these two protection mechanisms have considerable overlap, Liebesny and Till also pointed to three main differences between the Greek *logoi (asylias)* and the *Coptic logoi (mpnoute)*. First, while *logoi asylias* are valid for a certain amount of time (the legal literature mentions 30 days), none of the Coptic protection letters, like Jeremias' letter, contains a similar time limit.[16] Second, some Coptic protection letters might not have been issued by officials or clerical or monastic authorities, but rather by private individuals, which is never the case for the *logoi (asylias)*.[17] Third, while the *logoi (asylias)* seem to be providing a general protection against molestation for the holder, only a minority of the Coptic protection letters seem to provide such general protection: most of the Coptic

[13] Schiller, "Coptic ⲗⲟⲅⲟⲥ ⲙⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ documents"; Steinwenter, "Koptischen Schutzbriefen"; Böhlig and Böhlig, "Einige Bemerkungen". Palme, "Asyl" and Bagnall and Palme, "Franks" argue, based on Steinwenter's work, that the Coptic protection letters can be seen as a Coptic form of *logoi asylias*. Schiller, Böhlig and Böhlig, as well as Woess, *Asylwesen,* trace the origin of the Coptic protection letters even further to the *pisteis*, Greek documents used in the Hellenistic period in Egypt. The *pisteis* were safe conducts providing general protection for a specific amount of time, to someone outside their place of asylum. On *pisteis*, see Schäfer, "Ptolemäischen Pisteis".

[14] Manfredini, "Taluni Aspetti".

[15] E.g., *O.Crum VC* 75. See section 3.2.5.

[16] In some cases the Coptic protection letter seem to pertain to a particular (tax) year, see sections 2.4.3 and 4.1.1.1.3. The travel permits issued by state authorities were valid for a certain amount of months, on those see sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3.

[17] Till, "Koptische Schutzbriefe," 129. On this issue, see section 4.3.1.

protection letters specifically protect the holder against different types of molestation by the party issuing the document.[18] This is clear in Jeremias' protection letter: the village officials promise that they themselves will not harm or prosecute Jeremias, but do not promise protection against harm inflicted by anyone else. To these differences I want to add a fourth element, namely that the majority of the Coptic protection letters cannot be linked to asylum, as they do not contain any references to asylum practices. Exceptions to this rule are the letters implicating that the prospective holder of the protection letter had sought refuge with a clerical or monastic authority, but the majority of the Coptic protection letters does not mention asylum practices. As far as we understand from Justinian's texts, the *logoi asylias* had a very specific function, to allow someone who had found asylum to leave that place of asylum for a limited time period, with immunity. The function of the Coptic protection letters was more variegated, as I will discuss at length in Chapter 4. These points already indicate differences between the two mechanisms and how they operated, but I believe there is a more important reason to be cautious in linking the two mechanisms, namely the lack of documentary evidence for the *logoi asylias*.

There are no edited documents which explicitly identify themselves as or mention a *logos asylias*. Therefore we cannot make an effective comparison with the Coptic protection letters and their formulary which we see appear in the first half of the seventh century. Two publications cite two Greek documents which are requesting a *logos*, without qualifier.[19] The authors interpret these letters as requests for a *logos asylias*. However, neither request explicitly qualifies the logos as a *logos asylias*, and neither request explicitly connects to asylum practices.[20] *Logos* could mean a written or oral promise or assurance generally, and there is evidence that a *logos* could mean a written or oral promise or assurance, with a different function than what we expect from a *logos asylias* or *logos mpnoute*.[21] Even in one of the texts cited as evidence for the *logoi asylias* by Palme, a second *logos* is mentioned. From the content of the letter we understand that this second *logos* is not a *logos asylias* but

[18] There are Coptic protection letters which include such a general promise of protection, see section 3.1.2 on the various phrases expressing protection in the Coptic protection letters. This is also an argument against tracing the origins of the Coptic protection letter and *logoi asylias* mechanism to the Hellenistic *pisteis*, which offer a similar general protection.

[19] *P.Oxy* XVI 1944 and P.Vindob. G 14307, cited in Palme, "Asyl"; P.Vindob. G 14307 is edited in Bagnall and Palme, "Franks", as *SB* XXIV 16188.

[20] In *SB* XXIV 16188, a church is mentioned but it is not certain that that is where the person in need of the *logos* is.

[21] E.g. *SB Kopt.* V 2306, according to Till, "Koptische Schutzbriefe," 120-121 (no. 90).

some sort of statement of assurance, possibly only made orally. Thus, *logos* can have different meanings, even in the context of protection and asylum.

For the reasons stated above, I would argue caution against tracing a direct line of influence between the Greek *logoi (asylias)* and the Coptic protection letters, and would definitely argue against an identification of the Coptic protection letters as essentially *logoi asylias* in Coptic.[22] Instead, I consider the Coptic protection letter mechanism of the documentary sources and the *logoi asylias* mechanism as we know it from legal literature as distinct protection mechanisms operating in late antique Egypt.

*1.1.3.2. Relationships between ruler and ruled in islamic law and provincial practice*

This section turns to Islamic law and the practice of rule in the imperial provinces. It presents the Islamic legal concepts of protection *dhimma* and *amān* (1.1.3.2.1 and 1.1.3.2.2), and points to some shared characteristics between the Islamic legal concepts and administrative practice, and the Coptic protection letter mechanism (1.1.3.2.3). I do not suggest influence between the various mechanisms, but rather wish to put the Coptic protection letter mechanism against this contemporary background, in which Islamic concepts and mechanisms of protection, including ideals and practices of rulership related to protection, played an important role.[23] Indeed, the last part of the section shows how we see these legal concepts of *dhimma* and *amān* in practice in the papyri, the documentary evidence of the provincial administration contemporary to the Coptic protection letters (1.1.3.2.4).

*1.1.3.2.1 Dhimma*

*Dhimma* protection was the protection given by the central power to submitted non-Muslim peoples who were identified in Islamic law as "people of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*, in the first place Jews and Christians).[24] Just like *amān* discussed below, this protection mechanism was strongly connected to religion as the protection granted was in fact “God’s protection” (*dhimmat allāh*, *amānāt allāh*). *Dhimma*, as well as other types of protection mechanisms in

[22] The same goes for the Hellenistic *pisteis*. Similarities in formulary are notable but are not necessarily indicative of influence.

[23] For a brief overview of the various protection mechanisms and institutions and their development from the context of pre-islamic Arabia to that of the Islamicate societies, see Hayes and Scheerlinck, “Introduction”, and the various articles in *Acts of Protection in Early Islamicate Societies,* dossier in Annales Islamologiques 54 (2020).

[24] de la Vaissière, “Sogdian Ḏimmī”, shows how the newly conquered population of Sogdiana, although they were not “people of the Book”, in practice were granted by the rulers the protection associated with *dhimma*.

Islamic law, is described as a contract or a form of *ʿahd* (treaty, agreement between conqueror and conquered).[25] The rights and obligations of this protection agreement pertain to different aspects of the relationship between subject and ruler. The submitted people (*dhimmī)* have to pay tribute to the central power, particularly the capitation tax or *jizya*.[26] The *dhimmī* in turn receive protection against attacks on their territories from outside, and are granted certain freedoms, such as in the area of religious worship: they are allowed to continue practicing their religion. E.g. for Egypt, historiographical narratives mention that a church was built in the new provincial capital Fusṭāṭ as early as 668-681.[27] The *dhimma* protection also permitted jurisdiction independent from Islamic law, while the *dhimmī* also had access to the Islamic legal system which developed in the centuries after the conquests.[28] Thus, generally, *dhimma* provided protection and certain freedoms for the protectees, while they were obliged to give tribute to the central power. The protection comes nominally from God, but it is the Muslim community's obligation to uphold this protection.[29] We should be careful not to view the world in which Jeremias and his fellow villagers lived through the lens of this Islamic legal concept of *dhimma*, which assumes legally defined religious communities, which becomes a legal reality only in the 10th century.[30] Yet, the papyri show that *dhimma* as a protection mechanism influenced the relationship between Arab-Muslim administrators and their territories already by the end of the seventh century, as is shown in a rebuking letter from a high official in Palestine to his subordinates (*P.Ness.* III 77 = *P.HoylandDhimma* 1). I will discuss this letter in section 1.2.3.2.4.

*1.1.3.2.2 Amān*

A second Islamic legal mechanism of protection that is of interest here is the *amān*. Amān in its most general sense can be used in a similar way to *dhimma*, namely as protection for people who submit to the ruler. God's protection (*amānat allāh*) was granted and guaranteed by the person or institution in power. The *amān* contract was in use in a variety of circumstances. E.g., the Christian literary source commonly known as the "History of the Patriarchs" (Arabic title: *Siyar al-bīʿa al-muqaddasa*, "Biographies of the Holy Church")

[25] Cahen, "Dhimma"; Schacht, "ʿAhd.".
[26] Hoyland and Cotton, "Earliest Attestation," 56.
[27] Cahen, "Dhimma"; Legendre, "Islamic Conquest," 245. For an overview, see Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims*.
[28] Simonsohn, *Common Justice*, 4-5.
[29] Hoyland and Cotton, "Earliest Attestation," 57.
[30] Papaconstantinou, "Between Umma and Dhimma".

narrates how the caliph Marwan II (r. 744-750) issued a "decree of pardon" (*amān*) for a group of local rebels in the Egyptian Delta.[31] In this case, the protection is given to people who should be punished, i.e. rebels, but they are protected from punishment, through the *amān*.[32] *Amān* can also have the function of a safe conduct: Arabic historiography even presents us with the text of such an *amān* purportedly written by the caliph al-Mansur (r. 754-775) for his uncle 'Abd Allāh b. 'Alī, who had tried to seize power away from al-Mansur.[33] Similarly to the rebels mentioned above, the uncle of the caliph was guaranteed protection although he was supposed to be punished.[34] An *amān* in the sense of safe conduct could also be given to people who lived outside the Muslim realm and wanted to travel to and in the Muslim realm for a limited period for the purpose of trade or pilgrimage.[35] As I will mention in section 1.1.3.2.4, the instances of *amān* mentioned in the papyri also seem to link to this function of safe-conduct.

*1.1.3.2.3 Shared characteristics*

The Coptic protection letters issued in the villages of early Islamic Egypt, or the mechanisms behind their existence, share certain characteristics with these protection mechanisms of *dhimma* and *amān*, which operated at a much larger scale and at higher levels of administration of the Islamic empire. The following paragraphs will briefly discuss these shared characteristics. I do not want to argue for influence of any kind between these practices, but the similarities in the mechanisms are worth noting, as they point to shared social norms and expectations, of which both *amāns* and Coptic protections letters are expressions.

The first aspect of protection mechanisms that I want to highlight is that they often take the form of agreements which are a result of a negotiation between the two parties. Agreements between fighting parties, or between conquerors and submitted, appear in

[31] Trombley, "Documentary Background," 133. On this composite literary work, see e.g. Pilette, "History of the Patriarchs"; Heijer, *Mawhūb Ibn Manṣūr Ibn Mufarriǧ*.

[32] Examples of *amāns* given to rebels in Sijpesteijn, "Closing", Hagemann, "Muṭarrif", Huseini, "Rebellion".

[33] The text was transmitted by al-Azdī (d. 945) in his Ta'rīkh al-Mawṣil. Paragraph 6: "He permits him to come to him safely, confidently, protected, shielded (masturari) and guarded from his doing [him] harm and his betraying [him]." Marsham and Robinson, "Safe-Conduct", citation on p. 254.

[34] The caliph famously did not respect the *amān* and had his uncle imprisoned.

[35] I discuss the relationship between the Arabic safe conducts on papyrus, the use of the term *amān* in two Arabic administrative letters on papyrus, and the Coptic protection letters in more detail in section 4.2.

different forms in Islamic law of war.[36] Such agreements could be written down in the form of treaties or contracts (*'ahd*).[37] In the context of the conquest of Egypt, the literary sources tell us about the negotiations of patriarch Kyros, and the treaties he concluded with the conquerors.[38] A particular kind of such an agreement is a *sulh*, a treaty of peace between Muslim and defeated non-Muslim communities, for a specific amount of time.[39] Similarly, as I will argue in Chapter 3, the issue of a Coptic protection letter, and the inclusion of certain stipulations in the document in question, was the result of a previous negotiation between the local authority and the protectee, or a representative of the protectee. E.g. in Jeremias' case, the stipulation that he needed to pay a gold coin, most likely was a result of a negotiation before the document was issued.

Secondly, the protection granted by these agreements and their written down forms was dependent upon the fulfilment of certain conditions by the protectee(s), which meant that the protection could be revoked if the protectees did not fulfil the conditions. Chase Robinson considers this conditionality of protection (particularly *dhimma*) an "apparently classical feature of muslim-non-muslim relations".[40] This conditionality of protection is a striking feature of many of the Coptic protection letters, as well as some other related protection documents from early Islamic Egypt.[41] The protection provided in Jeremias' protection letter would most likely only take effect if he actually came to the village, but more importantly, if he paid the gold coin which is mentioned as an exception to the promise that he nor his children would be prosecuted because they defaulted on their taxes.

