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Protective interventions by local elites in early Islamic Egypt

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Chapter 5: The Integrated System: From Fustat to Djeme – and back

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Structure and arguments of the chapter

In the previous chapter, I have discussed four areas of life, i.e. taxation, travel, litigation, and the release of prisoners, in which the local village and monastic or clerical elites of Early Islamic Egypt made protective interventions in their communities through Coptic protection letters, as well as how the Coptic protection letters were related to and functioned differently than other mechanisms of protection which were in use in the province of Egypt in the seventh and eighth century (Chapter 4). Building on the analyses in the previous chapters, where the emphasis lay on the role of the language of the protection letters, how they were produced and circulated in village and monastic contexts, and which problems they aimed to solve in those contexts, this chapter will focus on the main agents of protection in the Egyptian countryside, the local elites, and their relationships with the local population on the one hand and the provincial government and its representatives on the other.

This chapter will discuss the participation of the local elites in the administration of the province and their position between the government in Fustat and the local population, through the lens of their documentary production related to protection mechanisms, including the Coptic protection letters. While it should be noted that relationships of protection could also be forged which omitted the middle man of the local elites, generally they formed an essential intermediary layer between government and local population.⁶⁰³ This chapter argues that the local elites were not simply transmitting orders from the government to the local population, and inversely, that they were not simply following orders, collecting revenue in the villages and sending it to the government, but that they were knowledgeable and active parts of an integrated system of administration and control of the province, and that they made use of their position in that system to their advantage. Throughout the various sections in the chapter, I will show how the local authorities in the countryside of Egypt were not acting in isolation and unaware of procedures involving higher echelons of the administration, nor were they merely executing the orders of the government in Fustat, but rather interacting with the commands. The fiscal process from a single tax-demand note sent by the governor of Egypt to a shipment of collected taxes sent

⁶⁰³ See section 4.1.2.2.

back up the Nile to the governor was not necessarily straightforward, as these local elites shaped the policies and demands of the government to further their own interests and to fit the realities of life on the ground.

This chapter has a dual focus. First, the chapter aims to show the integration of village elites in the administration of the imperial province. This includes the use of their main language of (private and administrative) communication, Coptic. The protection letters and the related documents discussed in this chapter provide a point of entry to the functioning of various levels of elites (pagarchic and rural) in Egypt in the seventh and eighth centuries. My analyses of the documents stress the interconnectedness of these various groups of elites, and especially the village elites' high level of integration in provincial administrative procedures. The documents studied in the various case studies in this chapter, while they are not all Coptic protection letters, relate to societal and administrative areas in which the protection letters solved problems, in particular travel and fugitives or tax evaders (Chapter 4, section 4.2).

Second, this chapter aims to show how the village elites' participation in the Coptic protection letter mechanism allowed them to shape their position as members of their village communities and as actors in the administration. I examine the local networks of dependency relationships that are underlying the Coptic protection letter mechanism, which lays bare the ambiguity of those relationships. The village elites' participation in the Coptic protection letter mechanism was motivated by their desire to entertain local relationships, build up social capital, and maintain their position in the administration. Supporting the fiscal system through their participation in the Coptic protection letter mechanism, served the village elites' own interests.

The first focus of the chapter is the subject of sections 5.2 and 5.3, and the second focus is the subject of section 5.4. The approach in these sections, as did Chapter 4, will explore different levels in the administrative hierarchy in the province. This interconnected approach to locally circulating documents like the Coptic protection letters allows us to study different scales of networks of authority in the imperial province. Section 5.2 provides a wider perspective of government policies and their reception in the countryside. The section will emphasize, through a case study, the importance of Coptic as an administrative language. Coptic was the language in which the village elites and their mechanisms functioned. It was important, also to higher functionaries, that communications coming from above reached those the messages were intended for in the relevant language, i.e. Coptic.

