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Protective interventions by local elites in early Islamic Egypt

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Chapter 3: Patterns of Protection

This Chapter's overarching goal is to provide answers to my first set of research questions: *Can the Coptic protection letter be considered an institution of village life? In other words, was a Coptic protection letter a result of a routine or rather an ad-hoc procedure? Can we identify patterns in their production (including their language) and circulation?* The first part of the chapter examines the formulary of the Coptic protection letters in detail, in order to ascertain whether from their language they could have reasonably been recognized as a specific document type, and in which ways/whether they could be recognized as instruments of protection in particular. Therefore, the first section of this chapter individuates the core formulas, or rather formula types, of the Coptic protection letter (3.1.1), and I discuss four ways in which the protection letters express or reflect protective interventions within the Coptic protection letter mechanism (3.1.2). Protective interventions are expressed through 1. negative promise clauses, 2. positive promise clauses, including 3. phrases promising conversations and agreements, 4. specific phrases reflecting steps in the procedure to obtain a protection letter.

The second part of the chapter builds directly onto this discussion of the formulary, and examines in detail the procedure to obtain a Coptic protection letter. The protection letters have been called products of "routine procedure",³¹⁰ but my analyses show that there was not a routine procedure to obtain a Coptic protection letter. There could be several different people, letters, and conversations involved, which is again reflected in the language of the documents. I discuss four main aspects of the procedures that were in place when someone needed a protection letter: The presence of intermediaries (3.2.1); The various roles of intermediaries (3.2.2); Oral interactions as negotiations (3.2.3); Logistics of the protection letter procedure (3.2.4); The interaction and cooperation between village and clerical elites in these procedures, with particular attention to the two letters in the corpus addressed to bishop Pesynthios in the early seventh century (3.2.5).

The third part of the chapter links the language of the protection letters to the protection letter mechanism in the villages. Two sections will examine the relationship between patterns of formulary and unique phrases, the universal and the exceptional, in these documents. The first, as a case study, compares the protection letters written and

³¹⁰ Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*, 177 and n. 49.

signed by the village scribes of Djeme (including Jeremias' protection letter cited in Chapter 1) (3.3.1). The second examines more closely references to the particular situation at hand in the protection letters (3.3.2). The last section, building on the findings of the previous sections, argues that the Coptic protection letters can be seen as a social institution of village life (3.3.3): they were a recognizable type of document, often produced by the village administrative apparatus, and there are recurring patterns in the procedure to obtain a protection letter. However, importantly, their contents were in part determined by the specific circumstances of each case, and there was not a streamlined and fixed process in terms of how they could be requested and circulated, and who would request or be approached, who would issue, write, and circulate.

3.1 The protection letters as recognizable instruments of protection

3.1.1 The core formulae

Was a protection letter recognizable as a specific document? The material and visual aspect of the documents does not favor recognizability. The writing support (mostly ceramic shards or limestone flakes, but also small pieces of papyrus) and the visual layout, or apparent lack of an standardized, document-specific layout, make them look very similar to other types of Coptic documents, like private letters or tax-receipts.³¹¹ Their recognizability lies in their formulae. This section will focus on those formulae, particularly the ones that were essential to write a protection letter.

“Although some standard formulae survive, the text contains some unusual features...”³¹² This is a recurring remark in editions of protection letters. Editors note again and again that the document in question contains standard phrases or formulae of the documentary genre, or is clearly recognizable as a protection letter, but that the text also contains uncommon features.³¹³ Indeed, no two protection letters are exactly the same, in terms of which formulae or variants of the formulae are used or in which order.

However, a few formulae constitute the core of the protection letter. Their (almost) universal use in the documents shows that they are essential to the genre. First, and very

³¹¹ Although they are generally short documents, the length of the protection letters varies, which they have in common with (private) letters more than with tax-receipts.

³¹² Cromwell, *Recording*, 245 on O.BM EA 44848.

³¹³ See also, e.g.: “While the upper part follows the **usual formulaic** expressions of such kinds of texts, the expression of agreement by the two mentioned officials contains a disjunction (ll. 1–3) that **seems less common**.” oTorino no 17 (142); “Le formulaire présente ici **plusieurs traits inhabituels**”: *O.Saint-Marc* 322. (both my emphasis)

generally, there are two elements of the formulary that are present in all of these documents, taking into account only the texts that are complete: some form of the *εις παλογος (μηνΟΥτε) ντοοτκ*, *eis plogos mpnoute ntootk*, formula and one or more promise clauses.³¹⁴ The *εις παλογος (μηνΟΥτε) ντοοτκ* formula can open the document (often preceded by a cross) or comes after a more letter-style opening.³¹⁵ In second place, most of the documents contain a signature of the protector and an instruction clause. When the document opens with the *εις παλογος (μηνΟΥτε) ντοοτκ* formula, rather than a letter-style opening, the protection letter usually contains the signatures of the protectors.³¹⁶ The signature can be omitted when there is another mention or claim of authority or validity.³¹⁷ Signatures of the protectors were evidently not necessary to draw up a protection letter deemed valid.

The instruction clause does appear in most (complete) protection letters, but is conspicuously absent in some, which has even caused those to be grouped in a special category in previous studies. As I have mentioned in section 2.1.3, while Till only saw them as formally deviant, Delattre argues that they serve a different function, namely that they are addressed to people who are not in fact fugitives, but rather prospective travelers, the protection letter serving as their travel permit, and I believe that they mainly serve to record tax exemptions (see below 4.1.1).³¹⁸

³¹⁴ On my use of the terms “instruction clause”, “promise clause”, “limitation clause”, “exception clause”, “protectee”, “protectors”, “intermediary”, used in this chapter and the following chapters, see section 2.4. On the *εις plogos mpnoute ntootk* formula, see 1.5.1 and 2.1.

³¹⁵ This letter-style opening, which functions as an internal address, takes on different forms, but usually contains the names of the protector (senders) as well as the protectee (addressee).

³¹⁶ There are exceptions to this rule, of course, as is so characteristic of the Coptic protection letters. E.g., *SB Kopt.* V 2272 starts with the *εις παλογος (μηνΟΥτε) ντοοτκ* formula, and ends with a what in a letter would be an external address, rather than the signatures of the protectors: “*εις παλογος μηνΟΥτε | ντοοτκ νγει ερι | εκηφακ μεκηφακ | νγεωκ επεκμα | τας νανδρεας | ζιτην μωυσης | μη θεοκzis*: “Here you have the promise by God. Come to me and settle (the case) with me. Not settling, go to your place. Give to Andreas from Mouses and Theoxis.”

³¹⁷ E.g. clauses such as: “so that you do not doubt, we drew up this promise and we sign it” and variants, or “For your security we drew up this promise for you: it is valid and effective in every place it will be shown”: *O.GurnaGorecki* 69. The Coptic protection letters which open with an internal address of the style *παπα NN (+ title) παρκαδαι νNN*: from NN who writes to NN, do not contain signatures, although they do contain a mention of drawing up or signing the document. Cromwell, *Recording*, 164-165, 181, observes this for the protection letters written by the Djeme scribe Aristophanes.

³¹⁸ Delattre, “Lettres”.

These core formulas were not only used in protection letters addressed to protectees, but also in letters between intermediaries and protectors. These letters use the terms “*logos*” (here translated as “promise”) or “*logos mpnoutē*” (“promise (made) by (invoking) God”) to indicate protection letters addressed to the protectee. These expressions echo the opening formula: *eis plogos mpnoutē ntootk*. Moreover, often the contents of the intended protection letter were given, which could include an instruction clause or a promise clause.³¹⁹ These clauses are then written using the third person (“we will not harm him”), instead of the second person (“we will not harm you”).

The fact that we can identify a set of core formulas for the Coptic protection letters is one indication that they functioned as a recognizable instrument employed repeatedly in certain types of situations, which usually involved someone who was stranded away from home. The combination *logos* formula and promise clause makes them recognizable, and in second instance the instruction clause also functions as an identifier. The authority signature was important too, but is a characteristic shared by other documentary types, such as legal documents and tax-receipts.³²⁰ In the following section I will continue paying attention to the formulary of the protection letters, focusing particularly on the various formulae reflecting protective interventions, in order to ascertain to what extent and in which way the documents could be recognized as a mechanism of protection. In the first place these are the promise clauses, which I have identified as one of the most important parts of the protection letter formulary. In second place these are expressions which are related to the protection letter procedure: the interventions through which the documents were requested and circulated.

3.1.2 Protective documents: expressions of protection

The Coptic protection letters never mention any Coptic words that are explicitly related to protection. However, the first editors of these documents recognized them as protective documents, and that identification could only have been caused by their interpretation of the

³¹⁹ E.g. *O.Crum VC* 64, ll. 3-8: “You have written to me concerning Sabinos the camelherder, to issue a *logos* (promise) for him and for his camel, that he comes to his house. So here is the promise by God for him and his camel, that he comes to his house ⲉⲡⲉⲓⲁⲛ ⲁⲧⲉⲧⲛⲥⲁⲓ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲉⲧⲃⲉ ⲥⲁⲃⲓⲛⲟⲥ | ⲡⲁⲛⲁⲛⲕⲁⲙⲟⲩⲗ ⲉⲧⲣⲁⲧⲥ ⲗⲟⲑⲟⲥ ⲛⲁⲩ ⲙⲛⲡⲉⲩ | ⲕⲁⲙⲟⲩⲗ ⲛⲓⲩⲉⲓ ⲉⲓⲣⲁⲓ | ⲉⲡⲓⲛⲓ ⲧⲉⲛⲟⲩ ⲉⲓⲥ | ⲡⲗⲟⲑⲟⲥ ⲙⲛⲡⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲛⲧⲟⲧⲩ ⲙⲛⲡⲉⲩⲕⲁⲙⲟⲩⲗ | ⲛⲩⲉⲓ ⲉⲧⲣⲁⲓ ⲉⲡⲉⲩⲛⲓ ⲉⲡⲉⲩⲛⲓ ⲛⲩⲣ ⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉⲡⲉⲩⲕⲁⲓⲙⲟⲩⲗ. As in this case, some letters “quoting” a protection letter would have functioned as a *logos* itself: see section 3.2.1.