Thirdly, the narrative sources also tell us about moments when, even without apparent breaches by the protectees, protection agreements were not upheld. There is the case of caliph al-Mansur who granted and then broke an *amān* for his uncle. In protection mechanisms like *amān* and *dhimma*, God might have been the protector, but the mechanisms operated between humans who had to uphold the agreement. Violation of *amān* and

[36] Hayes and Scheerlinck, "Introduction," n. 24.
[37] Hill, *Termination*; Kaegi, "Egypt".
[38] Kaegi, "Egypt," 55; Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*, 49-50.
[39] Khadduri, "Ṣulḥ.".
[40] Robinson, *Empire*, 8-10, who quotes from Abu Ubayd (d. 223/837) a *ṣulḥ* given to the people of Edessa: "this is the letter (*kitāb*) from Iyad b. Ghanm and those Muslims with him to the people of Edessa: 'I have granted them security (*amān*) for their lives, possessions, children and women, their city and their mills, provided they pay what they rightly owe."
[41] This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, esp. section 4.2.3.

*dhimma*, as religiously sanctioned agreements, was seen as a violation against God.[42] Similarly, in the Coptic protection letters, God takes the role of, if not the actual protector, the promoter or guardian of the protection. The characteristic formula "This is the promise, by God, for you" usually opening the Coptic protection letters as it does Jeremias' protection letter, is an indication of this role of God, whose invocation in that formula is similar to an oath.[43] Some protection letters also contain an actual oath, which further underscores the religious embedding of a document operating on the crossroads of administration, (public) law and social relationships. The punishment for the protector, if they should not uphold the protection letter is referred to twice in the Coptic documentation, and twice this punishment is related to God or religious practice.[44]

Finally, two aspects of *amān* in particular, have a parallel in the Coptic protection letter mechanism. One of these aspects is that we see *amāns* providing amnesty to individuals or groups who were supposed to be punished for certain misdeeds, such as the acts of rebellion mentioned in section 1.1.3.2.3. On their smaller scale, the Coptic protection letters had a similar function: they provide protection against rightful punishments or claims by the local authorities issuing the protection letter. Jeremias had defaulted on his tax payments, but is promised he will not suffer the consequences, i.e. prosecution. The other parallel is related to the *amān*'s function as a safe conduct, mentioned in section 1.1.3.2.3. Travel was an important component of the Coptic protection letter mechanism as well, as it allowed people to travel to a certain place, usually their home, with amnesty. Jeremias' protection letter states explicitly that he had fled, and that he should come to his house.[45]

#### *1.1.3.2.4 God's protection in practice*

In the previous sections I discussed *dhimma* and *amān* as important mechanisms of protection which were a part of the relationship between the rulers and the subjects of the caliphate, and the characteristics which they shared with the Coptic protection letter mechanism. In this section, I will address a few aspects of how "God's protection" of *dhimma* and *amān* filtered down to the subjects in the imperial provinces, people like

[42] Schacht, "Amān." On the breaking of an *amān*, see the next paragraph.
[43] On the characteristic *logos mpnoute* formula of the Coptic protection letters, see sections 1.5.1 and 2.1.2.
[44] *SB Kopt.* V 2226: exclusion from service; *SB Kopt.* V 2262 contains an oath: "If I forsake this promise, then God will forsake me".
[45] On the role of travel in the Coptic protection letters, see section 4.2.1.

Jeremias and his children, via the words and actions of the representatives of the state in the provinces.[46]

Terms related to *ahl al-dhimma*, "people of protection" or "protected people" appear in the Egyptian papyri in Arabic language from the Abbasid period. The term could be used when referring to the population of a certain region, but dividing it into two groups: Muslims and "protected people", i.e. Christians (and Jews).[47] The term is also found in some documents related to tax collection.[48] In these Egyptian documents, the reference to the *dhimmī* status of the people in question is not connected to certain ideas on how they should be treated. On the other hand, one late seventh-century Arabic letter on papyrus from Nessana, situated in the Negev desert, provides a direct link between the religious concept of *dhimma* as God's protection, and the treatment of conquered territories of the caliphate and their inhabitants. In this letter, an important official of the province – maybe the provincial governor – warns two subordinates about corruption of which he evidently has heard some reports.[49] The papyrus is fragmentary but it is clear that some officials, including the addressees, had been taking more than what was owed from the population of Nessana. The letter talks of injustice and corruption and the sender threatens to reclaim the money from the possessions of the corrupt officials themselves. Both God and the governor or high official, the sender, are shown as protectors in two parallelly structured arguments, in which God is named first, and then the sender:

*God does not like wrongdoing or corruption and as regards you, I did not appoint you to a job for you to act sinfully and behave unjustly in it…and the people of Nessana have the protection of God and the protection of His messenger. So do not reckon that we acquiesce to your corruption and injustice in respect of it.*[50]

The worldly power, the sender of the letter, is guaranteeing and implementing God's protection for the people of Nessana. *Dhimma* was supposed to protect these local people against excessive taxation and oppression by abusing officials, and complaints or reports of

[46] The role of the local elites in transmitting and implementing provincial policies is discussed in Chapter 5.

[47] *P. World.* p. 132 (793-794), *P.HindsNubia* (758).

[48] *P. World* p. 132 (793-794), *P.DiemFrueheUrkunden* 7 (784), a tax-receipt with safe-conduct formulas.

[49] *P.Ness.* III 77 = *P.HoylandDhimma* 1.

[50] ll. 4-5 and 11-13, translation Hoyland. My emphasis.

abuse could result in reprimands from a higher office. Just rule, including avoiding oppressive behavior, is directly related to *dhimma* in this letter.

The edited papyri from Egypt do not seem to use terms related to *dhimma* protection in combination with admonitions about just governance of the province in the same way that we see in the letter from Nessana. However, the idea of protection of the local population through guaranteeing just governance, is found explicitly in different letters and other documents issued by higher government officials and directed down to lower officials or even to the individual taxpayer. This fair governance as it is represented in the papyri aimed to protect the local population from excessive taxation in case of bad harvests due to natural causes, but also from abuse by officials. Several scholars have noted that the papyrological record shows us how Arab-Muslim administrators took Islamic concepts of protection seriously, as well as the obligation it put on them and their colleagues to protect the conquered people. As part of his argument that early Islamic documents show "institutional or ideological elements we have associated with the state", Fred Donner argues that they reflect "a notion of authority to rule on the basis of Law, and responsibility of the state for the welfare of its subjects according to that Law."[51] He cites papyri in which officials try to protect the population in times of agricultural difficulty: "in particular, we find them writing to subordinates demanding that they take specified measures to forestall food shortages, hoarding of grain, and famine pricing in certain localities." A similar concern for the wellbeing of the taxpayers might be underlying the recurring advice in administrative correspondence not to collect the taxes before the harvest.[52]

But the most common threat from which we see higher officials trying to protect the local population was abuse by officials further down the administrative chain.[53] We see this mostly in reactions to (reports about) abusive behavior by officials, whether they were village head men, tax collectors, or higher officials at the pagarchy level. Several letters

[51] This again is part of his arguments that there was an Islamic state already in the seventh century: Donner, "Formation," 292. See also there on p. 293: "Clearly there is a general concept of law or justice at work here, and officials of the state are expected to adhere to it." Examples are given there on p. 292.

[52] *P.MuslimState* 22, commentary to l. 9, with references.

[53] Reinfandt, "Crime," n. 18, gives a list of Arabic papyri mentioning legal procedures related to abuse by officials. People experiencing or claiming unjust behavior from officials is definitely not a new phenomenon in the papyrological evidence from Egypt. Among petitions from the Ptolemaic period "misconduct or negligence by authorities" is by far the largest group in terms of subject, according to Baetens, *Survey*.

issued by higher officials to their subordinates contain comments on how officials should treat the local population. E.g., in the administrative letter *P.Berl.Arab* II 65, the senders summon the addressee(s), probably local tax administrators, to come to them. The senders had been appointed by the *amīr* as overseers of the tax collection in the Fayyum region, "and he *(i.e. the amīr)* has recommended us to approach the subjects friendly and to treat them well | . . . . and to protect them from the damages which are mentioned in what came to me. (ll. 5-7)." Thus, this message of benevolence and protection as a characterization of the relationship between rulers and subjects becomes part of the preamble of the order sent by the two overseers. It trickled down the administrative ladder, as it was a message given to them by their superior, but they repeated it in this letter as a form of justification for their summons.

In the letters of Umayyad governor Qurra b. Sharik (709-714) to Basilios, district administrator of Aphrodito, comments about the correct behavior of officials towards the people in his purview are part of a variety of rhetorical strategies employed by the governor in order to make Basilios do what he was told.[54] Often this correct behavior consists of sending the right amount of taxes in a timely manner, but Qurra also warns Basilios not to be corrupt or to permit other officials in his district to be corrupt or oppressive.[55] The corrupt practices which Qurra tells Basilios to avoid were put in general terms like "cheating the population" but also refer to specific circumstances, see e.g. Qurra's comments on the fair distribution of a fine imposed by the government on Basilios' district.[56] Yet, there must have been reports of much more violent abuse: on one occasion Qurra strongly discouraged his subordinate from torturing locals with lime and vinegar.[57] Thus, higher officials used their administrative correspondence, including general recommendations and specific remonstrances, as an instrument to protect the local population from abuse by lower officials.

Other mechanisms of protection used by higher officials were related to the administration of justice and to the fiscal system. The papyri show that the local population in the countryside could lodge complaints about abusive behavior by their village head with

[54] Papaconstantinou, "Rhetoric".

[55] This concern of Qurra's with Basilios not oppressing the locals is already discussed in the earliest editions of Qurra's Greek and Arabic letters (editions by Harold Bell and by Nadia Abbott cited in Papaconstantinou, "Rhetoric," 277 and n. 50).

[56] *P.Lond.* IV 1345 (710).

[57] *P.Ross.Georg.* IV 16 (710).

governor Qurra b. Sharik, and that he would order that the case be investigated.[58] In the fiscal system, higher officials in charge of taxation could use tax documents themselves to protect the taxpayers from abuse by lower tax officials, by including in the tax demand note a warning not to pay the tax collector more than what was mentioned on the note, and, to notify the issuing official if the tax collector asked for more.[59]

The comments about fair behavior towards the local population were often motivated religiously. This is of course most explicit in *P.HoylandDhimma* 1, in which both God and the governor are presented as the protectors of the local population, as discussed above. Religion thus is used as a "uniform language of behavior, values and expectations", even if in this case it is not used by non-Muslims, it is definitely applied to them.[60] This is also visible in Qurra's letters to Basilios in which he introduces God in his own expectations of a good official, as noted by Donner: "The governor then enjoins his pagarch, however, to act honestly and to be trustworthy (*muḥsin*, *mujmal, amīn*), and to ask God's aid, for, he says, God will help if one is trustworthy and concerned about the wellbeing of affairs. In this case, then, the governor is clearly playing on the pagarch's guilt or sense of responsibility, not merely as a government servant, but as a person subject to an absolute Law derived from God."[61] However, it should also be noted that not all mechanisms of protection by the government were motivated through explicitly religious language in the papyri, as we can see in the letter from the officials quoting the *amīr* on how the officials should behave towards the local population. Also, Qurra's letters do not always religiously motivate his admonitions towards Basilios. Thus, while the protection "of God" of the legal sources is visible at times in the papyri, the religious component was not necessarily made explicit.

Who were the officials from whom the senders of these letters, or their superiors, are trying to protect the local population? These potentially abusive officials seem to have belonged to different levels of the administration: Qurra urged both the pagarch Basilios

[58] See section 4.3.2.

[59] See e.g. *P.Clackson* 45 and section 4.1.2.

[60] Sijpesteijn, "Success," 30.

[61] Donner, "Formation," 292. Similar shared religious language in the papyri can be found in petitions and informal requests which, in various ways, name both God and the addressee as the helper or protector of the sender. For this in Arabic request letters, see Sijpesteijn, "Righting Wrongs". For the addressee as an intercessor before God in Coptic debt-related requests see Papaconstantinou, "Women".

himself to be just *and* to ensure that his subordinates behave fairly. Moreover, he gave the order for a legal inquiry as a response to a taxpayer's complaint about the abuse of his village head (the function of Georgios and Aron, who issued Jeremias' protection letter). On the other hand, the *amīr* mentioned in *P.Arab.Berl.* II 65, as well as the governor writing to his apparently corrupt subordinates in Nessana (*P.HoylandDhimma* 1), both gave warnings about the treatment of the local population in their respective provinces, to officials who themselves seemed to have belonged to the ruling elite, judging from their Arab names.