Section 5.3 focuses even more on the “integrated system” of the chapter title. It discusses the connections of village elites’ mechanisms and documents with higher levels of the administration, through case studies analyzing requests for travel permits, and protection letters which link village inhabitants to higher officials. Section 5.4 then discusses the role of the Coptic protection letter mechanism in the social relationships in the village, the various overlapping interests that could motivate the village elites to participate in the Coptic protection letter mechanism, and how the Coptic protection letter mechanism supported the goals of the provincial administration of Egypt, and ultimately of the Islamic Empire.

5.1.2 Methodological remarks

As I discuss in more detail in section 1.5.5, one of the central arguments of this dissertation and of this Chapter in particular is that the whole administrative apparatus at work in Egypt, with its Arab-Muslim *amīrs* and its “local” *lashanes* was an integrated system in which all different actors actively contributed, consciously or unconsciously, to keep the province of Egypt, and eventually the Islamic Empire running. This approach has been part of the methodology of several recent Empire Studies publications not focusing on Islamic empires. See for example the collection: *Beyond Empires: Global, Self-Organizing, Cross-Imperial Networks, 1500-1800*. The contributions of this 2016 collection examine the mechanisms by which European state empires and informal empires, self-organized networks, worked together and strengthened the empire. Moving away from a state-centered approach in the analyses to an actor-centered approach entailed, in the words of the editor:⁶⁰⁴

“...a very rewarding process of bringing to the fore the role Europeans and non-Europeans played in the construction of formal and informal empires worldwide. This attempt to treat equally, or as equally as the primary sources have allowed authors, metropolitan and colonial actors as members of the same world, sharing similar interests and engaged in comparable activities, not separately but rather as members of the same networks has helped authors to break with their own historical categories without falling in the trap of either telling a tale of the colonizer or of the colonized.”

One step further goes the idea that the local elites were not only fully integrated in the fabric of empires, but even actively furthered the interest of the empire of which they were a part. This idea is part of the identification of those local elites as “stakeholders in empire”, which

⁶⁰⁴ Antunes and Polónia, *Beyond Empires*, 279.

was proposed in Irigoin and Grafe's 2012 article "A stakeholder empire: the political economy of Spanish imperial rule in America". The authors argued that the local elites of the Spanish colonies had a great economic interest in the empire, as they had the same authority to locally reinvest tax revenue, the collection of which they also partially controlled. They were (economic) stakeholders in the empire.⁶⁰⁵ Examining the local elites of Early Islamic Egypt as "stakeholders", embedded in larger structures of power and dependency such as administration and tax collection, rather than as mere subjects or taxpayers, does justice to the evidence which can be found in the papyrological record. However, this identification of the local elites as stakeholders in empire cannot be transposed directly from the context studied by Grafe and Irigoin to the local elites of Early Islamic Egypt. While the local elites did play an important part in tax assessment and tax collection, they were obliged to forward the amount collected to the central administration, rather than reinvesting it as in the Spanish stakeholder model. If they kept money for themselves this would have been considered a deed of corruption.⁶⁰⁶

The local elites' actions, including the protective interventions studied in this dissertation, did affect the province, by providing the social cohesion in the countryside which allowed fugitives to return home and contribute to the (tax) economy of the province. By implementing the policies of the government the local elites furthered their own interests, and by adapting the policies to the realities on the ground and to their own interests, they furthered the interests of the empire. Inversely, supporting the fiscal efforts of empire, they supported their own position and interests. Other than securing and advancing their social position in their communities, there were financial incentives for the local rural elites to support the fiscal efforts of empire: since the rural elites were responsible for collecting and forwarding taxes of their communities, it is likely that they would have had to make up the difference themselves if tax-payments were lacking because tax-payers were not in the village to pay their taxes. I will elaborate on these intertwined interests of empire and local elites in section 5.4.

⁶⁰⁵ Grafe and Irigoin, "Stakeholder Empire". The theory is also discussed in Burbank and Cooper, *Empires*, 13.

⁶⁰⁶ See also the warnings in the tax-demands not to pay more than owed to the tax collector discussed in 4.1.2.2. From the ninth century onwards, tax farmers committed to maintaining the land under their control and its infrastructure, as well as paying the taxes.