³²⁰ Richter, “Koptische Rechtsurkunden”.

language of the documents. I see four different ways of expressing protection in the Coptic protection letters. First, the promise clauses mention the punishment from which and the people from whom the protectee is protected. Second, more affirmative promise clauses. Relatedly, affirmative promise clauses indicating conversations and settling disputes. Third, expressions related to the document itself: to issue it, to write it, to draw it up, to respect it (by the intermediary). These expressions reflect acts of protection or protective interventions by protectors and intermediaries: it is not only the document which protects you, but also the person who decides or promises to issue it for you or respect its stipulations for you.³²¹

3.1.2.1 *Promise clauses: negative*

The promise clauses in the protection letters are mostly written in negation sentences.³²² They use Negative Future III, which conveys a meaning of promise in Coptic. The verbs used always have the protectee as an object, be it directly or through a preposition. They can be quite general, related to an unspecified evil or harm (see below). Another verb commonly used is “will not ask of you”, which in the documents is often explicitly related to money or taxation.³²³ Other commonly used verbs designate an action fitting in a legal context: “will not prosecute you”, and “will not arrest you”.³²⁴ Several documents use other verbs to phrase the protection, but in one case the verb used can be associated with the general idea of doing harm,³²⁵ while in the other cases the verb indicates a link with either taxation specifically, or money/property more generally.³²⁶ In one document the protector promises the protectee that he will not “hit him this time”. That this was an exceptional way of phrasing the protection letter is highlighted by the fact that this particular promise was

³²¹ As we see in the case of the man who was issued a logos by two village officials but they violated it: *SB Kopt.* V 2286.

³²² See also section 2.4.2.

³²³ “to ask”: χNOY . E.g., *O.CrumVC* 10, ll. 5-6: $\chi\text{INH}\chi\text{OYK} \mid \text{ΓΕΛΛ} \text{ΖΝΤΕΡΝΠΕ ΤΕΤΑΡΤΕ}$: “that I will not ask anything of you in this fourth year”.

³²⁴ “to prosecute”: ΠΑΡΑΓΕ (παράγειν), in 26 cases. “to arrest/seize”: $\Delta\text{ΜΑΖΤΕ}$: e.g. *O.CrumVC* 11; ϮΩΠΕ in *SB Kopt.* II 916 and *SB Kopt.* V 2292.

³²⁵ *SB Kopt.* V 2254: ll. 5-6: $\chi\text{Ε ΕΝΕΝΥΓΩΡΕΙ ΝΛΑΥΕ} \mid \text{ΝΡΩΜΕ ΕΠΑΡΕΧΘΕ ΜΜΟΚ}$: “We will let no man mistreat/transgress against you”.

³²⁶ E.g. *SB Kopt.* V 2261: “to assign taxes”: $\text{ΝΝΕΝ} \mid \text{ΚΑΔΑΥ ΕΙ} \mid \text{CΩP} \mid \dots \mid \text{ΛΑΔΥ Ν} \mid \text{ΖΩΒ ΕΒΟΛ} \mid \text{ΕΙΧΩΚ}$: “we will not allow anyone to assign anything to you”;

SB Kopt. V 2274b, l. 4:

$\text{†ΝΑΚΩ ΛΑΔΥ ΝΖΩΒ ΔΝ ΔΧΙ ΔΡΟΚ}$: “I will not let anything be taken from you” (and 2274c, l. 4: $\text{ΚΟ ΛΑΔΥ ΝΖΩΒ ΔΧΕΙ ΕP}[\text{ΟΚ...}]$).

added almost as an afterthought, after the date. Dates generally occur at or near the end of the documents.³²⁷

The party who “will not” do any of the things can be the protector himself (or themselves). E.g., *SB Kopt.* III 1368, the protectors, the lashanes of Djeme promise: **ⲭⲉ ⲛⲛⲉⲛⲉⲣ ⲛⲉⲑⲟⲟⲩ ⲛⲁⲕ**: “that we will not do you harm” (literally, “that we will not do evil to you”), and in *SB Kopt.* V 2239, the protector promises: **ⲭⲉ ⲉⲛⲉⲛⲁⲣⲁⲓⲛⲁⲣⲁⲓⲛⲁⲣⲁⲓ ⲙⲙⲟⲕ**: “that I will not prosecute you”.

Thus, often the protectee is actually protected by the document against actions of the protector.³²⁸ However, in some clauses the protectee is protected against a more general source of harm, literally anyone. In those cases the promise clause is sometimes introduced by the protector’s statement that “I will not allow anyone to...”. E.g. in OTorino S. 5911: “[...for we will not al]low anybody to punish/prosecute you with anything evil.” *SB Kopt.* V 2292: **ⲭⲉ ⲛⲛⲉⲗⲁⲗⲁⲩ ⲛⲣⲟⲙⲉ ⲟⲛⲛⲓ**: “that no man will arrest him”, and *SB Kopt.* V 2240: **ⲭⲛⲛⲉⲓⲕⲁⲩ ⲛⲉⲣ ⲛⲉⲑⲟⲟⲩ**: “that I will not let harm be done to you”.

3.1.2.2 Protection clauses: affirmative

In some cases the documents contain affirmative expressions of protection. These can complement the formulaic negative expressions discussed above but more often they occur by themselves. *O.Crum VC* 11 is an example of a protection letter which contains both negative and affirmative expressions of protection. The text is fragmentary but the protector promises to not permit that anyone prosecutes the protectee for anything, and promises to not imprison the protectee. Immediately following these formulae, the text reads: **ⲁⲗⲗ ⲛⲧⲁⲩⲱⲛⲉ ⲉⲱⲛ ⲧⲟⲟⲧⲕ (?) | ⲛⲧⲁⲥⲉⲛⲉⲗⲑⲉⲓ ⲛⲙⲙⲁⲕ | ⲛⲓⲙ ⲉⲛⲛⲉⲧⲛⲁⲛⲟⲩⲩⲱⲩ | ⲛⲙⲙⲁⲕ ⲛⲁⲧ**: “but I will be of help to you and I will come to your aid (in) every(thing) good with you”. This last expression is reminiscent of some of the clauses discussed below in section 3.1.2.3.

The same mix of negative and affirmative expressions of protection can be found in *SB Kopt.* V 2253, in which the protector Kyriakos, *hegoumenos* of the “mountain of Djeme”, a local monastery, promises the monk Psmo: “that I will not do you harm, because you fled, neither will I permit any harm to reach you but I will discuss amicably with you

³²⁷ *SB Kopt.* V 2224, ll. 4-8: **ⲭⲉ ⲛⲛⲁ | ⲁⲙⲁⲥⲧⲉ ⲙⲙⲟⲕ ⲉⲑⲱⲩ ⲛⲧⲁⲕ ⲁ ⲉⲧⲃⲛⲏⲧⲓⲥ + ⲙⲉⲛⲓ** Ὁ(β)ι ἰ(ν)δ(ικτίωνος) εἰ | **ⲁⲩⲱ ⲭⲉ ⲛⲛⲁⲥⲓⲟⲩ ⲉⲣⲟⲕ | ⲙⲛⲉⲓⲥⲟⲛ + ⲃⲓⲕⲧⲱⲣ ⲥⲧⲟⲓⲭ(ⲉⲓ) +** I will not detain you for the affair of ... (?) Tubi 10, indiction year 5. And I will not beat you this time. + Victor signs +

³²⁸ See section 5.4.2.

in everything good, neither will I ask anything except the 3 *keratia* and you must give a *trimession*.³²⁹

These two examples contain the same affirmative protective expression: *ϣϥⲛⲉⲗⲟⲉⲓ ϣⲛ ϣⲟⲃ ⲛⲓⲙ ⲉⲡⲛⲉⲧⲛⲁⲛⲟϥ*: “to agree in everything good”.³³⁰ A very similar expression is used in *SB Kopt. V 2233*, only *ⲉⲡⲛⲉⲧⲛⲁⲛⲟϥ* is not added: *ⲁⲗⲗⲁ ⲛⲧⲛϥⲉⲛⲉⲗⲟⲉ | ⲛⲙⲙⲁⲕ ϣⲛ ϣⲟⲃ ⲛⲓⲙ*: “but we are in agreement with you on every matter.” One promise clause, most often negative, sufficed to produce a protection letter. In the cases in which various types of protective expressions are combined, the extra protective expressions might have been added in order to convince the protectee, or because they were relevant in the specific case.

3.1.2.3 Talk and settle

A number of protection letters was grouped by Till and Schiller in a specific subcategory, because of their affirmative protective clauses referring to conversations, negotiations, and settlements which differ from the usual negative Future III clauses, discussed in the previous paragraph.³³¹ It is clear from the examples cited in the previous section, that protective promises related to talking could occur in combination with the negative promise clauses, making that distinction less relevant.

These “talk” and “settle” expressions often refer to interaction between the protector or intermediary and the protectee. Some documents state that they should “talk” (see below) or “settle”, come to an agreement. Moreover, sometimes the protectee is given the right to go away again after the interaction, without any problem s, if no agreement can be concluded. A good example is *SB Kopt. V 2271, ll. 2-5*: *ⲛⲃⲉⲓ ⲛⲧⲁⲱⲁⲭⲉ | ⲛⲙⲙⲁⲕ ⲉⲓ ⲙⲉⲛ ⲁⲡⲣⲟⲃ ⲁⲣⲓϥⲕⲉ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲁⲩⲁⲣⲓϥⲕⲉ ⲉⲱⲱⲛⲉ ⲁⲉ ⲙⲙⲟⲛ ⲛⲃⲱⲕ ⲛⲁⲕ | ⲙⲉⲧⲁ ⲕⲁⲗⲟϥ*: “Come and I will talk with you. If the thing pleases you, it is well. But if not, go freely (or: without problem).” The expression *meta kalou* is used several times in the corpus.³³² In their

³²⁹ *ⲭⲉ ⲙⲉⲣⲛⲉⲑⲟⲟ | ⲛⲁⲕ ⲭⲉ ⲁⲕⲡⲟϥⲧ ⲟϥⲁⲉ ⲛⲛⲉϥ(ϣ)ⲛⲭ(ⲟⲣⲉⲓ) | ⲛⲧⲉⲗⲁⲁϣ ⲙⲛⲉⲑⲟⲟϣ ⲧⲁⲥⲟⲕ | ⲁⲗⲗⲁ ⲉⲓⲛⲁϥⲉⲛⲉⲗⲟⲉ ⲛⲙⲙⲁⲕ ϣⲛ | ϣⲟⲃ ⲛⲓⲙ ⲉⲡⲛⲉⲧⲛⲁⲛⲟϥ | ⲟϥⲁⲉ ⲛⲛⲉⲓϭⲛⲟϥ ⲕⲉⲗⲁⲁϣ | ⲱⲁⲛⲕⲉⲣⲁⲱⲙⲙⲧ ⲛⲃⲁⲧⲓⲡⲧⲓⲙ(ⲉϥϥⲓⲟⲛ)*.