As a last point I would like to briefly mention the *amān* in the papyri. As mentioned in section 1.1.3.2.2, *amāns* are known to us from the literature, but there are also papyri which mention an *amān* issued to an individual. The references to *amāns* in the papyri suggest that those documents were in fact Coptic protection letters or similar documents, perhaps in Arabic, which have not been found or identified yet. 4.2.3. Another kind of document that is clearly related to the *logos mpnoute* docu,ents are the Umayyad safe conducts, or rather travel permits, written in Arabic. These are known under a term different than *amān*, namely *sijill* and serve yet a different function of offering temporary immunity in early Islamic Egypt. These travel documents and their relationship to the Coptic protection letters are discussed at length in sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3.

In summary, the papyrological record shows the Arab-Muslim government's concern with fair rule, which included protecting the local population from abusive or corrupt behavior by officials, by way of different protection mechanisms. Administrative letters served to guide or remonstrate subordinates. In a unique case of the letter *P.HoylandDhimma* 1 from Nessana, the obligation to avoid corruption in the relationship between rulers and subjects is even explicitly tied to *dhimma* protection. But we also see God's protection in practice in tax demands which caution the taxpayer about tax collectors who ask too much, and judicial mechanisms which dealt with complaints about abusive behavior. We see the Arab-Muslim government not only invoke this obligation of protection in an effort to protect the local population from abuse by Arab-Muslim administrators, but also from abuse by local elites responsible for governance of districts or villages, like Georgios and Aron, the village heads who issued Jeremias' protection letter. Indeed, these various protection mechanisms involved the local officials who issued the Coptic protection letters, or their direct superiors, and as such they operated in the immediate context of the

Coptic protection letter mechanism, and can be compared to them.[62] The same can be said of the instances of *amān* in the papyri, as well as the safe conducts or travel permits (*sijill, kitāb*) on papyrus. The letters and documents I discussed in this section were issued by representatives of the state to their subordinates, which often were members of the local elites responsible for administering the districts and villages in the countryside. The Coptic protection letter is another manifestation, at the village level and directly issued by local elites, of this expectation of an administrative system that offers *all* its participants justice and protection from abuse and unjust behavior. Through a top-down effect local elites were encouraged to behave according to principles of just rule. On the other hand, as I have argued above, one can also see the Coptic protection letters as expressions of a shared system of expectations about just rule.

Now that we have introduced the Coptic protection letter mechanism, as well as the legal protection concepts and mechanisms in the background of the Coptic protection letter mechanism, we turn to the administrative system of Egypt in the seventh and eighth centuries, the period in which the Coptic protection letter mechanism was active is discussed more fully in the next section.

### *1.2 The administration of Egypt in the seventh and eighth centuries: immediate changes and gradual developments*

Jeremias' protection letter solved a very personal problem for him and for his children, as they were allowed to return to their home without facing harm from the village heads. However, the reason why the village heads could have harmed him, and most likely the reason why Jeremias had fled, i.e. his taxes, links this personal problem to the administration of the province, the caliphate even. Many of the Coptic protection letters are directly linked to the administration of the imperial province, whether because of their content or because people involved in them were involved in the (tax) administration of their village.[63] To provide context for this aspect of the Coptic protection letters, this section discusses the administration of Egypt as it evolved in the aftermath of the Arab-Muslim conquests. Georgios and Aron issue their protection letter for Jeremias and his children in 725, when Egypt had been a province of the Islamic empire for about 80 years. By this time, the

[62] To my knowledge, these documents do not mention Coptic protection letters. *P.MuslimState* 7 and 31 might be exceptions, see section 4.2.3.6.
[63] See section 4.1.1.

administration of Egypt had undergone a number of changes, which are visible in the papyri. The conquerors introduced some immediate changes and adjustments to the administration of the province, but the seventh and eighth centuries also saw slower, more gradual developments of change in the administration of the province.

Petra Sijpesteijn has shown how the development of the Arab-Muslim administration of Egypt during the first centuries after the conquest can be roughly divided into two stages, with a turning point after 50 years, in the beginning of the eighth century.[64] A number of policies effecting change were enacted immediately or very quickly. Where the administrative language of Egypt had been almost exclusively Greek since the Hellenistic period, the new rulers immediately communicated in Arabic as well as in Greek with the local population. The new rulers also immediately started requisitioning labor and materials from the local population. In 643 a receipt for 65 sheep was issued in both Arabic and Greek.[65] The Greek documents in the archive of the official Senouthios working in Middle-Egypt also show that the new government was issuing requisitions of materials and labor from the inhabitants of the Nile Valley in the first years after the conquest.[66] On the other hand, during these first decades, the new rulers left the administration of the province largely in the hands of the local elites, instead of replacing them with officials from among their own ranks (see below, section 1.2.2). After the "first 50 years", this also started to change.

Testimonies to the changes are the narrative and documentary sources concerning the late Umayyad period (705-750), which has been called in the literature a time of "radical departure from previous practice" in the administration of Egypt as a province.[67] In this period, the central administrative register (*diwān*) in the provincial capital was translated to Arabic, furthering processes of language change which were already underway since the conquest: a multilingual administration in which Arabic, Greek, and Coptic all had their particular roles developed (1.2.3).[68] Moreover, the administrative personnel in the countryside was being replaced with Muslim officials (see below, section 1.2.2).[69] However, these processes , developed gradually. The Coptic protection letters, attested until

[64] Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*; Sijpesteijn, "Arab Conquest"; Sijpesteijn, "New Rule".
[65] *P.GrohmannMuhadara* II p. 12 = PERF 558.
[66] On Senouthios' archive, see *CPR* XXX.
[67] Frantz-Murphy, "Economics".
[68] On the translation of the *diwāns*, see Legendre, "Translation", Sijpesteijn, "Policy".
[69] Frantz-Murphy cited above. See also Sijpesteijn, "Archival Mind," 172.

the eighth, maybe the 9th century (on dating the Coptic protection letters, see section 2.3), are testimonies to the gradual nature of the processes of Arabicization and Islamicization of the Egyptian countryside. Just like Jeremias' protection letter, they were written almost exclusively in Coptic and do not have Arabic parallels from this period.[70] Moreover, the lack of Arab names in these documents shows that the villages in which they were produced were still headed by locals (see below).

Another development in the administration of Egypt of the late Umayyad period, and one that is of direct importance to our understanding of the Coptic protection letters, was a heightened attention to the flow of revenue, which included tax payers' movements. These policies have their clearest expression in the Arabic and Greek documentary travel permits produced in that period by the highest offices of the province, but can also help explain a striking aspect of the chronological distribution of the Coptic protection letters.[71] While the majority of the Coptic protection letters can only be dated roughly to the seventh or eighth century, the protection letters which can be dated more precisely were all produced in the first half of the eighth century, contemporary to the Arabic and Greek travel permits.[72] In this dissertation, I argue that the Coptic protection letters had different functions and goals than the Arabic and Greek travel permits (4.2), but also that the Coptic protection letters were responses to the same governmental policies aiming at a greater control over taxation and mobility, but implemented and adapted by local authorities in the villages. The apparent "success" of the Coptic protection letters in the late Umayyad period should be seen as an indirect result of those policies, an intensification in the use of an instrument which had been in use before the conquests. While the Coptic protection letters were not direct products of Islamic law or even of specific policies of the Arab-Muslim government in Egypt, there was a greater need for them at a time when taxation and mobility were surveyed and regulated more. Since taxation and the control of mobility in the province will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 (respectively section 4.1 and 4.2), I do not discuss them here.

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[70] Two Greek documents contain formulary that is very close to that of the Coptic protection letters: *SB* III 7240, and *CPR* VIII 84, both discussed in section 5.3.2). See section 1.2.3 on language change and especially the role of Coptic as a language of administration in Early Islamic Egypt.

[71] These processes are analyzed in detail in Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*. On travel permits see sections 4.2.2 and 4.23.

[72] However, the Coptic protection letters are not an exclusively 8th-century phenomenon: see section 2.3.2, on the difficulty of dating Coptic documents, see below section 1.4.

These paragraphs have discussed, in broad strokes, both the immediacy and gradualness of the developments of the administration of Egypt after it became a province of the caliphate in the middle of the seventh century, and how the Coptic protection letters fit those developments. In the next sections, I will discuss in more detail two aspects of the administration of Egypt in the seventh and eighth centuries which I have mentioned here: the changes in administrative personnel and offices in the countryside, and the multilingual nature of the administration. The discussion of the administrative personnel (section 1.2.2) in the countryside is especially relevant as background to my analyses in Chapter 5, which looks at the Coptic protection letters and the local elites in terms of how they were connected to the rest of the provincial administration. Section 1.2.3 serves as an introduction to the main language of the protection letters, Coptic, and to its role in the society and administration of Egypt in the seventh and eighth centuries, in which it is accompanied by both Greek and Arabic.

### *1.2.2 Functions and personnel of the administration*

Going back to the years of the conquest, the Arab-Muslim conquerors, whose governance was characterized by "confidence and pragmatism",[73] chose to maintain some elements of the administration and change others. In the countryside, the local administrative structure was at first kept in place, together with its personnel.[74] This way, the new rulers could co-opt the expertise, manpower, infrastructure and power of these local authorities, without having to send their own manpower while they already were in a minority. Thus, the administrators of the five *eparchies* or regions which divided the province, and within those the *pagarchies* or districts in which the Egyptian countryside was divided, were still chosen from the local urban elites, residing in the *metropoleis* or capital cities of the districts. The administration of smaller administrative units, villages and settlements of different sizes, also remained in the hands of the local, rural elites, people like village heads Aron and Georgios, who issued Jeremias' protection letter.[75] However, while the local elites maintained authority in the countryside, the ultimate authority in the province lay with the representatives of the empire, of the caliph, in the new capital of Fustat: in the first place

[73] Sijpesteijn, "Expressing," 172.
[74] Sijpesteijn, "New Rule," 190, for examples of officials retaining their posts after the conquest.
[75] On local elites in this dissertation, see section 1.3.

the provincial governor.[76] This authority of the state was present in the countryside through administrative correspondence, which communicated and forwarded orders to the relevant officials, but the presence of the state was also physical: there is evidence that military garrisons and their leaders were stationed in the countryside in the years after the conquest.[77] In Chapter 5, I discuss at length the interaction between local rural elites and the central government, including through a more indirect presence of the state in the villages in the countryside, e.g. by way of the transmission and translation of communications from the highest offices. The first changes in the administrative structure in the countryside happened at the higher levels with the disappearance of the function of the *dux*. Egypt as a province of the Byzantine empire had been divided into five *eparchies*, each headed by a *dux*, who was both an administrator and a military leader. At a first stage the new rulers had placed their own military commanders at the head of the *eparchies*, next to the *dux* who lost that particular part of his power.[78] The office of the dux seems to disappear from the record after the turn of the eighth century, and the pagarchies, headed by a pagarch, became the largest administrative units of the province.[79] The pagarchs communicated directly with the authorities in Fustat.[80] Moreover, around the same time, the function of district administrator (pagarch) starts being filled by people with Arab names.[81] The districts were made up of a capital and villages in various sizes. It is in these village contexts that the Coptic protection letters were produced, mainly by various village officials involved in the general administration and taxation of the village.[82] In section 1.3 below I will go into further detail on the administrative functions of these actors of the Coptic protection letters.

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[76] Another important office was that of the ṣāḥib al-kharāj, the fiscal overseer of the province, whose agents issued the travel permits discussed in Chapter 4. On Fustat, see Bruning, *Rise*..

[77] Legendre, "Pouvoir," Conclusion. Morelli in *CPR* XXX: administrative correspondence and military presence are both conspicuous in the papers of the official Senouthios, who was an administrator of the northern part of the Hermopolite district during the first years after the conquest. His papers include a number of references to letters from an *amir* received by Senouthios' superior, and they show that garrisons were located in his district, the Hermopolite.

[78] Sijpesteijn, "Establishing".

[79] Legendre, "Byzantine nor Islīic?" The latest attestation of a dux is in 749: Sijpesteijn, "Multilingual Archives". Morelli CPR XXII introduction.

[80] Sijpesteijn, "Multilingual Archives".

[81] E.g. a pagarchical official, maybe the pagarch himself, is Sufyān b. Ġunaym in the Greek tax-receipt SB XVI 13018, Hermopolis, 714.

[82] The administration of these villages and the various functions therein has been examined in great detail by Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*. See also Papaconstantinou, "'Great Men'"

The papyri show that in the 730s-750s in the Fayyum, tax agents were still chosen among the local inhabitants of the villages by Arab-Muslim officials administering the region.[83] Another important element of the Egyptian countryside were larger and smaller monastic centers. Especially large monastic centers engaged in the administration of Egypt, e.g. through their involvement in the production of administrative documents related to taxation and the control of people's movement.[84] Smaller monastic settlements and their inhabitants were connected with the villages in their surroundings. Monastic authorities appear in the protection letters in several roles; I will discuss specific clerical and monastic titles and functions in section 1.3 below.