Since this chapter is partially built on documents that fall beyond the central corpus of Coptic protection letters, I wish to comment on a point of methodology. The point of view of the local elites, the bottom-up perspective, is well represented in the documentary sources, the papyri and ostraca. However, in its focus on the transmission of governmental orders and policies, this chapter will actually adopt a predominantly top-down perspective. This top-down perspective is inherent to many of the sources used in this chapter. An important type of documentary source for the issues discussed in this chapter is administrative correspondence, in Coptic, Greek and Arabic, generated at various levels of the administrative hierarchy. The extant administrative letters show us mostly top-down communication, from higher levels of the hierarchy down the administrative chain. Most of these are sent one level down the administrative ladder, and only one person is explicitly mentioned as the recipient, although other people were often eventually involved in the execution of the orders in the letter, e.g. a governor writes to a pagarch about collecting and dispatching the taxes, mechanisms which would eventually have involved many people who were subordinate to the pagarch. However, in a few instances this relationship is more complicated, and the sender's words reach further down the ladder, or many different people are addressed by the sender's message, more or less in the way that a circular letter might work. I will discuss such more complicated cases in section 5.2.

Thus, the majority of our evidence is written from this top-down perspective, albeit at many different levels of the administrative ladder. However, there are also documents which reflect bottom-up communication: a request from village officials in which they ask the district administrator to order that a travel permit be issued for three monks (section 5.3.1), guarantee documents addressed by village elite members to the district administrators or addressed by monks to their head of the monastery.⁶⁰⁷ There is also indirect evidence of such bottom-up lines of administrative communication. We know that individual locals could petition the governor, because we have Qurra b. Shariks decisions on what to do with the petitions, although we do not have the original petitions themselves.⁶⁰⁸ The papyrological record also contains horizontal communications, where officials of similar level transmit, certain orders and ask requests and favors from each other. This is especially visible in the archive of Flavius Papas, the pagarch of Edfu in the second

⁶⁰⁷ Section 4.2.

⁶⁰⁸ Discussed in section 4.3.2.

half of the seventh century, and in Basilios' archive which both contain several epistles exchanged between pagarchs.

Each of these documents played its part in the administration of the Egyptian province, be it at Fustat, in a district capital such as Hermopolis/Ashmun, or in larger and smaller villages in the countryside. These documents were the instruments by which the people issuing, requesting, receiving them negotiated their place in the administration and society of the province, and ultimately, the empire. Because of the particular focus of this dissertation, I will focus on documents related to problems solved by Coptic protection letters discussed in Chapter 4, but the Coptic protection letters themselves are also part of the analyses. They feature in particular as instruments by which the local elites adapted governmental policies to the realities of life in their communities. Their production and circulation was geographically limited, but, through their connections to documents, individuals, and offices from other levels of the administrative hierarchy, they are testimonies of the reach of the government in the countryside and the negotiation of its orders and policies by the local elites (5.4). Coptic protection letters take pride of place also in section 5.3.2, which pays special attention to those protection letters in which officials on an administrative level higher than the village are mentioned. These protection letters are examples of how the village elites' documents and mechanisms could be connected to the documents and mechanisms of higher levels of the administration.

Now that I have introduced the various arguments of this chapter, as well as the type of documents which are discussed, in the next section I will focus on the transmission and reception of communications from the central government, and the translation mechanisms which allowed the multilingual administration of Early Islamic Egypt to function efficiently.

5.2 Translating orders from above

5.2.1 Orders arriving at the local elites

In order to control the province, not only a certain amount of force – or the threat of such force – but also effective communication was important.⁶⁰⁹ How did the local weavers, farmers, monks, fishermen etc., know what the governor wanted from them and decided for them? The government had to ensure that the locals knew who was ruling the province, and what was expected of them. This need for efficient communication was also felt at the highest levels of the empire: the literary sources mention and cite numerous letters sent by

⁶⁰⁹ Delattre, Legendre, and Sijpesteijn, *Authority*.

the caliph to the local governors of the provinces of his empire, detailing his demands and scolding his governors for not meeting them.⁶¹⁰ The thousands of papyri which have been found in Egypt that can be dated to the seventh century and beyond, contain a large amount of administrative communication, either between officials of different or similar rank, or between officials and (members of) the local population.