³³⁰ See also *P.Heid. XI 490*: *ⲓⲉⲧⲛⲁⲛⲟϥⲧ ⲧⲉⲧⲛⲉϥⲥⲁⲓ ⲟϥⲗⲟⲑⲟϥ ⲛⲁⲩ*: “... good and that you write him a *logos* (promise)”. It is improbable that it refers to the actual content of the protection letter which needed to be written, as you would expect such information after the mention of issuing or writing the document, but I do not think it is a coincidence to find those words together.

³³¹ Till, category 5: “Einladungen zu Verhandlungen”. Schiller: “Summons Type”.

³³² An appendix to the edition of *O.GurnaGorecki 70* presents an overview of the use of this expression in Coptic literature and documents.

Issue a logos

The phrase used to indicate “to issue a protection letter” is ⲥⲗⲟⲓⲟⲩ, “*tilogos*” (or “*ti plogos*”).³³⁶ It is notable that this expression is never used in the protection letters addressed to protectees, but rather in the correspondence between protectors and intermediaries (see below). The expression appears both in letters in which someone asks for a protection letter to be issued for a third party as well as in letters from people asking their addressee to issue a protection letter for them. To indicate the person to whose advantage the protection letter is issued, the protectee, the expression uses the Coptic “dative” preposition ⲛ-: ⲛⲁⲗⲁ, ⲛⲁⲓ: for him, for me.³³⁷

Receive a logos

ⲭⲓⲗⲟⲓⲟⲩ (“*jilogos*”, to receive a promise) occurs much less frequently than ⲥⲗⲟⲓⲟⲩ, “to issue/give a promise”, and seems to point to a step in the procedure when an intermediary receives the protection letter written on behalf of a third party, from the protector.³³⁸ However, it can also point to the protectee actually receiving the protection letter. Both meanings are used in the following letter:

*Be so brotherly and get the logos (promise) for me in the name of the lashanes and in the name of the whole village; but get it for Pkamoul also, and for all my men and all my goods. You know that I am wont to get a promise each year. Moreover, Pkamoul said: “I will not go South unless you get the promise for me.” Send it to me tomorrow, quickly. Give it to Apa Koukle from Petronius.*³³⁹

Respect the logos

In letters in which the sender asks the addressee to issue a protection letter for a third person, the sender could include in the letter a promise that he would uphold or respect the protection letter of the protector. The Coptic verbs to indicate “to observe/uphold/respect (the promise)” are ⲣⲟⲉⲓⲥ and ⲉⲗⲣⲉⲩ.³⁴⁰

³³⁶ In *P.Heid.* XI 490, cited above, the sender uses the verb ⲥⲁⲗⲓ, “to write” when asking for for he issuance of a protection letter.,

³³⁷ Coptic: Now, please, / write and bring Taammonikos / to you so that he issues a / promise for him: *SB Kopt.* V 2286.

³³⁸ *O.Lips.Copt.* II 170, discussed in more detail in 3.2.1.

³³⁹ *O.Medin.HabuCopt.* 136, Djeme, seventh-eighth century.

³⁴⁰ *O.CrumVC* 75; *O.Vind.Copt.* 184; P.Katoennatie 685/1; Van der Vliet, “Letter”; *SB Kopt.* V 2291; *SB Kopt.* V 2294.

In *O.Crum VC 75*, Johannes, the lashane of the village of Trakatan, asks a certain Abba Paham to issue a protection letter for a jar maker (†ΝΟΥ ΜΑΤΚΝΜΝΤ|ΕΙΩΤ ΤΙΛΟΓΟΣ ΝΗΚΩΚ). In his letter, Johannes combines negative protection clauses usually found in the protection letters themselves, as well as the “respect” clause, and an extra affirmative promise of protection: “and I will observe for him the promise, that naught of ill befall him, whether from me or from other men; rather I will contend for him until I shall deliver him at thy holy *topos* (monastery)”.³⁴¹ In his edition, Crum noted that the protective expression with “to defend/to contend for” did not appear in the Schutzbriefe discussed by Till, and it remains unique in the corpus until today. However, it is an interesting addition to the affirmative promises of protection discussed in section 3.1.2.2.

This first part of the chapter has focused on the elements of the formulary of protection letters which make them recognizable as examples of a documentary genre and as instruments of a protection mechanism. I have presented what I believe to be the core formulas of the protection letters, the formulas that, especially when used together, identify the document as a protection letter. I have also shown the various ways the language of the protection letters expressed protection, as well as particular acts within the protection letter mechanism: issuing, receiving, upholding a protection letter. The next section will build immediately onto this last point. I discuss the various interactions and steps taken by various actors when someone was in need of a protection letter. The discussion is divided into four aspects: the importance (3.2.1) and various roles (3.2.2) of intermediaries, the role of oral interactions (3.2.3), the logistics of the protection letter procedure (3.2.4), and the interaction between village and monastic contexts in these procedures (3.2.5).

3.2 Procedures of protection

In this section I will discuss what we can understand from the documentation on the Coptic protection letters about the procedure to obtain such a protection letter. Which kind of interactions preceded the production of a protection letter, and who was involved?³⁴² I will discuss 5 aspects of the protection letter procedure which come to the fore in a careful reading of the documents. First, the interventions of one or more intermediaries was a frequent step on the road to the production of a protection letter. Intermediaries are seldom

³⁴¹ II. 6-11: ΔΥΩ †ΝΑΡΟΕΙC | ΝΑΥ ΕΠΛΟΓΟΣ ΜΝΤΕΛΔΟΥΕ ΝΗΕΙ|ΘΟΟΥ ΤΑ2ΟΥ ΕΙΤΕ 2ΑΡΟΙ ΕΙΤΕ 2Α ΚΕ | ΡΩΜΕ ΑΛΛΑ †ΝΑΩΩΧΕ ΕΧΩΑ | ΝΩΑΝΤΑΚΑΤΑCΤΑΖΕ ΜΜΟΥ | ΕΠΚΤΟΠΟΣ ΕΤΟΥΔΑΒ.

³⁴² This section is partially based on Scheerlinck, “Procedures”. The section summarizes and adds to certain arguments from the article, and discusses new examples.

seen in protection letters addressed by the protector to the protectee (the “standard” *logos mpnoute* document), but many other documents in the corpus document their interventions in the procedure. Second, the intermediaries play different roles in the documentation: we see them address protectors with requests for a protection letter for a third party,³⁴³ but we also see them discuss who would be the most appropriate person to issue the protection letter,³⁴⁴ and we see them even punish protectors who did not respect a protection letter issued by themselves.³⁴⁵ Moreover, the intermediaries, as well as the protectors, played different roles in rural life: both village authorities and monastic authorities acted and interacted in different parts of the process. Third, oral as well as written interactions were part of these procedures. While the eventual result of the protection letter procedure was a written document, the documents testify on several occasions of oral interactions that were integral steps on the road to the eventual document. I understand these oral interactions as moments of negotiation which could determine the contents of the eventual protection letter. Fourth, I will make some remarks on the logistics of the protection letter procedure: how did the protection letters arrive in the hands of the protectees? Fifth, I will highlight the interactions between village and monastic contexts in the protection letter mechanism. I will pay special attention to the two letters in the corpus addressed to bishop Pesynthios of Coptos.

Before I can address these topics, I should make a brief remark about the documents which inform us about the Coptic protection letter procedure. The majority of our information about the protection letter procedure comes from letters between protectors and intermediaries. The protection letters issued by protectors to protectees almost never mention an intermediary or the steps that led to the protection letter. Moreover, there are only 3 published letters in which the protectee writes to the protector or an intermediary with a request for a protection letter.³⁴⁶ Although few in number, these letters show that people needing a protection letter seemed to know how to obtain one, as in their letters they point out the measures to be taken and the people who should take them. They used their knowledge of the relationships and competencies of their fellow villagers in order to try and

³⁴³ E.g. *O.Crum VC 75*.

³⁴⁴ *SB Kopt. V 2286*.

³⁴⁵ *SB Kopt. V 2226*.

³⁴⁶ *SB Kopt. V 2300*; *O.MedinetHabuCopt. 136*; *O.GurnaGorecki 72*.

get what they wanted.³⁴⁷ While these letters from protectees are valuable for our understanding of the protection letters and their role in society, the mechanisms of protection letter procedure are brought to light rather in the more numerous letters between protectors and intermediaries, and therefore it will be those letters which will be the center of the discussion below.

3.2.1 Presence of intermediaries

The first characteristic of this procedure which we learn from the letters is the importance of the interventions of intermediaries, in spite of their near absence in the protection letters addressed by protector to protectee. An exception to this near absence is *SB Kopt.* V 2234, a protection letter for a priest and “the people who are with him”: “The master Apa Apion and Abraham ...informed me (?) that you (pl.) went. Now here you have the promise, priest of Terkot and all men who are with you (sing.),...”³⁴⁸ The production of this particular protection letter seems to have been the consequence of a communication from intermediaries Apa Apion and Abraham to the protector, who signs the document but whose name is lost.

However, the other letters of the corpus indicate that direct communication between protectors and protectees concerning the procedure to obtain a protection letter was much less frequent than the involvement of intermediaries in such communications. Among the corpus are examples that show the interventions of often 1, or 2, but even up to 3 individuals who would in all probability not be mentioned in the eventual protection document.³⁴⁹

That intermediaries should be involved in the protection letter procedure is easily conceivable: the protectees generally seem to have been away from their home, and were not willing or able to return to their home without an offer of (partial) amnesty. The authorities who could issue the document ensuring that amnesty were often also those who could punish them. Direct contact would have been risky, and the use of an intermediary, who could not only transfer the document but in all probability also negotiate its contents

³⁴⁷ This is part of the conclusions in Scheerlinck, “Procedures”.

³⁴⁸ *SB Kopt.* V 2234, ll. 1-5: ΕΠΕΙΔΗ ΑΠΚΥΡ(ΙΟC) ΑΠΑ ΑΠΙΩΝ | ΜΝ ΑΒΡΑΞΑ[Μ].....ΑΜΟΪ | ΧΕ ΔΤΕΤΝΩΚ ΝΗΤΝ ΤΝΟΥ ΕΙC ΠΛΟΓΡΟC ΝΤΟΤΚ ΝΤΟΚ ΠΠΡΕCΒΥΤΕΡΟC | ΝΤΕΡΚΩΤ ΜΝ ΡΩΜΕ ΝΙΜ ΕΦΕΔΑΣΤΗΚ.