A striking point about the Coptic protection letters is the near absence of Arab-named individuals in them, even at a time that other documents show that there was a presence, albeit still small of Arabs in countryside. [85] This apparent near absence of Arab-Muslim individuals in the Coptic protection letters can be explained by the local nature of the production and circulation of the letters. The people involved in the protection letters were predominantly related to villages and monasteries, and bear local, Greek and Egyptian, names. Yet, in eighth-century papyri related to local, rural contexts in the Fayyum tax fugitives bearing Arab names appear alongside individuals with Coptic names .[86] Thus we might also expect to find protection letters issued to people bearing Arab names, but that is not the case. This could be purely caused by the chance of survival, and might change in the future, when more documents are edited. On the other hand, the fact that the large majority of the protection letters come from the Theban region, where Arabicisation and Islamisation

[83] *P.MuslimState* 23. On messengers as fiscal agents see also Schmidt, "Messengers".

[84] This is the focus of Palombo, "Christian Clergy". Examples of such monastic centers appearing in this thesis are the monastery of Apa Apollo at Bawit (Hermopolite district, Middle Egypt), the monastery of Apa Apollo at Deir el-Bala'izah (Apollonopolite district, Upper Egypt), and the monastery of Apa Ieremias near Manf (Memphis, Lower Egypt: Delta).

[85] The exception is a letter, in which the sender, Αβου Δεεια, Abū Diyaʾ, seemingly asks for the issuance of a protection letter for someone else. *P.Heid.* XI 490: the name of the sender is written in Greek in the address on the back of the papyrus (l. 6). The letter is written in Coptic. Also, three documents contain an oath sworn by God the Almighty and, the wellbeing/head of those who rule over us: BKU III 473 and O.CrumVC 8 and 9.

[86] Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*, 193, n. 417: a mid eighth-century fiscal register lists the names of fugitive Muslim peasants: *CPR* XXII 34.

developed slower and later than the more northern parts of Egypt, including the Fayyum, certainly plays a role here.[87]

In the preceding paragraphs I gave a brief overview of developments in administrative personnel in Early Islamic Egypt, and placed the Coptic protection letters in their administrative context: they were issued by local Egyptian administrators and authorities in the villages and monasteries, rather than by Arab-Muslim (or convert) district administrators in the district capitals or higher officials in Fustat. In the following paragraphs I would like to address the language situation in Egypt in the period in which the Coptic protection letters were issued. This is also relevant because the Coptic protection letters were connected to other documents, written in Arabic, Greek and Coptic. To understand the role these documents fulfilled in the administration, it is useful to give an overview of the multilingual background of administrative documentary production in early Islamic Egypt. The role played by Coptic in this linguistic landscape will be the focus of the discussion.

### *1.2.3 Multilingual background of documentary production*

The first section below gives a brief overview of the history of Coptic as a literary and documentary language, and as an administrative language of Early Islamic Egypt. In the following section I focus on two contexts, other than the village, in which Coptic is used to write administrative documents: monastic centers and the offices of district administrators (pacharchs). The Coptic protection letters were mainly village products, but they were connected to monasteries and exceptionally to higher offices such as the pagarch's office.

#### *1.2.3.1 Coptic, an administrative language*

Coptic developed as the last language phase of the Egyptian language towards the fourth century, a phase which ended in the 1fourth century, when the shift to Arabic in Egypt, which started with the conquest and accelerated in the following centuries, was complete.[88] Before the sixth century, Coptic appears in the written record especially as the language of

[87] The earliest dated Arabic documents in Djeme are protocols (*protokollon*: first sheet of a roll of papyrus) dated to 732 and 733: *CPR* III 109 and 110. There are no Arabic documents from Djeme from the first two Islamic centuries except for protocols.

[88] For the evolution of Coptic and its relationship to Greek and Arabic, see Richter, "Greek, Coptic"; Björnesjö, "L'arabisation" focuses on the papyrological evidence. On Arabic-Coptic language contact, see Boud'hors, "Degrés d'arabisation"; Legendre, "Perméabilité"; Richter, "Greek, Coptic," 422–426, with further bibliography. For the evolution of Coptic until the Arab conquest of Egypt, see most recently Fournet, *Rise*.

Christian literature and of private communication. As a literary language, it loses its pride of place to Arabic in the 10th century, when new works are composed in Arabic by Egypt's Christians, and older Coptic ones start to be translated..[89]

As for documentary texts, Coptic gradually took over from Greek in Egypt in several areas of life from the sixth century onwards. In the sixth-century archive of Dioskoros, landlord, notary and poet in the Middle Egyptian town of Aphrodito, Coptic is attested as a language for writing legal documents.[90] However, until the seventh century, Coptic does not appear in the written record as an administrative language, which remained the domain of Greek, but as "vehicle of written communication related to everyday life."[91] However, at the same time that the new government of Egypt starts to use Arabic in their communication, together with Greek, Coptic starts to be used more and more for administrative purposes as well, while, seemingly, never becoming the language in which the highest echelons of the administration communicated with each other or for documents directed down the administrative ladder. The changes made in the administration of the empire by Umayyad caliphs ruling in the late seventh, early eighth century have been recognized as instrumental in this development.[92] The papyrological record makes clear that Greek and Coptic were used for a long time after the conquest, for the purpose of writing private and administrative texts[93] Only from the 9th century onwards, Coptic was only rarely used for legal documents, even for documents used by Coptic speakers.[94] 10th-century legal documents written in Arabic could be orally translated into Coptic to the relevant parties, and 11th-century monasteries in the Fayyum could produce their accounts either in Coptic or in Arabic.[95]

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[89] It is at that time that the author of the co-called "Apocalypse of Ps.-Samuel of Qalamoun" wrote an impassioned warning about what he perceives as the Arabicisation and, by consequence, the moral decadence, of the Christian population of Egypt. While this pessimistic image has been taken more or less at face value by modern scholarship, it has recently been argued that the text reflects rivalries between factions in the Christian church in Egypt rather than an exact picture of the linguistic situation of Egypt. Papaconstantinou, "They Shall Speak," esp. 298.

[90] Fournet, *Rise*, Chapter 3.

[91] Richter and Grossman, "Egyptian-Coptic Language," 78.

[92] Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*. On the multilingual policies, see Legendre, "Translation", Sijpesteijn, "Policy".

[93] Berkes, "Latest Identified", presents the latest dating of a Greek papyrus document: 825 (SPP III$^2$ 577, belonging to church administration). Tax documents written partially in Coptic are attested with certainty up to the tenth (*CPR* IV 13, 942).

[94] Richter, "Greek, Coptic," 421. Coptic documentary texts containing Arabic loanwords date from the 8th through the 12th century: 423–426.

[95] Papaconstantinou, "'They Shall Speak'" 296–297.

This section will focus on the role of Coptic as an administrative language in Egypt from the conquest throughout the eighth century, when Arabic gradually started to replace Coptic in the administrative functions where it was used (e.g. to write tax-receipts), at the same time that in the administration of the Egyptian countryside the Arab-Muslim officials started to replace the local elites (see above section 1.2.2). I will show how there is a substantial amount of Coptic documentation related to the administration of Early Islamic Egypt. Because of this volume alone Coptic documents should be considered as an important source for our understanding of the administration of Egypt. Moreover, although Coptic documents were produced at lower levels of the administration, they were nevertheless connected to administrative developments in the province, or even the empire. In that way, they show how the local elites issuing and using these documents in Coptic helped shape the administrative rule. The Coptic protection letters serve as an excellent example of this: a substantial amount of over 140 Coptic documents documenting the Coptic protection letter mechanism operating in the countryside in the seventh and eighth centuries show us the how the local elites dealt with the demands of the government, and shaped fiscal practice accordingly, from their position at the bottom end of the administrative ladder but at the head of their communities (Chapter 5).

Let us now turn to an overview of the use of Coptic in administrative documents in particular. Scholarship on the linguistic situation in Early Islamic Egypt, has tended to stress the private nature of written communication in Coptic.[96] Coptic is described as a language for private letters and legal documents.[97] Recent publications on the role of Coptic in the administration and society of late antique and early Islamic Egypt repeat the notion that Coptic never became an "official" language, in the same way that Greek and Arabic were.[98]

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[96] Richter, "Greek, Coptic," 405-406:…Coptic, which clearly enjoyed its widest spread during the first two centuries after the conquest: it was then that a great many private records were drawn up in Coptic, and then did Coptic become a common medium of private expression in epigraphy. But Coptic never came anywhere close to the importance of Greek or Arabic as a linguistic means for administrative, public, and representative purposes, …"

[97] Fournet, "Multilingual Environment," 441.

[98] Richter, "Greek, Coptic"; Richter, "Language Choice"; Richter, "Unseren Herrn"; Berkes, "Griechisch"; Clackson, "Coptic or Greek?," 103, considers Greek *and* Coptic "official languages" of post conquest Egypt. This statement is qualified by editor Arietta Papaconstantinou: n. 67: "What is meant here is probably that administrative documents at the local level, such as tax-receipts, were issued in Coptic at that time. However, Coptic never became an official language of the Arab administration" (with reference to Richter, "Language Choice").

Studies emphasize that for administrative purposes, Coptic was used only locally, on low levels of the administration, while Arabic and Greek operated on the higher levels of the administration.[99] Coptic administrative documents issued directly by the highest offices of the imperial province of Egypt are indeed not attested. However, in order to understand the reach of the Islamic empire, and the role of the local elites in the society and administration in this province, it is fruitful to examine the non-negligible amount of Coptic written communication which records the relationship between government and its subjects, and which was produced and received at different levels of the administration.

Thousands of documentary papyri and ostraca from post conquest Egypt have been published. In about 2.500 of these papyri and ostraca Coptic was used.[100] In this amount both monolingual Coptic documents as well as bilingual Coptic-Greek or Coptic-Arabic documents are taken into account. The papyrological record also preserves trilingual Coptic-Greek-Arabic papyri.[101] About 750 or 30% of these are documents related to the relationship between the government and the local population. The other 70% are documents pertaining to the private sphere, such as private letters and legal documents, and to the internal administration of monastic centers. Although the majority of the Coptic documents we have is private, there is a significant number of documents reflecting the official practices of the governmental administration. The sheer amount of documents alone shows that we cannot ignore Coptic as a language of administration, and not exclusively on the level of the village.[102] Chapter 5 presents case studies that prove the importance of this attention to Coptic and Coptic document writers, as it allows us to understand the provincial

[99] Richter, "Language Choice"; Papaconstantinou, "'They Shall Speak,'" 273: " In the centuries that followed the conquest, the use of Greek declined quite rapidly among the population, while Coptic became more and more commonly used all areas of life that have left a written record. For the first time it was used even in official documents addressed to the Arab authorities at the local level."

[100] This number is the result of combined searches in the *Trismegistos* database (*TM*, www.trismegistos.org) and the *Brussel's Coptic Database* (*BCD*, https://dev.ulb.ac.be/philo/bad/copte/base.php?page=accueil.php). This number is a very conservative result: I took into account only documents which were dated with certainty after the middle of the seventh century, according to the databases. Yet, many Coptic documents have been labelled seventh-8th century, and a large part of those probably belong the Islamic period.

[101] E.g. *P.Clackson* 45, Berkes and Younes, "Trilingual Scribe?".

[102] In the Coptic protection letters, Greek script could be used in combination with Coptic, namely in some parts of the formulary protection letters, as Jennifer Cromwell has shown for the Djeme scribe Aristophanes' protection letters, who used Greek script for the opening address in e.g. Cromwell, *Recording*, 245-247, no. 9. On Aristophanes' protection letter production, see section 3.3.1.2.

administration as one system in which the three administrative languages and their users were integrated. The next section discusses two milieus, other than the village milieu but connected to it, where Coptic was used for administrative purposes: monastic centers and the district administrator's (pagarch) office.

*1.2.3.2 Two non-village milieus in which Coptic was used for administrative purposes: monasteries and pagarch's offices.*

That monastic centers were places where documents expressing the relationship between government and local population were received and produced, is very clear in the cases of the Apa Apollo monastery of Bawīṭ and the Apa Apollo monastery at Deir al-Balā'izah, both in Middle Egypt. Documents regarding taxation were received and produced by the monks of these monasteries. Monks received Coptic and Arabic-Coptic tax demands from the pagarch or district governor, and were involved in tax collection within the monastery and its surroundings, including the production of tax-receipts.[103]

The same can be said in the specific case of the regulations regarding the circulation of people. Monastery-internal documents can be quite direct testimonies of governmental regulations regarding the local population, as e.g. the guarantee letters addressed by monks of the Apa Jeremias monastery of Saqqara to their superior, as part of the procedure of obtaining travel permits.[104] Furthermore, communications between monastic or clerical authorities and village authorities can also reflect local measures taken to deal with these government regulations, e.g. in letters asking to issue a protection letter for a third party.[105]

Other than in villages and monastic contexts, Coptic was also used to write administrative paperwork in the office of district administrators, located in the *metropolis* or capital of the district which was named after its *metropolis*. Sebastian Richter has shown how, in the case of the archive of the pagarch Basilios, the pagarch's office acted as a "relay station" between the governor's office and the local authorities in the pagarchy.[106] Bottom-

[103] The tax-receipts could be issued in Greek or Coptic. E.g., *P.Bal.* II 132-151, Coptic tax-receipts issued at the Balā'izah monastery. *P.Clackson* 45 is an Arabic-Coptic tax demand note connected to the Bawit monastery. The role of monastic centers in Early Islamic Egypt in the production of these administrative documents is a major focus in Palombo, "Christian Clergy".