The main instrument by which we see the Arab-Muslim government transmitting their policies and demands to the province of Egypt is sending letters with instructions and orders down the administrative chain. The dozens of Greek and Arabic letters issued between 709-710 by governor Qurra b. Sharik to Basilios, pagarch/district administrator of Afrodito/Ishqaw, are well known.⁶¹¹ Letters which contain orders for delivering certain goods could be accompanied by a list (γνώσις, *gnōsis*), written in a different style of handwriting underneath the closing of the letter, and detailing the separate categories and the amounts requested.⁶¹²

The letters were, however, often accompanied or paralleled by officers sent from the central chancery to execute or supervise the execution of policies announced in the letters. The presence of this person is several times mentioned in the letters as a mechanism of control: not only will this deliverer of the letter presumably bring back Basilios' written answer to the governor, Qurra writes in his letters to Basilios that "his man" will not leave until Basilios complies with the instructions of the governor and gives the man whatever he is ordered in the letter to send to the governor.⁶¹³ Other than messengers the central government could also send out agents with a specific task to all corners of the Egyptian countryside, as a way of communicating and carrying out governmental policies. E.g., Qurra wrote in several letters that he sent agents to search and arrest fugitives.⁶¹⁴ In *P.Apoll.* 9, a

⁶¹⁰ Cobb, "White Banners" examines such dynamics for Abbasid Syria..

⁶¹¹ For a detailed overview of all documents in the archive, see Richter, "Language Choice". A general introduction: *P.Lond.* IV.

⁶¹² E.g. *P.Laur.* IV 192 (Greek). An Arabic example, from a different administrative dossier, of such an administrative letter with an added list is *P.MuslimState* 23, which gives instructions on the delivery of wheat for the tax collection.

⁶¹³ *P.Lond.Copt.* IV 1343, ll. 9-11: ἐπετ[ρ]έψ[αμ]ε(ν) | γὰρ τῷ ἀποστολόφ ἡμῶν μὴ ἀποκινήθῃναι ἐκ σοῦ/ ἄχρις ἂν ἐκπέμψῃς | ἐντελῶς τὴν ὑστέραν ψυχὴν τῶν εὐρισκομένων ἐν τῇ διοικ(ήσει) σοῦ[υ]/: since we instructed our messenger not to move away from you until you send out the very last soul of those found in your district".

A messenger with this function is also mentioned in *P.Ryl.Copt.* 277 (section 5.2.2).

⁶¹⁴ E.g. *P.Lond.* IV 1518.

complex letter dealing with fugitive caulkers (see below), this same tactic is mentioned. The postal service controlled by the caliph, the *barīd*, was also active in Egypt and in the papyri members of the βερεδάριοι bearing Arab names bringing letters back and forth are mentioned on several occasions.⁶¹⁵

The demands and instructions of higher authorities were passed down to lower ranking officials again by letter, sometimes indicating the origin of the instructions: a letter issued in 643 from the pagarch Athanasios to his underling Senouthios mentions that “the emir decided that...”. Athanasios’ instructions to Senouthios – he is told to organize police forces to prevent people from travelling – follow from the decision and instructions which the *amīr*, Athanasios’ superior, had previously given him – presumably also by letter.⁶¹⁶ It has been noted on several occasions that many of these top-down administrative letters contain not also orders and demands, but also justifications for those, the reason why certain instructions were given or certain goods were requested.⁶¹⁷ This practice shows a deliberate inclusion of the administrative apparatus at lower levels by officials of the central government. Letters sent between administrators from among the local elites can also transmit governmental policies and orders, as e.g. in *P.Apoll.* 27, in which one administrator, a *notarios*, asks the pagarch Flavius Papas for help, as he received a letter with orders from the *amīr*, which he cites – in indirect speech – extensively in his own letter to his colleague.⁶¹⁸