³⁴⁹ Two intermediaries, including the sender, are intervening for (the protection letter of) Samuel in *SB Kopt.* V 2287. In the interventions mentioned in *SB Kopt.* V 2286, 3 people are involved who would not feature in the eventual document: the document is discussed in more detail in Scheerlinck, “Procedures”.

(see below), would have been preferable. We see intermediaries make a variety of interventions, which is the second aspect of the protection letter procedure that I would like to discuss.

3.2.2 Various roles of intermediaries

One role which intermediaries could play in the procedure is as senders of a request for a protection letter for a third party.³⁵⁰ E.g. *SB Kopt.* V 2288 is such a request from three village headmen (*lashane*) to a monastic authority: “Johannes, Pisrael and Saua, the *lashanes* of Trakatan write to Apa Jakob: Please, your Paternity, issue a promise for Johannes, son of Paternouthios, that he comes and we talk with him...” The three *lashanes*, in this case the intermediaries, seem to detail the contents of the eventual protection letter to be written by Apa Jakob, expressing the instruction clause and a clause reminiscent of affirmative promise clauses in the third person.³⁵¹

However, intermediaries also come into play after a protection letter has been produced. E.g., they can be on the receiving end of a letter from the protector in which the protection letter for the protectee is embedded.³⁵² In these letters as well the protection letter formulae can be written in the third person instead of in the second person.³⁵³ *SB Kopt.* V 2303, a protection letter for Samuel and his children, has the protection letter formula in the third person, but it seems to be a stand-alone document, not embedded in a letter, as the document opens with the *eis plogos mpnoute* formula instead of a letter opening or some form of justification for sending the document, as in the other letters with an embedded protection document. Only the first 4 lines are (fragmentarily) preserved, but the beginning of the *eis plogos mpnoute* formula reads: ll. 1-2 : + ΕΙΣ ΠΛΟΓΟΣ | ΝΤΟΤΗ ΝΣΑΜΟΥΗΛ...: “Here you have the promise for him, (*i.e.*) Samuel...”. Although the document is fragmentary, we might interpret it as follows: this is a document addressed by the protector to the intermediary, who would pass it on to the protectee (Samuel and his children). Apparently the sender did not think that the receiver of his letter, the intermediary, needed an explanation why they received this protection letter for Samuel, and it is plausible that intermediary and protector had communicated about Samuel’s situation beforehand. The

³⁵⁰ E.g. *SB Kopt.* V 2288.

³⁵¹ A detailed discussion of this letter in Palombo and Scheerlinck, “Asking”.

³⁵² E.g. *O.Crum VC* 64 (discussed in detail in Scheerlinck, “Procedures”; *SB Kopt.* V 2301; *SB Kopt.* V 2302; *O.Vind Copt.* 66; *SB Kopt.* V 2290; OTorino S. 5911.

³⁵³ E.g. *O.Crum VC* 64; *SB Kopt.* V 2301; *SB Kopt.* V 2304..

corpus contains references to the intermediaries receiving the protection letter from the protector and passing it on to the protectee. E.g., Petronias asks Apa Koukle to get his protection letter, issued by the village authorities of Djeme, and give it to him.³⁵⁴ The senders of *O.Lips.Copt.* II 170, probably 3 monks of the monastery of Apa Ezekiel,³⁵⁵ tell their “brother”, probably another monk, that they have received a protection letter for him.³⁵⁶ They tell him not to be afraid and come to “the village” that same night, immediately after reading their letter, presumably to give him the protection letter, although that is not explicitly stated.³⁵⁷

When intermediaries asked a protector to issue a protection letter, they could insert in their request a statement that they would respect said protection letter once it was produced. I have discussed this expression also in section 3.1.2.4. E.g., in *SB Kopt.* V 2292, the sender asks the receiver to give a certain Triphanios a protection letter, and states that he will respect it. Although the sender uses protection formulary in his letter, namely a promise clause on ll. 9-11, this letter was probably not meant as the protection letter for the protectee. That document was probably issued by the receiver of the letter, clearly a clerical or monastic authority.

Before anything I greet and kiss the footstool of the feet of your holy Paternity. I ask you to give a promise for Triphanios, that he comes to his house. I will respect the promise for him, that nobody seizes him to ask anything from him, except your Paternity. In this case, “nobody” most likely includes the sender of the letter, who will be prevented by the addressee’s protection letter from taking anything from Triphanios. The expression of “respecting” the protection letters seems to have been used mostly by village authorities in situations in which the protectee received the protection letter in a monastic context, while needing to return to his village (3.1.2.4). In cases such as this, the difference between intermediary and protector becomes most blurred. Upon the protectee’s return to the village, the village head, instead of issuing a protection letter for the protectee (which we see most often in the corpus), considers the monastic or clerical authority’s protection letter as

³⁵⁴ *O.MedinetHabuCopt.* 136. Discussed in detail in Scheerlinck, “Procedures”.

³⁵⁵ According to the editor.

³⁵⁶ Ll. 3-4: Εἰς πολλοὺς ἀνδρίται | ΝΗΚ.

³⁵⁷ The senders of the letter also refer to a certain Mena, who was going to Hermonthis the next day, but it is not clear what his exact role in the situation was.

valid.³⁵⁸ Other interventions of intermediaries in the corpus are, e.g. punishing with excommunication two protectors who had transgressed against a protection letter they had issued,³⁵⁹ discussing who should issue a specific protection letter,³⁶⁰ accompanying the protectee during travel.³⁶¹

The intermediaries and protectors also have various roles in rural Egypt: they are generally local authorities in their region, but monastic or clerical authorities as well as village authorities both issue protection letters and act as intermediaries. Eg., in *SB Kopt. V* 2288 *lashanes* ask Apa Jakob to issue a protection letter, but in *O. Medinet Habu Copt.* 136 Apa Koukle serves as an intermediary between the *lashanes* and the protectee. The interaction and cooperation between monastic and village authorities are discussed in section 3.2.5 below.

3.2.3 Oral interactions as moments of negotiation

While the eventual product of the protection letter procedure was a written document, intermediary steps could be both oral and written interactions. I have discussed elsewhere two documents which very clearly document this combination of oral and written steps.³⁶² I have argued there that the moments of oral interaction were probably moments of negotiation, between the protector and an intermediary as a representative of the protectee. I believe that during those conversations or negotiations the stipulations in the protection letters, in particular the limitations and exceptions, would have been fixed.

SB Kopt. V 2295 is another example of these oral interactions in the (fragmentary) Coptic protection letter mechanism. The sender, who acts as the protector in this case, received an oral request for a *logos* and is now sending the *logos*: ll. 2-5: ΝΤΑ-|ΠΑΤΕΡ ΜΟΥΤΕ ΕΙ ΝΑΝ ΕΨΩ|ΜΜΟ]C ΧΕ†ΛΟΓΟΣ ΝΠΕΑ-| [...]: “Patermoute came to us and said: Issue/give a *logos* (promise) to his (= likely “my”)... Thus, the actual protectee is an acquaintance or dependent of Patermoute, who acts as a first intermediary for the protectee. The sender writes the protection letter in *SB Kopt. V* 2295, with an instruction to “Come home/to his house” in the third person. The addressee of *SB Kopt. V* 2295, whose name is lost but who

³⁵⁸ See section 3.2.2 on the interaction and cooperation between lay and monastic or clerical elites in the protection letter procedure.

³⁵⁹ *SB Kopt. V* 2226.

³⁶⁰ *SB Kopt. V* 2286.

³⁶¹ *SB Kopt. V* 2301; *O. Mon. Cyr.* 5; *O. Crum VC* 75.

³⁶² *SB Kopt. V* 2286; *O. Gurna Gorecki* 72. Scheerlinck, “Procedures”.

must be a person acting as a second intermediary for the protectee, will presumably give the protection letter to the protectee (or maybe to Patermoute to forward to the protectee).

That conversations played an important role in mechanisms of problem-solving in the villages is also evident in a number of protection letters in which the protectee is invited to come and talk to someone, usually the protector, to come to an agreement.³⁶³ In some cases the document mentions that if the conversation should not produce an agreement, the protectee is guaranteed a safe return by the protection letter.³⁶⁴ Those conversations might have led in turn to the production of another document.³⁶⁵

3.2.4 Logistics of the protection letter procedure

The Coptic protection letters functioned on a very local level, and the different actors were for the most part probably not far away from each other (see also section 4.2.3.5 on the limited geographical scale of the Coptic protection letters). The protection letters document the protection mechanisms between e.g. the village of Djeme and surrounding monastic settlements, which were at the most at a couple of kilometers distance.³⁶⁶ Petronias expected his protection letter on the day after he put in the request with Apa Koukle, who had to receive the protection letter from the lashanes and then send it to Petronias.³⁶⁷ This suggests very short distance between all actors, as well as direct or short lines of communication.³⁶⁸ When the instruction clause mentions that the protectees should “come South” or “come North”, this indicates that the protectee is at some distance, likely another village or maybe even a different district (like possibly in Van der Vliet, A Letter to a Bishop (O. APM Inv. 3871), discussed in 3.2.5).³⁶⁹

³⁶³ They are discussed in more detail in section 4.3.1.2. See also section 3.1.2.3. Both lay officials asking bishop Pesynthios to issue a protection letter for a third party mention that they want to talk with the protectees.

³⁶⁴ Such situations are documented in e.g. *SB Kopt.* III 1365; *SB Kopt.* V 2271; *SB Kopt.* V 2272; *P.KölnÄgypt.* II 25; *SB Kopt.* II 914; *O.GurnaGorecki* 70.

³⁶⁵ Like the settlements as products of arbitration discussed in Fournet, *Rise*, Chapter 3. See also Gagos, Van Minnen, *Settling*.

³⁶⁶ See also section 3.2.2. The officials writing to bishop Pesynthios with requests for protection letters probably wrote from his diocese of Coptos to the *topos* of Apa Epiphanius in Western Thebes, at about 40 km distance.

³⁶⁷ *O.MedinetHabuCopt.* 136.

³⁶⁸ I will further discuss this local nature of the protection letters in Chapter 4, in particular in contrast with the Arabic and Greek travel permits.