[104] On the role of these documents in the government's efforts to control mobility, see Delattre, "Checkpoints," 535-536; Palombo and Scheerlinck, "Asking". See also section 4.2.2.

[105] On communications between monastic and lay village elites on Coptic protection letters, see 3.2.6. On the Coptic protection letters' connection with governmental policies, see section 5.4.5.

[106] Richter, "Unseren Herrn".

up communication from the villages in the pagarchy arrived at the office of the pagarch in Coptic in the guarantee declarations. Top down directed communication arrived in Greek and Arabic, in the form of the governor's letters on administrative matters, but also in the form of tax demand notes stipulating the taxes expected from a village.[107] The tax demands per individual tax payer are communicated to those tax payers in Coptic-Greek tax demands issued by the pagarch's office. These are not attested in the Basilios archive, but Richter cites as a parallel Coptic-Greek tax demands from Hermopolis, the *metropolis* of the Hermopolite district. Thus, the office of the pagarch or *dux* translated the tax related communications from the governor to the local authorities, by producing relevant documents (individual tax demand notes), but also by using the relevant language (Coptic and/or Greek).[108] I will argue in section 5.2.2 that similar translation mechanisms existed for the government's communications concerning fugitives, which is another subject on which the Arab-Muslim government communicated with the lower strata of the administration in the countryside, and through them with the Egyptian population.

The administration of Early Islamic Egypt was decidedly multilingual, including communications regarding taxes and the control of the tax payer's mobility, which were both domains of the Coptic protection letters. While Arabic, Greek, and Coptic were used in different types of documents and different contexts, the languages were all three used to discuss, instruct, order, and negotiate on those issues.

In this section I have discussed aspects of the administration of Egypt in the seventh and eighth centuries, i.e. the changes in administrative personnel in the countryside and the multilingual nature of the administration. In the next section I focus on the local elites, the social groups with the authority and responsibility to issue Coptic protection letters or intervene for people in need of a protection letter.

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[107] See Delattre, Pintaudi, and Vanthieghem, "Entagion Bilingue," 364-365 for such *entagia* issued by governor 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Marwān. Pagarchs wrote to each other in Coptic as well as in Greek: Boud'hors, "Nouveau Départ," nos. 2 and 3. Most recently, Berkes and Vanthieghem, "Notes" provides an edition of a Coptic letter by Nājid b. Muslim as pagarch of Fayyum to village headmen, see also section 5.2.2.

[108] These documents are attested in Middle Egypt in Greek and Coptic, and in the Fayum in Greek: Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*, 236-237. See also Richter, "Unseren Herrn"; Vanthieghem and Delattre, "Ensemble Archivistique," 128–129; Berkes and Younes, "Trilingual Scribe?" shows how by the end of the 8th century trilingual individual scribes operated in the Fayum.

*1.3 "Local elites"*

The letter I cited at the beginning of this chapter, the protection letter for Jeremias and his children, was issued by Georgios and Aron, who are given the title *meizones* (*meizōn*: village head) in the document, and who were at that time the village heads of Djeme. About Jeremias' role in the village, we know little, only that he has children and that he is a taxpayer of Djeme, who had fled from the village. There is another actor involved in the document, namely the village scribe Aristophanes, who wrote the document. There is no other actor visible in this particular document, but as I will discuss in detail in section 3.2, one or more intermediaries can be involved in the procedure for getting a Coptic protection letter. In this dissertation the "protectors", issuing the protection letters, as well as the "intermediaries", intervening in different ways in the protection letter mechanism, are most central in my analyses. They are the actors who use their power in society to intervene for the protectee, and they belong to the so-called local elites. I examine, mainly through the lens of the protection letters, their relationships both with the protectees and with the government of the province. In this section, I will first discuss terms like "elites", "local elites", and "rural elites". Then I will give an overview of the local elites which appear in the corpus.

*1.3.1. Clarification of the terms "elites", "local elites", "rural elites"*

"Elites" as a formal category denotes socially dominant groups or individuals, whose dominance or "social capital" can come from a variety of resources.[109] These include wealth (including landownership), military power, religious or administrative office, and often a combination of several of these resources.[110] Thus, one way of approaching "elites" is examining who were the socially dominant groups or members within a certain social structure and what were the resources of their power or status. The category of "elites" can be used relatively, as elites can be discerned in a variety of social structures in a variety of historical contexts. While this flexibility of the term can be seen as an advantage, it can also be confusing, when different groups in a given society are considered "elites".[111] Another

[109] For a brief overview of "elites" in sociology and history in the 19th and 20th centuries, see Hagemann, Mewes, and Verkinderen, "Studying," 24-28.

[110] Robinson, *Empire*, defines "elites" in the preface "social groups whose assertions of high status were underpinned by economic and or cultural resources: land, descent, history and piety = the economic, cultural and symbolic "capital". See the "sources of social power" in Mann, *Sources*.

[111] Hagemann, Mewes, and Verkinderen, "Studying".

way of approaching "elites" is to examine how they expressed their status or power in their actions, their interventions in society. Starting from the sources, in this particular case the Coptic protection letters, we recognize the "elites" as those who were able to grant or guarantee the protection to others within the community. Going back to the protection letter for Jeremias, Georgios and Aron's position as village heads allowed them to take the role of protector in that situation and to initiate or reinforce a relationship of protection with Jeremias (and his children). However, while protection relationships are necessarily uneven relationships, we should take into account that individuals considered elites in their community could be on either side of that relationship, and that Jeremias could have been a member of the village elite, even though at the time of the production of his protection letter he seemed to have been in need of protection from the village heads.[112]

In studies on empire and elites, the individuals who issued the Coptic protection letters, or who acted as intermediaries for the protectees, would be considered part of the "local elites", "those whose power, influence, and contacts were mostly concentrated on the level of their own city or rural area."[113] Local elites in Empire Studies context are also understood as the elites of the conquered lands and their successors, who could be integrated in the empire and its administration: "most often, imperial rulers needed the skills, knowledge, and authority of people from a conquered society – elites who could gain from cooperation."[114] In the case of Egypt, as a province of the Islamic Empire, "local elites" in that sense is still a heterogeneous category, including clerical and non-clerical elites, and elites operating on different levels of the administrative and social hierarchy.

In a 2012 publication, Arietta Papaconstantinou discusses the "rural elites" visible in the papyri of late antiquity and the early Islamic period.[115] These "rural elites" are groups and individuals among the inhabitants of villages in more rural areas, but also among the

[112] People belonging to the village elite also appear as protectees in the protection letters: in SB Kopt. V 2273 the protectee (likely a priest) is asked to pay 5 *holokottinoi*, a large sum, which could indicate that he was not destitute. . The content of request letters in Coptic and Arabic, in which the sender presents themselves as a person in need, sometimes reveals the sender as a well-off person: Papaconstantinou, "Women in Need", Sijpesteijn, *Righting Wrongs.*.

[113] Hagemann, Mewes, and Verkinderen, "Studying," 37.

[114] Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*. See Richardson, "The First 'World Event'", 484: "upholding a local identity while colluding with empire". On the role of the village elites of the protection letters in the administration of the province and of the empire, see briefly below section 1.5 and Chapter 5.

[115] Papaconstantinou, "Propriétaires."

inhabitants of the cities in the Nile valley who owned landed properties.[116] These rural elites gained their economic dominance at least partially from agricultural activities, but also through moneylending, and selling and renting out (parts of) houses.[117] The rural elites combine economic, political and social power in their communities. The easiest people in the papyri from the Egyptian countryside to recognize in the papyrological record as rural elites, Papaconstantinou notes, are the local authorities, whose status is visible in the documents which they issue and by their titles mentioned therein.[118] One type of documents issued by these rural elites, at least in the context of the villages, are the Coptic protection letters which form the core of this dissertation. Papaconstantinou discusses a number of characteristics and elements of the social and administrative role of these rural elites which I will highlight in my analyses of the documents related to mechanisms of protection, namely how they act as intermediaries with more central authorities, how they intervene in local disputes, and how they engaged in relationships of social dependency within their communities.

I distinguish three connected groups of rural or local elites in the Coptic protection letters, of which the first two are the most prevalent.[119] The first, and most prominent or most easily recognizable in the protection letters, are the lay elites in the villages, village authorities bearing various titles and functions, as well as other local elites with a certain authority, such as estate managers, possibly connected to a monastery,[120] and soldiers.[121] The village scribes, who were part of the village elite and whose scribal production also included Coptic protection letters,[122] do not appear with a scribal title as actual protectors

[116] About the diminishing difference in size and function between villages and cities in 6th- and seventh-century Egypt, see Papaconstantinou, "Propriétaires", n. 14,with bibliography.

[117] Papaconstantinou, "Propriétaires", for the elites of the village of Djeme, where a large part of the protection letters comes from.

[118] In this article, Papaconstantinou only discusses lay elites.

[119] Different aspects of the nature and the administrative and social roles of the local elites who are the main focus in this dissertation have been studied in a number of publications (see also section 1.5). Wickham, *Framing;* Papaconstantinou, "Propriétaires"; Papaconstantinou, "Great men"; Ruffini, "Village Life"; Ruffini, *Life;* , Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung* (focus on administrative responsibilities) Sijpesteijn, "Landholding"; Sijpesteijn, "Establishing". On clerical and monastic elites: Wipszycka, "Resources"; Palombo, "Christian Clergy".

[120] *O.CrumST* 394, *SB Kopt.* V 2279.

[121] *O.Crum* 113.

[122] In Papaconstantinou, "'Great Men,'" they are described as power actors; Papaconstantinou, "Propriétaires," 409 mentions their prestige in the village and economic status; Cromwell,

or intermediaries in those documents, but were nevertheless involved in the Coptic protection letter mechanism. The second group are clerical and monastic elites, i.e. priests and individuals who held authoritative functions in monastic settings. The third group, namely officials in higher offices, like the pagarch and the dux, who operated in urban centers in the countryside. I mention these here, because while they are only rarely visible in the Coptic protection letters, they do appear – often together with village elites and/or monastic elites – in other documents related to protection mechanisms, such as travel permits and different types of guarantee documents. I compare the form and function of the protection letters with such related documents in Chapter 4. The protection letters, as well as the related documents, show the interconnectedness of these groups of elites. They operate in different but overlapping contexts, and have different but overlapping areas of influence.

I only touch on the Arab-Muslim elites in Fustat and the lay and clerical elites in the urban centers in the countryside in as far as the Coptic protection letters and related documents give evidence of their relationships with the main actors in the Coptic protection letters, i.e. the lay and clerical elites in village and monastic settings. The protection mechanisms and protection relationships expressed by the Coptic protection letters functioned mainly on a local level that mostly did not reach beyond the district boundaries, in contrast with other documents or types of documents which can be compared to the Coptic protection letters, e.g the Arabic and Greek travel permits, which seem to have functioned on a larger geographical scale and in which the intervention of the government in Fustat is much more visible (see section 4.2, especially 4.2.3). Thus, while my analyses of the Coptic protection letters argue that they can be seen as local implementations and adaptations of provincial policies by the local elites, and that they are as such testimonies of the reach of the state in the Egyptian countryside, they also show how the local elites engaged in mechanisms and relationships of protection which functioned more or less independently from provincial administrative structures.[123] In the next section I will discuss the various titles and terms used in the Coptic protection letters to denote the local elites issuing them, and briefly discuss their functions.

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*Recording* discusses the elite status of the Djeme scribe Aristophanes in 6.1. On the village scribes shaping the protection letters see section 3.3.1.

[123] This is the focus of Chapter 5.

### *1.3.2. Rural elites: who appears in the corpus?*

In order to have a clearer view of the function in society of the actors in the Coptic protection letters, we can examine the various titles that accompany their names. However, it should first be noted that in many cases the names of the protector, protectee, or intermediary were not accompanied by any title or another type of identification, e.g. their place of residence or even a patronymic.[124] In many of those cases, however, the documents can be recognized as products of the village administration.[125]

#### *1.3.2.1 Lay elites in the villages*

By far the main group of protectors and intermediaries in the Coptic protection letters are the lay village elites. In the Coptic protection letters in which the protectors or intermediaries are named explicitly with a title indicating their administrative function in their village, those titles are ⲇⲓⲟⲓⲕⲉⲧⲏⲥ (*dioiketès*), ⲗⲁϣⲁⲛⲉ (*lashane*), ⲙⲉⲓⲍⲱⲛ (*meizōn*), ⲁⲡⲉ (*ape*).[126] These all denote functions on various levels of the village administration, with different but overlapping areas of influence (see below). The administrative structure, including titles and number of officials, in late antique and early Islamic Egypt varied regionally.[127] The protection letters are sometimes issued by one village official, but often also by two, three or even four village officials.