An interesting case is *P.Apoll.* 9, a layered letter in which the voices of different officials are represented.⁶¹⁹ Federico Morelli has shown how the messages of different officials are embedded in the text. This letter contains a message, named *sigillion*, from an *amīr* to a *dux* named Iordanes regarding caulkers who had fled. They need to be found and whoever hides them will have to pay an exorbitant fee. This sigillion from the *amīr* is then distributed by the *dux* to all the pagarchs in the region. The document which we have was found in the archive of one of those pagarchs, Flavius Papas.

⁶¹⁵ On the *barīd* of the Early Islamic period, and the various responsibilities of its employees, see Silverstein, *Postal*, 53-89. Foss, “Egypt”, 13-14. There are 28 references to *beredarii* in the Greek papyri from Early Islamic Egypt, the large majority belongs to the Basilios archive.

⁶¹⁶ *CPR* XXII 1.

⁶¹⁷ Morelli *CPR* XXX, Introd. On this feature in the Qurra’s letters to Basilios, see Papaconstantinou, “Rhetoric”.

⁶¹⁸ For more examples of local administrators asking each other for help regarding the orders see Foss, “Egypt”, esp. 10-11.

⁶¹⁹ Morelli, “Duchi”.

Aside from letters with orders and instructions addressed to a person within the administration, the government of the province also issued communications with tax demands for an entire village, the tax-demand notes being sent to the district administrator. There are examples of those in the early eighth century documentation related to governor Qurra b. Sharik and district administrator Basilios. The governor demands a certain amount of tax from a village, although the actual document was clearly sent to the office of the district administrator, as it was found among his papers. In section 5.2.2 below, I will discuss how these demands eventually reached the individual tax payer.

In most of this communication, the issuing officials seemed mainly concerned with getting their message to the relevant recipient, which was another official. However, there are some indications that government officials also thought of how to bring their message to the ears and heads of the local population, the taxpayers or fugitives about whom they were writing in their letters. In two Greek letters on fugitives, governor Qurra b. Sharik ordered Basilios that he should order local authorities such as village heads and policemen to come and listen to Qurra's instructions as Basilios' reads the letter aloud to them. After the reading, the governor orders, these locals should write a copy of the letter and hang it in their churches, where the message will be read aloud again. E.g. in *P.Lond.* IV 1343, the governor orders:

*Therefore read the present letter to all the people of your district, charging them to write a copy of it to each place and to publish it in their churches, exhorting and urging them to keep unbroken our command and to make known to you all the fugitives they know from the above mentioned administrative district of the Arsinoite, in order that we may not find any ground for proceeding against them whatever, or otherwise their life and property will have to answer for them.*⁶²⁰

Section 5.2.2 below analyses a Coptic document which in my interpretation is likely the product of a similar mechanism of transmission and dissemination of governmental orders and policies concerning fugitives.

The letters discussed and mentioned above were all written in Greek. It is well known that, from their very earliest communications, the Arab-Muslim government used both Arabic and Greek to transmit their demands in Egypt, sometimes using either of these

⁶²⁰ Translation by Bell, "Translations", vol. 1, 275. In *P.Lond.* IV 1384 the governor details the same procedure but specifies the people to whom Basilios should read the letter with "headmen and police", which I think might be also what was meant by "all the people of your district".

languages in a document, sometimes both.⁶²¹ Coptic, which had hitherto not had a role to play as an administrative language, starts to take pride of place in administrative communication on a lower level.⁶²² As such, it played a pivotal part, as I will show, in the transmission of governmental policies to the local population throughout Egypt.