³⁶⁹ *SB Kopt.* V 2301, *SB Kopt.* V 2274. See also *P.Ryl.Copt.* 289, in which the sender tells the addressee that some youths had fled their monastery and had convinced sailors to take them North,

The documents testify in different ways about the circulation of documents and people in the procedure. First, there are internal references to such logistics in the text. Petronias expects his letter to be sent rather than handed to him by Apa Koukle. The monks in O.Lips.Copt. II 170 seem to have invited their brother to come so that they can hand him the protection letter which they had received for him. *SB Kopt.* V 2286 refers to different trips that the actors should make to talk to one another about a required protection letter, as well as to letters and documents that should be written in the process.³⁷⁰ These internal comments provide small glimpses into the movements of people and documents in the protection letter procedure.

Second, the presence, or rather absence, of external addresses on the documents in the corpus should be noted. Most protection letters from protectors to protectees do not contain an external address.³⁷¹ The protection letters were legal documents, and their formulary in general is less reminiscent of letters than legal documents, which did not include external addresses in their formulary. At the same time, these documents also functioned as letters, and they did have to reach the protectee in some way or another for them to be able to make use of them. If the protectees were away from home, and wishing to avoid direct contact with the village authorities, their protection letters would be “sent” rather than given to them in person by the protectors. In the majority of the cases we can imagine that the protection letter was personally given to the protectee by an intermediary, someone who might have already intervened and negotiated with the protector on behalf of the protectee.³⁷² In those cases an address seems unnecessary, also because the name of the protectee was always part of the protection letters, so there was no risk that they could not be identified.

A third way in which the protection letters can give us insight in how they might have circulated, is where they were discovered. E.g., *O.GurnaGorecki* 70 is a protection

and now the sender wants to make sure that the youths receive a protection letter with which they can return to the monastery.

³⁷⁰ Scheerlinck, “Procedures”.

³⁷¹ Exceptions are *SB Kopt.* V 2236 and the very brief *SB Kopt.* V 2272, which asks the protectee to come and settle his case, and in which the address takes up 3 out of 7 lines: ΤΑC ΝΑΝΔΡΕΑC | ΣΙΤΝ ΜΩΥCΗC | ΜΝ ΘΕΟΚCΙC. The external addresses are of the type ΤΑΔC Ν+Χ ΣΙΤΝ Υ and variations, see the overview in Biedenkopf-Ziehner, “Untersuchungen”, 204-205 (Tabelle I). Otherwise, the majority of the documents with an external address are letters between intermediaries and protectors.

³⁷² Such a transaction was what I understand to be the goal of the letter *P.Lips. Copt.* II 170, discussed above, under “Various roles of intermediaries”.

letter issued by the *lashanes* of a village for Kurikos and his children. While the document was produced in the village, it was found in a monastic hermitage in Western Thebes, together with many other documents, among which other protection letters.³⁷³ The editor postulates that either Kurikos and his family had sought and found refuge at the hermitage and that therefore the protection letter was sent there, or otherwise that the document was sent to the hermitage because of an assumption that the inhabitants there knew where Kurikos and his family might be. We do not know who brought the protection letter to the hermitage, and it is possible that Kurikos himself brought it with him. In any case, the protection letter remained in the hermitage, suggesting that either Kurikos and his children were not found by the monks of the monastery, or that Kurikos and his children did not go back to the village. It seems unlikely that they would return to the village without the document giving them the protection to do so without consequences.

The protection letter for Kurikos and his children was transported between the village and the hermitage where it was found. This contact between village and monastic contexts, and thus between village and monastic authorities, is evident in several letters in the corpus of protection letters. This interaction and cooperation between village and monastic elites in the protection letter mechanism will be the topic of the next section.

3.2.5 The protection letters between village and monastic contexts

In section 2.3.1 I mention that 31 protection letters were found in monastic or church contexts in Western Thebes. Three more documents were found in monasteries in Middle Egypt. One explanation for these documents to be found there is that the monasteries and churches were places of refuge. On the other hand, especially in the case of churches and larger monasteries, we could postulate that they were archival places, as Anne Boud'hors suggests in the case of *O.Saint-Marc* 322 (and 323). It is likely that in the case of Kurikos which I discussed above, however, the hermitage was rather a place of refuge than a place where documents were stored. This interpretation is supported by the protection letters of which the contents show that monastic or clerical authorities were involved, whether the documents were found in a monastic or church context or not. The protection letters record several situations in which authorities in monasteries, such as priests and monastery heads, interacted and cooperated with village officials in the protection letter mechanisms. I

³⁷³ *O.GurnaGorecki* 69, 71, 72.

mentioned several examples of such interactions in the previous sections in passing, but I wish to discuss here two specific letters in more detail.

Two letters requesting protection letters were addressed to bishop Pesynthios, bishop of the diocese of Coptos.³⁷⁴ The bishop's documents were found near the *topos* of Apa Epiphanius in Western Thebes, where Pesynthios sojourned for a certain period from 619 onwards, when Egypt was under Persian rule. However, both letters seem to have been sent from locations in Pesynthios' diocese. The sender of one letter is the *lashane* of Pmilis, a village in the diocese of Coptos.³⁷⁵ The other letter was sent by a certain Stefanos, who is known in the Pesynthios dossier, and was probably a civil official, either a *lashane* or an urban magistrate.³⁷⁶ Both officials ask Pesynthios to issue a protection letter for a third party. In one case the protectee is a man by himself, in the other they are two men, their wives, and their cattle. Aside from their general aim, the letters are fairly similar. Both senders state that they want to talk with the protectees, and in one letter there seems to be a more elaborate "settle" clause (3.1.2.3), which is broken off. Both senders also promise to "respect", but in different terms: ΝΤΝΖΑΡΗΖ ΝΑΥ ΕΠ|ΔΙΚΑΙΟΝ: "I will respect what is just for him"³⁷⁷ and ΤΝ[Δ]|ΡΟΕΙΖ ΝΗΥ ΕΠΛΟΓΟC: "I will respect the promise for them".³⁷⁸ What is interesting about the letter from Stefanos, is that the bishop seems to have written about the protectee's case to Stefanos, and that the letter is Stefanos' reaction. The first lines of the letter read: "I received the letter from your godliness, holy lord and father Apa Pesynthios. And concerning Papnoute, son of Johannes of Pshelch, I ask your holy lordship and father that you issue a promise (*logos*) for him and that you send him to me, that I talk with him."³⁷⁹ Given that Stefanos' letter deals only with the protection letter for Papnoute, it makes sense

³⁷⁴ P.Katoennatie 685/1 (unedited); Van der Vliet, "Letter".

³⁷⁵ Van der Vliet, "Letter".

³⁷⁶ P.Katoennatie 685/1 (unedited). The identification of Stefanos as official in Coptos is made in *O.CrumST* 174, see Dekker, *Theban Networks*, 229. It is of course possible that Stefanos of P.Katoennatie 685/1 is a different person by the name of Stefanos.

³⁷⁷ P.Katoennatie 685/1, ll. 8-9.

³⁷⁸ Van der Vliet, "Letter", ll. 13-14. On these expressions, see section 3.1.2.4.

³⁷⁹ P.Katoennatie 685/1, ll. ΔΙΧΙ ΝCZΔΙ ΝΤΕΚΜΝΤΜΔΙΝΟΥΤΕ | ΝΧΟΕΙC ΝΕΙΩΤ ΕΤΟΥΔΑΒ ΔΥΩ ΕΤΒΕ | ΠΑΠΝΟΥΤΕ ΠΩΝ ΙΩΖΑΝΗC ΝΠΩΛZ [Τ]|ΠΑΡΑΚΑΛΕΙ ΝΤΕΤΝΜΝΤΧΟΕΙC Ν[ΕΙΩΤ] | ΕΤΟΥΔΑΒ ΕΤΡΕΤΕΝΤΙ ΛΟΓΟC ΝΑΥ | ΝΤΕΤΝΤΝΟΟΥC ΝΑΙ ΝΤΑΩΔΧΕ ΝΕ|ΜΑΥ. This is my own transcription and translation of the text, on the basis of photographs provided by the Katoen Natie collection. The document will be published in the complete edition and reedition of Pesynthios' dossier (by Jacques van der Vliet, Renate Dekker).

that Pesynthios' letter to which he refers had been about Papnoute's case. Stefanos asks the bishop to send Papnoute to him, which indicates that Pesynthios must have had at least relatively easy access to Papnoute. It is plausible that Papnoute had for some reason sought the protection of the bishop in the *topos* of Apa Epiphanius, but wanted to go home.³⁸⁰

These two letters document interactions between bishop Pesynthios in a hermitage in Western Thebes and lay authorities in Pesynthios' diocese in Coptos. While there is ample evidence that village officials could issue protection letters, in these two cases, the protection letter for the protectee would be issued by a clerical or monastic authority.³⁸¹ Van der Vliet postulates that this choice might be caused by the fact that the protectees were simply closer to the bishop than to the officials in their home village or town, but also because a letter infused by the authority of a clergyman would especially inspire confidence in those who were doubtful whether they could return home. I believe that a combination of those factors probably made monastic and clerical elites the most effective protectors. Moreover, as Renate Dekker argues, issuing protection letters was part of a bishop's duty, and fell under his legal authority.³⁸² The protectees might have sought refuge from their problems in the village, including any conflicts with the village officials who could detain or punish them, at a monastic settlement or with a clerical authority. Therefore, once they were there and needed a document to return to the village, they could either wait for a protection letter from the village officials, as seems to have been the case in *O.GurnaGorecki* 70, discussed above,³⁸³ or obtain one from a local monastic or clerical

³⁸⁰ In the other letter to Pesynthios, the sender mentions that the protectees should go North in order to talk with the sender. The diocese of Coptos lies to the North of Thebes. Thus also in this case the protectees were probably close to the bishop, as the editor also remarks.

³⁸¹ Other examples in the corpus of *lashanes* asking a monastic or clerical authority to issue a *logos* are *O.CrumVC* 75 and *SB Kopt.* V 2288. As in the Pesynthios cases, there did not seem to have been a problem between the monastic authority and the protectee, but rather the protectee was needed in the village. *O.CrumVC* 75: for an urgent business. *SB Kopt.* V 2288: the protectee should speak to several people in the village (to resolve a conflict?). Other letters addressing monastic or clerical authorities with a request to issue a *logos* might have been sent by *lashanes* or other village officials, but either they did not use their titles or the titles were lost. Examples of such letters are *SB Kopt.* V 2290, 2291, 2292, 2294, 2296.