The most common title in late antique and early Islamic village administrative documents in general, as well as in the Coptic protection letters, is that of *lashane*, who was in charge of the general administration of the village. One or two individuals were usually the *lashane*, but the office could be carried out by up to four people at the same time, and they could be

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[124] Moreover, due to the fragmentary state of many of the documents (see below, section 1.4), even the names of the actors can be lost. This could be partially due to the fact that the actors were mentioned in areas that easily break off: near the top and near the end of the document (in the address formula and in the signature). By "protector" I mean the party who issues the protection letter, and by "protectee" I mean the party on whose behalf the protection letter is issued. On the terminology I use for various elements in the Coptic protection letters, such as "protector" and "protectee", see section 2.4.

[125] An example is protection letter the Coptic protection letter *SB Kopt.* V 2247, which is issued by 4 men without accompanying titles. The document mentions various taxes and is most likely a product of village administration: see section 4.3.1.1.

[126] The village administration of late antique and Early Islamic Egypt has been examined in detail by Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*, and the following paragraph leans heavily on this publication. For the terms used for village officials in the Arabic papyri, see Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*, 158-159.

[127] Berkes, cited above. See his diagrams of different village administration structures on p. 189, 205 and 206.

in office for several years at a time, which was good for the stability of the village.[128] Especially in Djeme, where many of the extant Coptic protection letters come from, the *lashane* were the general administrators of the village, together with the *ape (*ⲁⲡⲉ pl. ⲁⲡⲏⲩⲉ (*apèue)*, whose function was more related to taxation. A term that is used in the Coptic sources, mostly in those found in the Theban region, to denote the village elites is ⲛⲛⲟⲥ ⲛⲣⲱⲙⲉ (*nnoc nrōme)*, "great men". They were the group among whom the village officials were chosen.[129] The term itself only appears twice in the Coptic protection letters.[130] The areas of responsibility of the village elites included tax assessment and tax collection, but they also judged in disputes and generally had great influence in village disputes and how they are resolved. They are also seen controlling debt prisons in the villages.[131] The areas of responsibility listed above are all related to the protection letters and the village elite's authority as well as motivations to issue such documents, as I will explain in section 5.4. One important aspect of the role of the village officials in society is that they functioned as intermediaries between the local population and government officials. This position came with power and status in the community, but also with responsibilities: the village heads were sometimes held liable, with their own possessions, by the government in Fustat for deficits in the tax revenues from their villages, or for individuals to be punished by the governor.[132]

#### *1.3.2.2 Monastic and clerical elites*

Individuals with clerical or monastic titles also appear in the Coptic protection letters, although less often than the lay village elites discussed above. Protection letters are found in monastic contexts and in some cases they were issued on behalf of monks.[133] Among the protectors and intermediaries in the protection letters we find a bishop, active in the first half of the seventh century, before the Arab conquest, who holds the highest rank among

[128] Berkes, cited above, 175.
[129] Wickham, *Framing*; Papaconstantinou, "'Great Men'".
[130] *SB Kopt.* V 2304 (singular), *SB Kopt.* V 2261 (plural).
[131] Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*, 177-178.
[132] See the letter sent by governor Qurra b. Sharik to the district administrator or pagarch Basilios in Aphrodito: "If you do not find him, send me his son or sons, and if he does not have sons, send me his wife, and if he does not have anyone to stand guarantor for him, send me his village headman." *P.Heid.Arab.* I 4.5-10, cited in Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*, 159, with more examples.
[133] *O.GurnaGórecki* 69, *SB Kopt.* V 2300. On the finding contexts of the protection letters, see section 2.3.1.

the monastic and clerical elites appearing as protectors and intermediaries in the Coptic protection letters.[134] However, also priests and heads of monasteries issued protection letters, and were asked by village officials to issue them. Cecilia Palombo has argued that the involvement of clerical and monastic elites in the production and circulation of Coptic protection letters was part of their active role in the administration of early Islamic Egypt.[135] The clerical and monastic titles that used in the protection letters are *presbuteros* (priest), *archimandrites*,[136] *hegoumenos,*[137] *proestōs,*[138] and probably *prōtos*,[139] (all different titles for heads of monasteries). Honorary titles such as "your paternity" and "Apa", or "Papa" also appear in the Coptic protection letters, indicating a monastic or clerical elite status.[140]

In this section I discussed the actors in focus in this dissertation, the local elites of the seventh and eighth Egyptian countryside. In the next section I turn to the sources which tell us, albeit often fragmentarily, of their interventions, their positions, their roles in society: the papyrological record. In other words, we move on from village heads Georgios and Aron, to the potsherd inscribed by the scribe Aristophanes.

### *1.4 Coptic protection letters, a documentary source*

Georgios and Aron's protection letter for Jeremias, as a source for historical research, is a document, the text of which was inscribed with ink on a potsherd, a fragment of a ceramic vessel reused as a writing surface. Other documents, including protection letters, were written on pieces of papyrus or on flakes of limestone.[141] Because of their Egyptian provenance and their writing support, these documents are considered part of the papyrological record.[142] This section of the chapter addresses some issues that arise when

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[134] Bishop Pesynthios of Coptos, who is asked to issue a protection letter in two letters (see section 3.2.5). On this aspect of the bishop's legal authority, see Dekker, *Episcopal Networks*, 57-58 and 266-267.

[135] Palombo, "Christian Clergy," 125-126.

[136] *P.Ryl.Copt.* 289.

[137] *SB Kopt.* V 2253.

[138] *SB Kopt.* V 2291.

[139] *SB Kopt.* V 2274: l.1 ⲛⲡⲣⲟⲧⲏⲥ. The title was originally interpreted by Till as an abbreviation of *prôtokomètès*, a village official, but Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*, 252, has argued that it should be interpreted in this document as the title for a head of a monastery.

[140] On such titles, see Derda and Wipszycka, "L'emploi".

[141] See Chapter 2. On the materiality of papyri see Bülow-Jacobsen, "Writing"; See also the contributions in Hoogendijk and Van Gompel (eds.), *Materiality*.

[142] In other areas around the Mediterranean papyri have also been preserved in much smaller numbers. For the late antique and early Islamic contest especially the papyri from Nessana in the

using documentary texts, specifically those belonging to the papyrological record, as a source for historical research in general, and more specifically as a source for our understanding of Egypt in the seventh and eighth centuries. Where relevant, I will also discuss the specific issue when it regards the Coptic protection letters in particular.

### 1.4.1 Uneven distribution of the documentation

The first issue that needs to be acknowledged when using papyri as a historical source is that the papyrological record has notable geographical, chronological and social "holes" in it. The papyri that have survived are distributed unevenly. In general, in the wetter area of the Delta and cities which have been populated continuously, like Alexandria, only few papyri have survived. Most papyri were found in areas that were lost to the desert at some point in history. For the seventh and eighth centuries, most Coptic papyri excavated and now preserved in collections come from Western Thebes, Ashmunayn /Hermopolis, Fayyum/Arsinoe, Kòm Ishqàw/Aphrodito, and Aswàn/Syene. However, the majority of the published Coptic documents comes from the Theban region. There are also large dossiers of Coptic documents from Middle Egypt, especially from the important monastic centers at Bawit and Bala'izah. It is important to point out that a combination of Coptic, Greek, Arabic, or multilingual papyri were discovered in most of these areas, also as parts of the same dossier or archive (see below). As I have discussed in section 1.2.3, the three administrative languages of Egypt operated in a multilingual system, even in the Theban region where Arabicization developed later than in other parts of the province. The Coptic protection letters themselves were mostly found in Western Thebes, which includes Jeremias' protection letter.[143] However, the Greek, Arabic and multilingual documents that connect the Coptic protection letters and their actors to the government, were mainly found in Middle Egypt. There, a small number of protection letters and references to them were found, and documents from the Theban area which link explicitly to documents produced in more northern regions of Egypt.[144] Thus, while the geographical distribution of the Coptic protection letters is uneven, and concentrated in Western Thebes, there are connections with documentary production in other regions of Egypt as well.

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Negev desert and from Petra are worth mentioning (check and put in references): *P.Ness* III and P.Petra I-V. On using papyri to write history see in the first place Bagnall, *Reading*.

[143] I will discuss this in more detail in section 2.3.1.

[144] These documents and their relationship to the Coptic protection letters, will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

The documentation is unevenly distributed in other ways as well. The papyri are considered relevant sources for social history because they reflect everyday concerns of individual, "normal" people as opposed to the literary sources' tendency to focus on high-level "important" historical events and people.[145] However, certain groups are definitely favored by the documentation. Monastic and clerical actors are well represented in the edited papyri of seventh and eighth-century Egypt, especially but not only in the Coptic documents. Even on the village scale, local elites such as the village heads of Djeme are much better documented than lower social strata. Women and children play a much less prominent role in the papyri than adult men. Lastly, the papyrological material is notoriously fragmentary in the most literal sense. Jeremias' protection letter is complete, but the majority of the documents used in this dissertation are missing parts of the original text. Holes and tears caused by insects or other destructive sources, smudged or faded ink can make texts very difficult to read. Portions of the original document written on papyrus can be torn or cut off, e.g. for reuse in the past, or for sales on the antiquities market. Discarded documents on ostraca can break into pieces. Lacunae in documentary texts can be completed only with elements of which we already have knowledge. Fortunately, thanks to the relatively large amount of published Coptic protection letters, and our knowledge of the formulas used to write them, editors have often been able to fill certain lacunae in several texts.[146]

### *1.4.2 Problem of dating documents*

A second challenge of the documentary record is the dating of the documents. This is especially relevant for Coptic documents, including the Coptic protection letters.[147] There are two challenges with dating Coptic documents. If they contain a date, it is usually a so-called indiction date, a relative type of dating common in late antique Egyptian documents, indicating the number of the year in a 15 year cycle related to taxation, preceded by the month and the day.[148] Without other information tying the document to a specific timespan, such as the mention of a person which can be dated, the indiction date does not give us

[145] Sundelin, "Introduction," 9.

[146] In Chapter 3 I discuss at length the formulary and the relative uniformity of the protection letters, which makes filling in lacunae possible but not certain.

[147] On Coptic monastic documents having been dated too early, see Palombo, "Christan Clergy", p. xxvi ff.

[148] Bagnall and Worp, *Chronological Systems*; Boud'hors, "Issues".

information about the year in which the document was produced. The Coptic protection letters generally contain an indiction date, which means that they can be dated to a specific date in a number of cases, particularly when they were written by certain scribes from Djeme. [149] The second challenge in dating Coptic documents particularly regards paleography. There are certain developments in the Coptic documentary writing styles which can help indicate a dating to a certain century or a couple of centuries for a given document.[150] This is still quite rough, and moreover, handwriting styles common in earlier documents are also found in documents that were written centuries later, especially when the writer writes in a book hand.[151]

### *1.4.3 Single documents, archives and dossiers*

Another issue to keep in mind when working with papyri is their relationship to other documents. Were they found in the same finding spot, e.g. a jar like the documents of pagarch Flavius Papas from Edfu, together with other documents (archive), were they found in different finding spots but do they refer to the same person, family, or institution (dossier)?[152] Most papyri are actually "single documents", whose connection to other documents is now lost. The people in them often cannot be linked to other people known from other documents. However, the papyrological record of the seventh and eighth centuries contains a number of multilingual archives and dossiers. Important multilingual corpora centered around a *pagarch* or another official in the local administration in the countryside are e.g. those of Senouthios (643-644), Papas (648-688), Flavius Atias (696-703), Basilios (705-721).[153] Documentary corpora of large monastic centers such as those of Bawit and Balai'zah have also been preserved.[154] The dossier of Aristophanes, village scribe of Djeme and the scribe of Jeremias' protection letter, has been studied in detail by

[149] See section 3.3.1. See also Cromwell, *Recording*, 2.4 on the chronology of the Theban Coptic documents in particular.

[150] Boud'hors, "Issues".

[151] E.g., the eighth-century Theban monk and book producer Frange, whose correspondence is edited in *O.Frange*.

[152] On archives and dossiers in the papyrological record, see Vandorpe, "Archives".

[153] Sijpesteijn, "Multilingual archives" discusses these as well as smaller multilingual archives, such asthe archive of headman Menas son of Senouthios with tax documents in Greek and Arabic-Greek, and the small archive of correspondence from Qasr Ibrim in Arabic and Coptic between the Nubian governor and the governor in Egypt.

[154] Palombo, "Christian Clergy", on the role of these monasteries in the administration of post-conquest Egypt, and especially Chapter 2 on these monasteries as archival places.

Jennifer Cromwell.[155] Other than Jeremias' letter, Aristophanes produced at least four more Coptic protection letters. However, the majority of these documents that form the core of this dissertation is not part of an archive or a dossier, but are rather stand alone documents, which usually means that we have less information on their context.[156]

Now that I have briefly discussed some challenges involved in using papyri as a historical source, in the next section I make a remark about a characteristic that is often ascribed to documentary sources, namely that they give us an unmediated view on the past.

### *1.4.4 The "unmediatedness" of documentary papyri*

Documentary sources such as papyri are valued because of a perceived unmediated quality: the papyri reflect situations that happened more or less at the time when they were written (e.g. drawing up a contract, drafting a petition about a grievance), as opposed to literary accounts which were almost always written centuries after the events by an author imposing his own interpretative framework.[157] However, a definition of documentary papyri as accounts of "what really happened" – as opposed to literary texts which are necessarily written through a lens which deforms the facts – is not very fruitful when trying to understand the situation that gave rise to the production of a document, of which the document is just one reflection. E.g., in the case of legal texts such as petitions it has already been argued that they could be "shaped" similarly to narrative texts.[158] Rhetoric also plays an important part in correspondence between higher officials in the capital and local

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[155] Cromwell, *Recording*.

[156] In section 3.3.1 I compare the protection letters produced by the various scribes of Djeme who appear in the Coptic protection letters.

[157] Sundelin, "Introduction," 7. Also Turner, *Greek Papyri*, 127, who puts this approach to documentary papyri in these words: "Those who require writing about everyday experience to be touched and transfigured by art regard non-literary papyri as humdrum, if not downright rubbish; the investigator, however, who is trying to learn of things as they really were will be excited at being put in immediate touch with concrete and vivid facts that have not been interpreted by the mind or imagination of a third party. He will feel something of the fascination of the eavesdropper: the text of 2,000 years ago which he is reading, unless it is a proclamation or public notice, was written to be seen by relatively few eyes, and not to be given publicity. Chance has caused the survival of what in this, as in most civilizations, has been thrown away. The investigator can therefore find evidence all the more valuable for being unselected and unrevised for public view. In this respect papyri are unlike inscriptions, which were designed for public exhibition and consequently have a certain self-consciousness." On the next page he briefly qualifies this statement.

[158] Papaconstantinou, "Hagiography," 2, citing (n. 4) Jean-Luc Fournet, "À propos de *SB* XIV 11856 ou quand la poésie rencontre le document", *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 93 (1993), 223–235.

administrators in the regions, as well as in petitions or more informal requests for justice or help.[159] The Coptic protection letters are quite concise documents and do not often contain phrases outside of a relatively fixed group of formulas and their variations. However, Coptic protection letters were written from a top-down perspective. They were issued by and thus "tell the story" from the point of view of the "protectors", the local authorities who held a certain power in their communities, which included the "protectee" of the protection letter. Moreover, the large majority of letters in which Coptic protection letters were discussed, e.g. requests for protection letters, were exchanged between local authorities who could issue the protection letters and those who intervened for people in need of one, with three published exceptions. As such, again the point of view of the "protectee" is only rarely seen. The Coptic protection letters operated in a reciprocal society, and they expressed and activated social relationships which were not symmetrical. The fact that our documentation was written for the most part from a top-down perspective results in a rather one-sided view of these protection relationships. While my focus in this dissertation is on the role of exactly these local elites who intervene as protectors in the Coptic protection letter mechanism, through the lens of the protection letters, it is important to study the Coptic protection letters not exclusively through the lens of the protectors. Without all parties' perspective, the documents do not grant us access to "what really happened". However, keeping this in mind, and scrutinizing the language of the Coptic protection letters to understand how we can read these documents against the grain instead of taking their words at face value, I will evaluate different aspects of the social relationships at work in the Coptic protection letter mechanism (see especially Chapter 5).

This section has discussed the challenges surrounding using documents such as Jeremias' protection letter as historical sources, which concludes the discussion of the context of the Coptic protection letters. In the last section of this chapter, then, I turn to my approach to these documents in this dissertation.

### *1.5 My approach, what is new?*

This section presents several aspects of my approach to the Coptic protection letters and the research questions I set out in the Introduction. First, I discuss the directions taken by the existing research on the Coptic protection letters, and how this dissertation relates to that (1.5.1). Second, I propose my approach to the categorization of Coptic protection letters

[159] Papaconstantinou, "Rhetoric"; Papaconstantinou, "Women".

(1.5.2). Third, I discuss what I view as the three main functions of the Coptic protection letters (1.5.3). The last two sections introduce my main interests in the protection letters: the social relationships underlying them (1.5.4), and their relevance for understanding the role of the local elites in the administration of the province, and the empire (1.5.5).

### *1.5.1 The existing research on the Coptic protection letters*

Here I briefly survey how the Coptic protection letters have been studied or used as sources for historical research. The existing scholarly research involving the Coptic protection letters falls broadly into two strands. One strand is concerned with the edition or reedition of these documents, and categorizing the large corpus into smaller groups. Because the first scholars who did this were especially interested in the protection letters as legal documents, these first categorizations and (re)editions also involve discussions of legal history, particularly on the protection letters' possible link with older types of legal documents related to asylum, i.e. the Hellenistic *pisteis* and especially the late antique *logoi asulias*, known from Justinian's legal texts. The first main studies are Schiller, "The Coptic ⲗⲟⲅⲟⲥ ⲙⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ documents" in 1933, and by Till, "Koptische Schutzbriefe", in 1938. The latter included 103 texts, divided into 9 categories, with German translations of the Coptic protection letters and a number of other Coptic documents that relate to them in varying degrees. It corrects and adds to Schiller's categorization and discussion. It also features an essay by legal historian Liebesny, precisely on the issue of the protection letters' link with the *logoi asulias*, which he and Till were less inclined to emphasize compared to other studies, as I have discussed in section 1.1.3.1. Till (and Liebesny)'s seminal study now counts as the starting point for the study of the Coptic protection letters, and many publications follow them in the use of the term "Schutzbrief" or a direct translation thereof.[160] However, the influence of Till and Liebesny's study reaches further than the name given to the documents: Till's interpretation of the characteristic formula ⲉⲓⲥ ⲡⲗⲟⲅⲟⲥ ⲙⲡⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲛⲧⲟⲟⲧⲕ (*eis plogos mpnoute ntootk*) as "Here is the promise, by God, for you" is commonly accepted.[161] Delattre, "Les lettres de protection", in 2007, updated the corpus, with a list of protection letters published since Till, including (re)editions of documents, and proposed some changes to Till's categorization, without going into the legal historical

[160] Schiller uses "logos mpnoute documents", which is less interpretative than "Schutzbriefe". Not all scholars use (a translation of) Schutzbrief, see section 2.1.2.
[161] Exceptions in 2.1.2.

discussion. He also added to the corpus of Coptic protection letters with reeditions and editions of documents. Furthermore, editions of protection letters appear within larger thematic corpora, e.g. as part of the documents belonging to a certain collection, area, or scribe,[162] or are published in small groups.[163] Most recently, 89 protection letters have been collected in *SB Kopt.* V, including a large number of texts from Till, "Koptische Schutzbriefe", with corrections by editor Monika Hasitzka. Thus, the protection letters have received attention in the form of editions, reeditions, or as sources for the study of the legal history of late antique and early Islamic Egypt. They have been categorized into smaller, mainly formal, categories.

A second strand of the scholarship involving the Coptic protection letters has been using them as sources for the administrative history of late antique and early Islamic Egypt, mainly as the protection letters relate to travel and the restrictions thereof by the Arab-Muslim government.[164] The Coptic protection letters are documents related to fugitives and taxation, two aspects of the administration of the Arab-Muslim government which have received some attention from scholars, also because they are prominent in the papyrological record. The protection letters have also been discussed in the context of the responsibilities of local authorities.[165]

This dissertation builds on the work that has been done, but aims at a more inclusive approach to the Coptic protection letters, with a stronger emphasis on the social mechanisms and relationships which they reflect. The Coptic protection letters serve as a way into understanding the functioning of the local, specifically rural, elites and their relationships with the local village population and with the government. The protection mechanisms I am examining of course constitute just a small part of village life, let alone the Islamic Empire, but they are, just like the Coptic protection letters themselves, at the crossroads of important, interrelated aspects of society, namely law and custom, administration, and social relationships. If we think back to Jeremias' protection letter I cited at the beginning of this

[162] E.g., respectively, *P.Stras.Copt.* 66, *O.Marc* 322, Cromwell, *Recording village life*, 245-247, no. 9.

[163] Boud'hors, "Coptic Ostraca".

[164] Delattre, "Checkpoints"; Schaten, "Reiseformalitäten"; Selander, "koptische Schutzbriefe"; Selander, "Travel".

[165] Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*, 176-177 on *lashanes*; Dekker, *Episcopal Networks*, 57-58 and 266-267, on the responsibilities of bishop Pesynthios of Coptos; Schmelz, *Kirchliche Amtsträger*, on clerical elites.

chapter, I believe there are three main facets to the document. Jeremias' protection letter was, firstly, a legal document, a text which was signed, which contained specific formulae, and which pertained to Jeremias' taxes and the administration of the village. This facet of the protection letters, its content and form, has received most attention in the past. However, secondly, Jeremias' document was a letter, in the sense that it was a communication between participants in an (asymmetrical) relationship of protection: the tax evader and his children, and the village administrators who had the power to harass him, but also to grant him amnesty. And thirdly, it was a material object, which had to be produced by and delivered to the relevant parties, as part of the protection letter mechanism. In this dissertation all three of these aspects are integrated in my analyses.

### *1.5.2 Categorization and embeddedness*

This dissertation does not analyze the Coptic protection letters per formal subcategory as they were set out by Till, and amended by Delattre. Within Till's and Delattre's categories, the texts can still differ quite a lot in terms of structure and content, and often certain texts from one category feature characteristics similar to those of another category, making the boundaries often more constricting than useful. I discuss the existing categorizations and the issues listed above in more detail in section 2.1. Generally I avoid rigid categorization of the Coptic protection letters and instead opt for a more flexible analysis of the corpus as a whole as well as the separate texts. There are multiple advantages to this flexible, "organic" approach to the corpus, and in what follows I discuss the two main advantages.

The concept of "family resemblance", made popular by Wittgenstein, is useful as a way to understand the corpus and its boundaries.[166] According to this approach, in any given category the elements in it are characterized by a network of overlapping similarities. The separate elements do not all have to contain specific characteristics to be considered part of the category, but rather these characteristics run as strands through the category.[167] As the Coptic protection letters are characterized by a very high degree of variability in their structure and content, this approach is appropriate. I apply this concept of "family resemblance" on two scales. On a smaller scale, it helps me to keep the category of Coptic protection letters open, while still being able to define what are the formal conditions to call

[166] This concept is also used to describe the connections between Fatimid state documents in Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 84; and Arabic letters of request on papyrus in Sijpesteijn, "Righting Wrongs".
[167] Wittgenstein uses the category of games as an illustration in his explanation of "family resemblance" in *Philosophical Investigations*, §66-68.

a document a Coptic protection letter. In section 3.1.1, I point to a constellation of formulaic elements which in my opinion form the core of the Coptic protection letter, as they are shared by the largest number of documents. The *eis plogos mpnoute ntootk* formula, or some variant of it, is chief among them. However, not all of the formulaic elements need to be part of the document for the document to be considered a Coptic protection letter. Thus, the category is formally defined, but not restricted. On a larger scale, this fluid approach of "family resemblance" also encourages the inclusion in my analyses of Greek, Arabic, and other types of Coptic documents which are not considered protection letters but which share certain formal or functional characteristics with them, such as safe conducts, guarantees, private letters, etc. Rather than studying the Coptic protection letters as a certain type of document functioning in a certain way in a certain context, I look for and examine the ties which they have with other (types of) documents. This way, I examine the mechanisms and relationships of protection underlying the documents across documentary types, languages and administrative, geographical, and social contexts. Studying the Coptic protection letters as elements in a much larger network, I highlight how they can help us understand how Early Islamic Egyptian society was woven together.[168]

Not examining the Coptic protection letters as defined by their membership of a certain formal subcategory has a second advantage. It allows me to group and analyze the documents along other lines, which can be related to form, but also content. E.g. in Chapter 3, I define different types of expressions of protection featured in the documents (section 3.2.1), and I draw a formal comparison of the protection letters written by the scribes of Djeme, individually and as a group (3.3.1). In Chapter 4, I make use of another way to group and analyze the protection letters, and tie them into the network of "protection documents", and that is to focus on the kind of protection they are offering, i.e. is the protection related to legal or administrative issues, what are the addressees of the protection letters protected from? The social or administrative function of the people involved in the protection letters, and the related other protection documents, as well as the contexts in which these people operated (e.g. village heads, monastic authorities, officials on different levels of the administration etc.) are also useful points of departure for bringing together documents and comparing them, as it helps to understand the social relationships of the world in which this

[168] The publications mentioned in note 164 do this to a certain degree. This approach is especially prominent here in Chapters 4 and 5.

network of documents was produced, which is more in focus in Chapters 4 and 5. This multidimensional way of grouping, comparing and analyzing the fluid corpus allows me to focus on the different functions of these documents in society and the mechanisms underlying their production and circulation. I explain my approach to the functions of the Coptic protection letters in the next paragraph.