³⁸² Dekker, *Theban Networks*, 57. Bernhard Palme sees the protection letters also as a measure against overcrowding of places of asylum: in this interpretation the relevant monastic authorities also have an extra incentive to issue a protection letter. Palme, "Asyl", 215.

³⁸³ See also *O.CrumVC* 64. OTorino S. 5911 (unedited) is protection letter for protectee Philotheos and his wife and children, but the ostrakon was addressed to Victor, probably Victor II, abbot of the monastery of Phoibammon in Western Thebes in the early 8th century (according to the editors).

authority.³⁸⁴ The protection letters show how authorities in village and monastic context communicated and cooperated concerning the production of protection letters, and how these documents and the people involved circulated between these different contexts. They communicated about problematic (“urgent”) cases in the community, and in order to solve them the village authorities needed help from the clerical and monastic authorities, to issue documents, i.e. Coptic protection letters, which in other circumstances could be issued by the village officials themselves. However, the village authorities gave suggestions for the content of these protection letters in their requests to their addressees, and added their own promise of protection, to respect the protection letter issued by the monastic or clerical authority.

This second part of the chapter has examined the processes and procedures through which the protection letters were requested and how they circulated. Some of these processes occurred regularly, were standardized and took place repeatedly: they can indeed be said to form a pattern. This applies e.g. to village officials requesting monastic or clerical authorities to issue a protection letter for the protectee, which the village authorities promised to honor. This pattern is emphasized by the language of the document, as the same expressions are repeated consistently in similar situations. On the other hand, the various examples discussed here show that there was not one standard procedure to follow in order to obtain a protection letter.

Now that we have established that there was variation within a recognizable and predictable corpus and procedure leading to the corpus, we will delve a bit further in to the question of variation and standardization, starting with an examination of a fixed interrelated group of texts. The first section focuses on the variability and uniformity of the protection letters produced in the formal environment of the village administration of Djeme. The second section then focuses on the relative importance of patterned, formulaic language, and unique, situation-bound phrases in the Coptic protection letters. The concluding section of this part, and of the chapter, brings together the discussions and findings of this part and of the rest of the chapter, in order to discuss the role of the Coptic protection letters as an institution of village life.

³⁸⁴ See also, e.g., *SB Kopt.* V 2288: in which the lashanes of Trakatan ask Apa Jakob to issue a protection letter; *O.CrumVC* 75: in which a *lashane* of Trakatan asks an Apa Paham to issue a protection letter.

3.3 Variability and uniformity

Jeremias' protection letter, cited in section 1.1.1, is unique. Not one of the other published protection letters contains exactly the same formulae in the same order. The same goes for every other document in the corpus: not one of them matches another one completely. This is also reflected in the frequent comments made by modern editors about the peculiarity of individual protection letters (cited in section 3.1.1). As I will show in the following section, which discusses the protection letters produced by the village scribes of Djeme in the first half of the eighth century, the Coptic protection letters were formalized to a certain degree, but at the same time very variable, even when composed in the same village, or by the same scribe.³⁸⁵

3.3.1 Patterns in the promises? The protection letters written by the village scribes of Djeme.

The majority of the protection letters are products of village administration. The village administration of Djeme is particularly well represented in the corpus: seventeen protection letters addressed to protectees are signed by scribes from the village.³⁸⁶ Two Djeme scribes are especially present. Psate, son of Pisrael and Aristophanes, son of Johannes. Psate, son of Pisrael left us probably nine protection letters.³⁸⁷ Of the hand of Aristophanes, son of Johannes, five protection letters have been published.³⁸⁸ One protection letter each is written by Theodoros, son of Psate,³⁸⁹ by Joannes, son of Lazaros, and by Komes. All five of these scribes are known from other documents produced in the town of Djeme or the larger Theban area.

³⁸⁵ This stands in marked contrast with the other short type of public or official legal document, i.e. the tax-receipt, of which the formulary can vary regionally, but is much more consistent.

³⁸⁶ More protection letters were issued by village officials of Djeme, but do not bear a scribal signature. In this section I discuss those explicitly signed by scribes. SB Kopt. V 2242 is a Djeme protection letter written by a certain Patapè. OTorino S 5945+S 5937 (unpublished) was issued by Djeme lashanes and written by a Theodoros (according to the editor a different Theodoros than the Theodoros (son of Psate) who wrote SB Kopt. V 2265 (different patronymic). These two might then be two more protection letter produced by Djeme village scribes.

³⁸⁷ SB Kopt. V 2266; SB Kopt. V 2228; SB Kopt. V 2284; O.CrumVC 8; O.CrumVC 9; P.Stras.Copt. 66. Possibly also SB Kopt. V 2268, identified by Alain Delattre as probably penned by Psate: see O.GurnaGorecki 70, comment to l. 2, as well as SB Kopt. V 2281 and 2283.

³⁸⁸ SB Kopt. V 2233, SB Kopt. V 2246; SB Kopt. III 1368; SB Kopt. V 2249 and Cromwell, Recording, no. 9. Jennifer Cromwell is preparing an edition of a 6th protection letter, in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology in Ann Arbor (inv. 2.5149).

³⁸⁹ SB Kopt. V 2265.

In this section I discuss those signed by scribes, to be able to gauge individual variations in their protection letter production, but it is important to keep in mind that the village administration of Djeme issued more protection letters than those explicitly underwritten by scribes. On the other hand, one protection letter which has a scribal signature was not issued by the office of the village officials in Djeme, although it was issued by a village administrator. *SB Kopt.* V 2271 is a protection letter issued by a *lashane* or village headman by the name of Swai. The ostrakon comes from the Theban region but it is unclear exactly from where. The scribe of the document styles himself as “the most humble deacon”: ΔΝΟΚ ΝΙΣΑΡΑΥ ΠΙΕΛΛ[Χ(ΙCΤΟC)] | ΝΔΙΔΑΚ(ΟΝΟC) ΔΙCΜΝ ΠΙΛΟΓΟC ΝΤΑΘΙΧ | ΚΑΤΑ ΤΕΧΑΙΤΕCΙC: I, Niharaw, the most humble deacon, drew up this *logos* according to his wish. The document contains an instruction clause, settle clauses, and Swai’s signature, but no date.

The following paragraphs compare the documents written by each of these scribes: do they use certain formulae consistently in their own protection letter production? And how do they differ amongst each other? This comparison shows how variable the protection letters are, even when they are written within a small chronological window and inside a small geographical area (700-750, Djeme), even in the production of one scribe. I will start with the scribes who wrote the most protection letters in the corpus, Psate and Aristophanes, and then I will discuss the other three Djeme scribes’ protection letters together.

3.3.1.1 Psate, son of Pisrael

Psate, son of Pisrael is a well-known scribe active in Djeme between 698/713 and 726/728.³⁹⁰ We know him from tax-receipts and other fiscal and legal documents written by him.³⁹¹ Psate is known for writing εicc instead of εic in the opening formula of his tax-receipts,³⁹² but he does not do that in the εic ΠΛΟΓΟC ΜΗΝΟΥΤΕ formula of his protection letters. *P.Stras.Copt.* 66, a tax-receipt with protection letter, does have εicc in the tax-receipt formula, which is the reason why it has been attributed to Psate, but not in the protection

³⁹⁰ On Psate, see most recently Cromwell, “Village Scribe”. See also Albarrán Martínez et al., “Ostraca. Le Dossier Des Reçus”, 231-234.

³⁹¹ On his tax-receipts, see Tax-receipt Albarrán Martínez et al., “Ostraca. Le Dossier Des Reçus”, 231-234. 142 Coptic and 50 Greek tax-receipts by Psate’s hand have been published: Cromwell, “Village Scribe”, 131.

³⁹² Albarrán Martínez et al., “Ostraca. Le Dossier Des Reçus”, 233.

letter formula, which is in line with his other protection letters. In *SB Kopt.* V 2284, Psate wrote both tax-receipt and protection letter formulae with εἰς.

Psate's protection letters are heterogeneous and are perfect examples of the notion "the exception is the rule" which applies so well to the protection letter corpus generally.³⁹³ Four are tax-receipts with a protection letter,³⁹⁴ one is a protection letter without instruction clause, two others are addressed to a group of monks (possibly the same) and these are longer and include exceptional formulae,³⁹⁵ and one is a protection letter without a promise clause, which is the only instance in the corpus. In line with his other work, Psate signed his name alternatingly ψατε and ψατη³⁹⁶ in his protection letters. In *O.Crum VC* 9 he signs ψατε πμακαριος πισραελ. Moreover, comparing the formulae used in Psate's protection letters, the heterogeneity becomes even clearer. The tax-receipts with protection letter formulae seem to be quite consistent in the tax-receipt section, but again use different formulas in the protection-letter section: e.g. the *eis plogos mpnoute* formula is written in at least three different variations: εἰς πλογοc μπηνογτε (*SB Kopt.* V 2281), εἰς πλογο(οc) μπηνογτε (with *plogos* abbreviated, *SB Kopt.* V 2283), εἰς πλογοc μπηνογτε παντοκρατορ (*SB Kopt.* V 2284).³⁹⁷ Psate used two different abbreviations for λογοc.³⁹⁸ He did not write a date in his protection letter without promise clause (*SB Kopt.* V 2228), while he did so in the other protection letters. His *O.Crum VC* 8, one of the protection letters addressed to a group of monks, has the only attestation in the protection letter corpus of an opening invocation with the Holy Trinity. The picture we get of Psate's protection letter

³⁹³ While at first glance Psate's tax-receipts seem more uniform than his protection letters, an in-depth study of Psate's corpus of nearly 200 tax-receipts (and the rest of his scribal production) is needed to understand whether the same variability occurs in his other work. One example of variability: he used three different scribal signatures in his tax-receipts: Cromwell, "Village Scribe", 132.

³⁹⁴ *SB Kopt.* V 2284, 2283, 2281 and *P.Strass.Copt.* 66. The last three do not contain Psate's signature but have been attributed to him on the basis of the characteristic use of εἰς (instead of εἰς) to open the tax-receipt (for *SB Kopt.* V 2281 and 2283: Cromwell, "Village Scribe", 132, n. 21. *P. Strass.Copt.* 66 identified by the editor.

³⁹⁵ *O.Crum VC* 8 and 9. Those documents can be dated either to 698 or 728: if they are dated to 698 as I think, if they are linked to Flavius Atias' *sigillion* (*SB* III 7240), then Psate, son of Pisrael had at least 28 years of scribal career. On my interpretation of *O.Crum VC* 8 and 9, including their date, see section 5.3.2.