### *1.5.3 Functions of the protection letters in society*

When it has dealt with their function, the scholarship on Coptic protection letters has mainly examined, in greater or lesser detail, two functions of these documents: as legal documents (guarantees) providing a certain amnesty for debtors, and as a type of safe conduct in a context of policies of restriction of travel by the government. I define the general function of the Coptic protection letters as instruments to solve problems in village contexts. I will emphasize how this problem-solving goes in different directions: the issuance of a protection letters can solve a problem for the party receiving the protection letter, but also for the party issuing it. These problems and their solutions are related to the two interrelated domains of law and administration, with taxation playing an important role. However, there is a third dimension to the purpose of the protection letters, and that is their social function in the milieus in which they operated. The protection letters activated social relationships between the various people involved in their production and circulation. My emphasis on the social function of the Coptic protection letters is related to my interest in the "social role" of the rural elites.[169] This key concept of sociology is defined as "patterns or norms of behavior expected from the occupant of a particular position in the social structure".[170] I examine the rural elites' protective interventions in village life, e.g. through the issuance of protection documents, as a part of their social role. This focus on the social aspects of village life in late antiquity and early Islam, based on documentary sources and with a particular focus on local elites, is not new.[171] However, the Coptic protection letters specifically have not been subject to an elaborate analysis in that light until now.

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[169] This is similar to the approach to Coptic legal documents mentioned by Richter, "Coptic Papyri".
[170] Burke, *History*, 47-50, esp. 47.
[171] On local elites' mechanisms of dependency and power in village life: cf. Ruffini, "Village Life"; Ruffini, *Life*; Papaconstantinou, "'Great Men'"; Papaconstantinou, "Propriétaires"; Papaconstantinou, "Hagiography"; Wilfong, *Women;* Sijpesteijn, "Loyal and knowledgeable supporters".

Emphasizing the social functions, closely intertwined with legal and administrative functions, of the documents, and the people involved in them, begs the question of how they fitted into larger societal mechanisms and systems. The paradigm of the opposition between reciprocity and solidarity has been used to examine social relationships in medieval Egypt.[172] How this might be of use when thinking about the way Coptic protection letters, and related protection documents, operated in society, will be the subject of the next paragraph.

### *1.5.4 Solidarity, reciprocity, and patronage*

Relationships based on reciprocity involve the exchange of goods, services and favours, which can be material or symbolic, whereby reciprocating is obligatory. These are personal relationships that can be between equals but are often between people of inequal power or status, and the content of the exchanges depends on the power differential in the relationship, whereby "[t]he most powerful members of the group generally offer protection and economic or other support to its weakest members, in exchange for various forms of services."[173] In systems based on reciprocity, the individual is more important than the group. Patronage relationships are part of reciprocity based systems.[174] In solidarity based systems, on the other hand, group belonging is more important than individual interests. The solidarity or group belonging is based on a unifying idea such as a shared ideology, e.g. religion. In a solidarity system you are bound to every member of the group, even if you do not have any other relationship with them. Reciprocity and solidarity can be seen as opposite ends of a spectrum which coexist in any "real" society.[175]

The different kinds of rural patronage which existed in late antique Egypt have been examined by Lopez through his analysis of the sermons of Shenoute of Atripe, abbot of a group of three monasteries located near the city of Panopolis, in southern Egypt, during the

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[172] Rustow, "Patronage"; Papaconstantinou, "Hagiography". Their approach follows Schwartz, *Were the Jews?* My discussion of this paradigm in the next paragraph is based on these sources. However, the concepts of solidarity and reciprocity as lenses through which to understand societies go back to Emile Durkheim (*The Division of Labour in Society*, 1893) and Marcel Mauss (*The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 1924) respectively.

[173] Papaconstantinou, "Hagiography," 15.

[174] A classic study on reciprocal relationships and patronage in the Islamic world is by Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*.

[175] This coexistence can create tension, as e.g. shown in the case studies by Schwartz, *Were the Jews?* and Rustow, "Patronage".

first half of the fifth century.[176] Rich and powerful landowners could become rural patrons, providing "rural clients with a protection that may take multiple and diverse forms: loans, help with irrigation, work opportunities, access to land tenancy, contacts with the powerful, protection from the demands of the state and other landowners (taxes, rents, liturgies), and—crucially in a late Roman context—legal protection at court."[177] However, monasteries also sought to engage in patronage relationships, and the tensions in which this rivalry resulted are palpable in Shenoute's sermons: while Shenoute considered his own patronage of the population as "care for the poor", the patronage offered by his rivals, the rich landowners, was "exploitation".[178]

In his comparative historical study, *Framing the Middle Ages*, Chris Wickham has argued, based on arguments by Patricia Crone about the effects of Arab-Muslim rule on existing networks of patronage, that when Egypt became a province of the Islamic empire "patronage and all the other complex mediations of the Roman world were much less available in Umayyad and 'Abbāsid society". Because the Arabs brought their own patronage system of walā', he argues, you could only be part of a patronage network by converting and becoming a mawlā.[179] However, forms of local patronage still existed in the eighth century. E.g., Arietta Papaconstantinou has defined the society of the eighth-century Theban area as "a reciprocity based group with a strong culture of patronage and obligation", in the context of her analysis of the child donation documents of the Saint Phoibammon monastery.[180] On the other hand, the village societies of the late antique and early Islamic Egyptian countryside also seem to have included elements of solidarity. While warning us that the idea of a "Christian community of Egypt" as we see it in the medieval literary sources, is not visible in the documentary sources, Arietta Papaconstantinou argues that "in the few cases where a sense of community does emerge, it is invariably the village",

[176] Lopez, *Shenoute*, Chapter 3.
[177] Lopez, *Shenoute*, 48.
[178] Lopez, *Shenoute*, 49.
[179] Wickham, *Framing*, 143. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 214-225 gives an overview patronage mechanisms in late antique Egypt. My discussion on patronage in these paragraphs does not concern *walā'*, the Arab-Muslim patronage system, in which non-Arabs non-Muslims could enter by converting. It was both a social phenomenon and legal institution. For the different aspects of *walā'*, see the articles collected in Bernards and Nawas, *Patronate*; Rustow, "Formal".
[180] Papaconstantinou, "Hagiography".

pointing to documentary sources in which a village seems to act as a whole.[181] Moreover, she points to "village solidarities", which led villagers to hide and protect fugitives, although they risked a fine that was twice as high as the fine for the fugitives themselves.[182] Of course, it is possible that behind this "village solidarity" was a pre-existing relationship based on reciprocity, and that the people hiding and protecting fugitives were already associates of the fugitives, who might have had to reciprocate the favor. The act of protection may have even sparked the reciprocity relationship.

Do the protection letters reflect a form of local patronage, or more broadly a social exchange based on reciprocity? Or do they reflect solidarity alliances? Marina Rustow offers a definition of what she calls the "informal" type of patronage to be found in medieval Islamicate societies, which I find useful here: "using one's influence, power, knowledge or financial means on behalf of someone else, with an eye toward benefiting both that person and oneself at the same time." This type of patronage can be engaged in by rulers, but also by "village big men".[183] As I mentioned above, I consider the Coptic protection letters to be problem-solving instruments which had the capacity to benefit both parties involved. Thanks to the protection letter, the addressee can return to his home without fear of punishment. This letter was in its turn produced because of the power of the local authority, and their responsibilities in the administration. The favor they are asking is for the addressee to generally come home and take up their role in village life, in many cases contributing a partial payment, which directly or indirectly might solve a problem for the local authority, in terms of tax revenue or (agricultural) labor. This in turn helps to strengthen the local authority's position in the administration and the village community. I will elaborate on this point in section 5.4.

On the other hand, we might ask if there is some form of local solidarity at play in the way these documents operated, by which belonging to a certain village community forged such a strong tie that tax evaders and fugitives could receive amnesty from their village heads or monastery leaders? Villages as a whole, or rather a group of village representatives, could issue a protection letter, and in some protection letters the issuing party promises to not ask

[181] Papaconstantinou, "Great men". It has been argued that the terms for "village community" (*koinon, koinotès)* indicate the authoritative elite group of the village rather than the whole community, e.g. in the so-called communal tax agreement P.CLT 6: Cromwell, *Recording* 90-91, Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung* 171-172.

[182] Papaconstantinou, "Great men", based on the Qurra-Basilios correspondence.

[183] Rustow, "Formal". The formal type of patronage in her analysis is *walā'* (see above).

anything from the addressee, exempting them from payment of taxes or a (tax) debt. Still, also in these cases the return of the villager could have benefits for the authority issuing the document not related to tax revenue, but rather to labor or even social issues, e.g. through the return of a family member to their family. Ties of reciprocity are much easier to recognize in the Coptic protection letter mechanism than ties of solidarity, as I will discuss in section 5.4.3.

Did the protection letters confirm or create ties of dependency between the parties? In other words, did the addressee owe something, a service, a favor, to the issuing local authority, other than their return to the village and their role therein? It is difficult to answer these questions, as the documents themselves do not directly indicate it. While definite answers to the questions asked here might not be within reach, the concepts of solidarity and reciprocity as systems underlying protective interventions are useful to try to understand the social role of the rural elites in their local context. In the next paragraph, I discuss how I move beyond this local context, and use the Coptic protection letters and related documents to examine the role of the rural elites in Egypt as a province of the caliphate, and in the caliphate itself.

### *1.5.5 Place of the rural elites in the empire*

My multidimensional approach to the functions of the protection documents, on the crossroads of the legal, the administrative, and the social, leads to an examination of what were or could be the different motives of a member of the local rural elite to issue a protection letter in a general sense, and why they would issue a specific protection letter. These motives are related to the local elites' relationships with the local village population as well as with the government, to the responsibilities and role of these elites in the administration of the province as well as in their own communities. But these motives are also related to the position of the rural elite in the empire at large. Recent insights and concepts from Empire Studies will be underlying my analysis particularly in section 5.4. I will examine whether the protection letters can be seen as reflecting the position of the rural elites as "stakeholders in empire".[184] In their analysis of the Spanish colonial state in America as a stakeholder model, Grafe and Irigoin argue that local elites had an active interest in the success and expansion of the empire, in large part because they had a stake in

[184] Grafe and Irigoin, "Stakeholder Empire". See also Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*, 13; Antunes and Polónia, *Beyond Empires*.

both collection and expenditure of taxes. I will try to understand the relationship between the interests of the rural elites to the interests of the empire and its representatives.

The ties that bound the rural elites the together with other actors in the society and administration of the province of Egypt and eventually the empire is the main subject of Chapter 5. I argue that the whole administrative apparatus at work in Egypt, with its Arab-Muslim *amīrs* and its "local" *dioiketeis* and *lashanes* was an integrated system in which all different actors contributed, not always necessarily consciously, to keep the Islamic Empire running. Actors of different religious, ethnic, social communities were tied together in the same administrative structures and knew how to work within these structures to integrate the demands of empire with their own goals. However, administrative and social hierarchy, a dichotomy between (new) rulers and subjects was both a political construct and a lived reality in day-to-day situations.[185] Managing "difference" was one of the main tasks of an empire in order to be successful.[186] It is more fruitful, though, to study these different actors, and their actions and motives, as parts of the same world, not working in isolation.[187] This can help us to move away from thinking about this world in opposed categories such as Muslims and Christians, Fustat and countryside, official and unofficial languages and documents, Arabic/Greek and Coptic, but rather as an integrated system in which different actors had sometimes aligned and sometimes different or opposed interests.[188] Moreover, I favor a vertical rather than horizontal perspective on the history of Empire: rather than studying the society of early Islamic Egypt as a layered cake of social strata, I will examine it through the actions and communications of "people pushing and tugging on relationships with those above and below them, changing but only sometimes breaking the lines of authority and power".[189] This holistic approach to the administration and society of Egypt

[185] While we cannot know for sure people's day-by-day social experiences, the papyrological evidence seems to suggest that this dichotomy was rather felt on a socio-political (rulers vs subjects) rather than a religious (Muslims vs Christians) level: Cromwell, "Religious Expression".

[186] Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*; Lavan, Payne, and Weisweiler, *Cosmopolitanism*.

[187] While this dissertation focuses on actors and the mechanisms which they employ to work within a structure or system, rather than on social networks, documentary sources such as papyri have proven to be an excellent source base for social network analysis, see e.g. Ruffini, *Social Networks*; Dekker, *Episcopal Networks*. In 2015, the Leiden Papyrological Institute organized the international conference "Papyri and Social Networks" (Renate Dekker, Cisca Hoogendijk, Mattias Brand).

[188] This becomes especially important when some of these lines become more blatantly blurred, e.g. in the gradual processes of Arabicisation and Islamicisation of the Egyptian province. See also Legendre, "Neither Byzantine?"

[189] Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*, 14.

as a province of an Islamic Empire, is also related to my comments on the advantage of tying the Coptic protection letters to other documents with which they share a "family resemblance". When we embrace the combined evidence of the documents in the three administrative languages of Islamic Egypt: Arabic, Coptic, and Greek, rather than dividing the extant documentary sources into official documents in Arabic and Greek, and unofficial in Coptic, we can see this integrated system reflected in them.