³⁹⁶ Psate in *SB Kopt.* V 2266; *SB Kopt.* V 2228; *O.Crum VC* 8 and 9, and Psate in *SB Kopt.* V 2284. In *P.Strass.Copt.* 66 the actual signature is missing.

³⁹⁷ *P.Strass.Copt.* 66 is too fragmentary to include here.

³⁹⁸ *SB Kopt.* V 2228 and *O.Crum VC* 8 and 9 (πλο^ϛ) vs *SB Kopt.* V 2266 (πειλ).

production is one of great variety. Some of these variations, such as using different abbreviations for *λογος*, or not using an abbreviation at all, were most likely inspired by his scribal activity, maybe the amount of space on the writing support, rather than dictated by the situation which gave rise to the production of the protection letter. Other variations, however, definitely were a product of that situation: the formulary used in O.CrumVC 8, with its abundance of clauses, was chosen deliberately to reference the situation of the monks, who are the protectees in that case (see section 5.3.2).

3.3.1.2 *Aristophanes, son of Johannes*

The great variability of Psate's protection letters contrasts with the other well-known Djeme scribe, Aristophanes, who was active mostly after Psate's time. Aristophanes was active as a scribe in Djeme from 724 to 756-758.³⁹⁹ His work has been the subject of extensive research by Jennifer Cromwell, in which context she has discussed Aristophanes' production of protection letters.⁴⁰⁰ He wrote five protection letters in the corpus, among which Jeremias' protection letter cited in section 1.1.1. His protection letters are dated between 727/728 and 729.⁴⁰¹ The protection letters written by Aristophanes vary less than those written by Psate. The general structure of the documents especially exhibits a strong uniformity. They all contain the same structural elements: opening address, instruction clause, promise clause, a clause which recurs in other protection letters: "So that you do not doubt, I have drawn up this promise and I sign it.", followed by a date, and a scribal signature. Moreover, all promise clauses, where extant, in all documents contain the verb "to prosecute", and the instruction clauses all only read "come to your house", only once supplemented by "appear" (*SB Kopt.* III 1368, l. 5: *ΝΤΟΥΩΝ2 ΕΒΟΛ*).

Aristophanes' protection letters are quite uniform in their structure and formulary, they lack the scribal variability of Psate's protection letters. However, it is clear that Aristophanes' documents were drawn up with specific situations in mind, which required different formulae and stipulations. *SB Kopt.* V 2233 is his only protection letter which does not stipulate a condition to the protection, and it has an affirmative promise clause (see section 3.1.2.2). *SB Kopt.* III 1368 (Jeremias' protection letter cited in section 1.1.1) is the

³⁹⁹ Cromwell, *Recording*, 58: Table 2.2.

⁴⁰⁰ Cromwell, *Recording*, section 4.5.

⁴⁰¹ Cromwell, *Recording*, 121, table 4.1. *SB Kopt.* V 2233: 5 June 729, *SB Kopt.* V 2246: 11 July 729, *SB Kopt.* III 1368: 3 October 728, *SB Kopt.* V 2249: 728/729, Cromwell, *Recording*, 245-247, no. 9: date lost but likely 727/728.

only protection letter by Aristophanes which mentions that someone had fled and has a second promise clause, apart from “we will not prosecute you”: ⲭⲉ ⲛⲛⲉⲛⲉⲣ ⲛⲉⲑⲟⲟⲩ | ⲛⲁⲕ ⲭⲉ ⲁⲕⲛⲱⲧ: “and we will not do any harm to you because you fled”. *SB Kopt.* III 1368 and *SB Kopt.* V 2246 contain limitations and conditions which do not occur anywhere else in the corpus. Thus, while two out of five of Aristophanes’ protection letters are fragmentary, the overall picture seems to be one of regularity, with space for alterations based on specific situations.

3.3.1.3 Other Djeme scribes

I discuss three more Coptic protection letters written by three different Djeme village scribes known from other documents written by them.⁴⁰²

Joannes, son of Lazaros gradually replaced Psate, son of Pisrael in the spring of 726 as a scribe responsible for drawing up tax-receipts in Djeme. The bulk of his tax-receipt production – about 30 have been published – can be dated to that year.⁴⁰³ The protection letter written by him *SB Kopt.* V 2264 is very short and does not include an instruction clause. It is similar to Psate’s *SB Kopt.* V 2266. It contains variations on the promise clause and scribal signature. The promise clause is written ⲉⲧⲙⲛⲁⲣⲁⲓⲉ where you would expect ⲛⲛⲉⲛⲛⲁⲣⲁⲓⲉ (or ⲉⲛⲉⲛⲛⲁⲣⲁⲓⲉ as a regional variant). This form of the promise clause also appears in *SB Kopt.* V 2280, written by Djeme scribe Komes, as well as *SB Kopt.* V 2281, possibly written by Psate but not signed.

The scribe Komes wrote *SB Kopt.* V 2280 (695 or 725), a tax-receipt with protection letter. The tax-receipt is for the capitation tax (ⲛⲉⲕⲁⲓⲁⲓⲣⲁⲫⲟⲛ: “your capitation tax”) for an amount of one *holokottinos*, for the first instalment of the ninth year, which is also the year in which the document was produced. The tax-receipt is signed, probably by the tax collector, and then follows the protection letter. The *lashanes* promise that they will not prosecute the protectee for anything in this, ninth, year, except for the *holokottinos*, and they will not let anyone else prosecute him. This document is the longest among the tax-receipts with added protection letters, as it contains two promise clauses, an exception, and the signature by the *lashanes*.

⁴⁰² *SB Kopt.* V 2242 was written by a certain Patapè.

⁴⁰³ Albarrán Martínez et al., “Ostraca. Le Dossier Des Reçus”, 234.

It has been suggested that the scribe Theodoros, son of Psate was the son of the scribe Psate, son of Pisrael.⁴⁰⁴ Two tax-receipts by his hand are known, of which one can be dated to 733. The protection letter from his hand lacks an instruction clause (*SB Kopt.* V 2265). In this it follows the previously discussed protection letters produced by Psate (*SB Kopt.* V 2266) and Joannes (*SB Kopt.* V 2264). He writes in name of the “*dioiketeis* of *Kastron Memnonion*”, i.e. the village administrators of Djeme who were one rank up from the *lashanes*.⁴⁰⁵ Theodoros’ protection letter has formal similarities to those written by his father, but also to those written by Aristophanes. Theodoros consistently uses the same abbreviation for *logos* which Psate uses in *SB Kopt.* V 2271 and *O.CrumVC* 8 and 9, and abbreviations generally characterize Theodoros’ protection letter. In terms of structure and formulae, his protection letter is very similar to those written by Aristophanes.

Examining the Coptic protection letters produced by the village scribes of Djeme, in a period of roughly 30 years, we can draw the following conclusions.⁴⁰⁶ The scribes, except for Aristophanes, wrote different protection letters with variegated formulaic structures: among their protection letters there are protection letters without instruction clauses, protection letters with affirmative promise clauses of the “settle” type, and tax-receipts with protection letter formulae. It is clear that there was no fixed “Djeme” format for protection letters, although there is overlap in the formulae used by the different scribes. The two scribes who produced more than one surviving protection letter, did not use the same formulae consistently, although Aristophanes’ production is much more uniform than Psate’s. But also in Aristophanes’ protection letters there was room for variation. However, it is clear that the scribes knew the formulaic building blocks which were necessary to compose a protection letter, but that they chose and combined them in many different ways, which probably reflected their own preferences, and/or the preferences of the village administrators in whose name they were writing, as well as the specific situation at hand. The protection letter was part of the repertoire of the village scribe, in the same way that tax-receipts, or (private) legal documents were.

⁴⁰⁴ Albarrán Martínez et al., “Ostraca. Le Dossier Des Reçus”, 237.

⁴⁰⁵ See sections 1.3.2 and 5.3.1.

⁴⁰⁶ If *O.CrumVC* 8 and 9 were written by Psate in 698. *SB Kopt.* V 2233 and 2246 were written by Aristophanes in 730.

This section focused on the Djeme village scribes and their varying use of the protection letter formula. Beyond issues of variability and uniformity in the use of formulaic structures, there are the appearances of unique expressions in the documents. Several documents in the corpus contain such unique phrases which seem to refer to the specific situation in which they were created, and I will discuss those in the next section.

3.3.2 Specific references in the protection letters

The content of the protection letters is generally “poured” into formulaic structures. What the protectee is supposed to do, the amount of money that they should still pay, the protection that is offered, were all written down in certain formulae which for the most part follow fixed grammatical patterns – e.g. the instruction clause in the conjunctive, a negative promise clause in negative future III – and a specific order in the document: the εἰς πλοῦτος (μῆνοϋτε) (ντοοτκ) formula was usually followed by the instruction clause, and thereafter came the promise clause, and possibly a limitation and/or exception. The verbs used in these clauses varied, but for the most part they were chosen from a limited number which recur throughout the corpus (see sections 2.4.1-2.4.2, and 3.1.2). The influence of these formulaic structures is the strongest in protection letters addressed to protectees, but is also present in the letters addressed to protectors or intermediaries, which can contain instruction clauses and promise clauses, and in some cases a complete and signed protection letter embedded within the letter.⁴⁰⁷ However, in these letters to protectors and intermediaries there was markedly more room for comments about the situation. This is not wholly surprising, as these letters were for the most part letters rather than signed legal documents, while the reverse is true for the protection letters addressed to protectees. At the same time, even in the protection letters addressed to protectees, sometimes there are phrases so specific that they seem to apply directly to the situation which gave rise to the document.

There are different ways in which those specific references were integrated in the protection letters. A: They could be molded into the formal structure, e.g. as the verb in an instruction clause or a promise clause. B: An addition could be made to a clause, which made it more specific. C: Additional comments outside of the formula could also point to the specific circumstances of the problem to be solved. I cite two examples to show what this looks like in the documents. First, *SB Kopt. V 2224*, the protection letter from protector Victor to

⁴⁰⁷ E.g. *O.Crum VC 64*, see section 3.2.1.

her, Thabaïs. That she comes ... and prays to her father...”⁴¹³ Again, the non-standard clause “that she prays to her father” is added to the standard clause “that she comes”, and shaped into the formulaic mold of the instruction clause. It is possible that Isak intended for Thabaïs to ask her father to help Isak in his plight in some way.

What was the role of these integrations or specific references in the documents? On the one hand, in some cases it must have been important that the protectee performed a particular task, which needed to be detailed in the protection letter. This was certainly the case in Isak’s protection letter for Thabaïs, he wanted her to “pray to her father”, which presumably would help Isak’s case as well. This could also be the reason why in a few protection letters, usually in the instruction clauses, there are references to the protectee’s work or occupation.⁴¹⁴ As I will explain in more detail in section 5.4, the intermediary or protector offered their support and protection for a specific goal which served their interests as much as those of the protectee.

On the other hand, references to the protectee’s personal situation might have been more effective in convincing them to return home. In the case of *SB Kopt.* V 2288, a letter from three village heads requesting a monastic superior to issue a protection letter for a third party, the village heads detail contents of the future protection letter in the third person, as is expected (on this, see section 3.2.2). However, towards the end of the letter, the text mentions that “your friends” received a protection letter and that they came home. This might have been the village heads directly addressing the protectee or it might have been a form of reported speech, expressing the words of someone else, in which case we do not know who is addressed. In any case, this unique addition to the letter was not technically necessary for the request to issue the protection letter. The reference to other people, or friends, receiving an making use of protection letters, could have been a means to convince the protectee, to whom the letter was presumably read, or in any case meant to be read, to accept the protection letter and come to the village.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹³ *SB Kopt.* V 2304: ... ἀγῶ εἰς πατρός μνηογῆ | ντοτς θάβαις νγει ἐβόλ | χ. νσπροςγχη ἐνεϊκῶτ.

⁴¹⁴ See the example discussed here, *SB Kopt.* V 2224, but also e.g. *SB Kopt.* V 2263, a fragmentary protection letter in which the protectee is instructed to “Come and gather your dates”.

⁴¹⁵ On this particular letter, see also Palombo and Scheerlinck, “Asking”. With this in mind, the affirmative promise clause “I will contend for him”, unique in the corpus and added to more standard promise clauses in *O.CrumVC* 75, might have been written to convince the protector, i.e. the addressee of the request letter for a protection letter, but possibly also as an extra assurance for the protectee, in case the letter was indeed read to him.

As I have discussed at length in this chapter, the language of the protection letters consists mostly of formulaic clauses or formulae which are specific to the genre and which make the documents identifiable as protection letters. At the same time, the contents of these clauses, and the combination or order in which they appear in the documents, are extremely variegated. The protection letters were formulaic, but they were not forms to fill out.⁴¹⁶ Based on the protection letters that have been published until now, this variation cannot be ascribed to chronological evolution or local tradition, and not even to the custom or preference of individual scribes. I believe that this extreme variation in the protection letters should be understood as a reflection of the situations which prompted their creation. When a protection letter was issued for a protectee, the clauses were chosen deliberately, determined by the specific problem at hand, and by how the protector aimed to solve it. This does not mean that the protection letters give us a detailed or clear insight in that situation or problem. The language of the protection letters consisted for the most part of highly varied formulae, and only on occasion the documents seem to refer to specific aspects of the underlying situation. Interestingly, these references are often fully integrated in the formulary of the protection letters, following their formal structure. The general image of the language of the protection letters which emerges from my discussions, is that that of repeated and recognizable patterns which still allowed a high degree of variation. The variation, including the specific references, connects the documents to the particular problem situations they were supposed to solve.

The next and last section of the chapter brings together the observations made in the preceding sections, and discuss how embedded the protection letters were as an institution of village life.⁴¹⁷ There is no question that the village was the central context in which the Coptic protection letter mechanism operated. In the majority of the cases, village administrators played the role of protector, or of the intermediary. They interacted and cooperated with monastic and clerical elites within the protection letter mechanism. But to

⁴¹⁶ Such form-like documents were in use in the fiscal administration of Early Islamic Egypt: *entagia* or tax-demand notes such as CPR XXII 7, SPP 1199 and 1200 were written with blank spaces left for the name and residence of the tax-payers. Apparently they were prepared to be filled out, but were never used.

⁴¹⁷ This chapter focuses on the documents and their actors in their local context. The relationship between the protection letters and larger governmental policies and practices will be discussed in Chapter 5.

what extent was the protection letter mechanism a formalized institution in the village, maybe even a routine solution to certain problems in the village?

3.3.3 *The protection letter mechanism as an institution of village life*

I use the word institution here in as similar way as Krakowski and Rustow (2014): “a set of established and predictable practices that convey social meaning, are normative, and come to have such a seemingly objective reality that they govern future possibilities of social behavior.”⁴¹⁸ Lajos Berkes has argued that protection letters were issued as a matter of routine, on the basis of the relatively large number of such documents that have been preserved: “Die Ausstellung solcher Dokumente war ein Routinevorgang, zahlreiche Schutzbriefe sind überliefert, zwei sogar vom selben Tag.”⁴¹⁹ I would agree with this statement only to a certain extent. The relatively large amount of evidence for the production and circulation of protection letters over a relatively short period of time, as well as other features which I will discuss below, allow us to consider the protection letters mechanism as firmly embedded in village life as an instrument that was repeatedly used to solve a certain range of problems. They were instruments tied to different aspects of life in the villages: fiscal, economic, legal, and social.⁴²⁰ A careful reading of the protection letters uncovers a network of protective interventions, frequently linking the village elites, villagers, to monastic centers and monastic elites. The language of the protection letters corroborates this view of the protection letters as a social institution of village life: the documents refer to themselves and are referred to with a specific term: *logos mpnoute* (2.2). In many cases only the more general *logos* is used as a designation, but then the formulaic context usually corroborates the identification of the document as a protection letter. Indeed, the Coptic protection letters have a recognizable and genre-specific, if variegated, formula, which even pervades protection letters between protectors and intermediaries. Moreover, clear patterns emerge that show the most important formulaic building blocks of the Coptic protection letters. Thus, they had a certain degree of standardization which

⁴¹⁸ Krakowski and Rustow, “Formula”, 114. Their definition of institutions is based on Nathan Hofer, *The Popularization of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt*, 1173–1325. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

⁴¹⁹ Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*, 177 and n. 49, referring to *O.Crum VC* 8 and 9, which were issued on the same day. I discuss these two documents in detail in section 5.3.2.

⁴²⁰ Chapter 4 will elaborate on those issues.

allowed for variegated expressions. This standardization supports the idea that the Coptic protection letter mechanism functioned as an institution in village life.

Several features of the procedure to obtain a protection letter also point to the “predictability” of the protection letters, as patterns can be identified in the procedure. E.g. there are several instances of intermediaries asking for a protection letter, and stating they will respect it. Another example of a procedure pattern are letters from a protector to an intermediary with the protection letter for the protectee embedded within the letter.⁴²¹ Moreover, one protectee stated that he received a protection letter each year. (We do not have evidence for such repetition in the corpus.) One letter mentions that people other than the protectee, possibly his friends, had received protection letters and that they came home (i.e. made use of the document as intended). This letter illustrates the idea that a protection letters was something you could expect, you could count on, that the Coptic protection letter mechanism followed established patterns in local rural society. Similarly, the recurrence in the corpus of village heads requesting monastic or clerical authorities to issue a protection letter for a third person, and promising that they will uphold the protection letter, show us that this was a repeated, predictable way of solving problems in the countryside. .

While I believe those aspects of the Coptic protection letter procedure also support the identification of the Coptic protection letter mechanism as an institution, I believe that the evidence does not allow us to consider the protection letters or their issuance in these contexts as “routine”. The high degree of variation in the formulary – including sometimes very specific references to the situation at hand – even in those written in the same village or even by the same scribe, shows that indeed there was not one go-to routine format for a protection letter, a template to be filled out. As such they differ from tax-receipts, with which they otherwise share characteristics: they were also documents related to public law, relatively concise and highly formulaic. This high degree of variation in the language of the protection letters rather points away from routine, and towards deliberate choices in the formulary of each document, tailored to the particular situation at hand. The different types and amounts of exceptions in the protection letters can be understood in this respect. They were not a fixed fine or a routine amount, but rather the product of a deliberation of the protector or of a negotiation between the protector and (a representative for) the protectee.

⁴²¹ Martin, *Social Structures*, *passim* for the usefulness of “patterns” to understand social relationships, structures and institutions.

In terms of the procedure to obtain a protection letter, the many different interventions of a varying number of intermediaries documented in the corpus also suggest that obtaining a protection letter was less than routine. Moreover, the procedure was not always straightforward for the people involved, as is shown by the letters discussing who was most appropriate to issue a protection letter,⁴²² or whether a protection letter should be issued at all.⁴²³

In conclusion, I consider the Coptic protection letter mechanism an institution of village life. The mechanism used the Coptic protection letter as a recognizable and legally valid – at least in its local context – type of document, and there were certain patterns of interactions between the actors, as we see clearly in the documents which testify to the procedures to obtain a protection letter. The repeated patterns in the language, and in the way the mechanism operated, show that in certain circumstances, a protection letter, characterized by a number of document-specific formulaic elements, would be issued. One could, to a certain extent, expect a protection letter to be issued when one was in need of it, and expect it to be upheld when one was in possession of it.⁴²⁴ However, it was a malleable and flexible institution, which is shown not only by the great variability in the formulary, but also by the fact that there were different ways to request or obtain a protection letter, for oneself or for a third party. An integral characteristic of the mechanism was an emphasis on the situation at hand, references to which are often molded and poured into the more fixed formulaic structures of the documents. In my opinion these references include references to the human interactions behind the production of the protection letter, e.g. negotiations about the conditions of the protectee's return and protection.

This chapter has examined the “patterns of protection” in the corpus of Coptic protection letters, connecting their language and the processes of their production and circulation among the villages and monastic settings of seventh and eighth century Egypt. In the next Chapter, I move on from issues of form and procedure to questions about content:

⁴²² *SB Kopt.* V 2286.

⁴²³ *P.Ryl.Copt.* 385: the sender states that he will not issue a protection letter for certain fugitive vine dressers. In the fragmentary letter *SB Kopt.* V 2307, the sender seems to advise or mention a decision against issuing a protection letter for someone: ll. 6-8: ΟΥΔΕ Τ ΛΟΓΟΣ ΝΑΨ | ΑΛΛΑ ΕΤΑΝΩΣΕ Ν|ΝΕΘΟΟΥ ΕΤΑΨΑΔΥ: “to not issue (?) a *logos* (promise) for him, but we have written (down) the evil things he has done”.

⁴²⁴ And expect punishment for those who did not:

what kind of problems are these problem-solving instruments trying to solve? And how do the Coptic protection letters compare to other, contemporary, documents which have similar functions?