In the Coptic documentation, the Islamic Empire is predominantly represented by the office of the governor of Egypt.⁶²³ Over twenty Coptic documents which explicitly mention the governor have been published until now. The governor in Egypt is called σύμβουλος (*symbolos*) in the Greek as well as in the Coptic documents. The majority of these documents are part of the Basileios archive. These are guarantee declarations by locals, regarding taxes, requisitioned laborers or fugitives, which I have discussed in several sections in Chapter 4. The guarantee declarations were addressed by the local guarantors to the governor (and the tax office), but only in an indirect way, i.e. via the pagarch.⁶²⁴ In those documents, the governor is the representative of the highest authority of the empire in the province.⁶²⁵ Particular, direct orders or decisions of the governor are referred to in a couple of Coptic letters. *P.Ryl.Copt.* 321 is a Coptic letter written to a Muslim official which mentions conflicting orders from the governor and from the letter's addressee, the Muslim official. *P.Bal.* II 187 is a private letter written by a person in the service of the governor. This sender relates how after an application to the governor he had been released from his service. The governor, especially as representative of the empire but also as an individual official, is thus not wholly absent from the Coptic documents. However, from the documents that are published thus far, it seems that Coptic documents were not produced by the office of the governor. Moreover, while the guarantee documents regarding fugitives or requisitioned laborers were formally addressed to the governor (and the tax office), they were actually received and kept at the office of the pagarch, to whom they were also

⁶²¹ *P.GrohmannMuhadara* II p. 12 = PERF 558 (643). Sijpesteijn, "Multilingual Archives".

⁶²² Richter, "Language Choice", Richter, "Unsern Herrn Kurrah"; Papaconstantinou "Speak Arabic"; Clackson, "Coptic or Greek?". I discuss the language distribution of Early Islamic Egypt and especially the importance of Coptic as an administrative language in section 1.2.3.

⁶²³ The caliph, named πρωτοσύμβουλος or ἀμυράλμουμνιν in the Greek documents, is mentioned in Coptic-Greek tax-demand note from the first half of the 8th century *P.Bal.* 130, but in the Greek part of the text and as part of the name of the tax (*dapanè* or expenses tax "for *amiralmoumnin*").

⁶²⁴ E.g. *P.Lond.* IV 1518, *P.Lond.* IV 1519, *P.Lond.* IV 1520, *P.Lond.* IV 1521, *P.Lond.* IV 1523, *P.Lond.* IV 1526.

⁶²⁵ See also *O.Crum VC* 49, which is a letter from a Muslim official regarding the post horses "of the governor".

addressed. Coptic documents effectively play a role in the communication and relationship between the government and the local population at the level of the village and pagarchy, but to see how that worked we have to go a step down the administrative structure of Egypt, to the level of the administration of pagarchies (districts), as I will discuss in the next section.

5.2.2 Pagarchy level: The local elites transmitting policies and demands

I discussed above how top-down directed communication arrived in the hands of local district administrators in the form of the governor's or other high officials' letters on administrative matters, but also in the form of tax-demand notes or *entagia* stipulating the taxes expected from a fiscal community.⁶²⁶ However, the tax-demands per individual taxpayer are communicated to those taxpayers in bilingual Coptic-Greek tax demands issued by the local pagarch's office. In fact, among the earliest documents using Coptic to express the relationship or communication between government and subjects after the Islamic conquest are some tax demand notes from Hermopolis. These early documents were issued by the office of the dux Flavius Atias at the end of the seventh century and were written in Greek and Coptic.⁶²⁷ Jenny Cromwell has shown how the two languages are distributed in the *entagia*: Greek is used for the address, the total amount to be paid, and the date. The formulas constituting the largest part of the text, however, are written in Coptic.⁶²⁸ Sebastian Richter describes a similar pattern of language distribution in the guarantee declarations in the Basilios archive. Greek is used in the introductory invocation of the Holy Trinity, but also throughout the documents for very specific parts, namely in the lists of the requisitioned workers and their place of origin, the list of witnesses, the scribal signature and the docket on the verso which identifies the document as a guarantee declaration and repeats the names of the interested parties. The linguistic distribution, Richter argues, is thus mostly functional: even a person who knew Greek but not Coptic, could have extracted the

⁶²⁶ See also Delattre, Pintauidi, and Vanthieghem, "Entagion Bilingue" for such *entagia* issued by governor 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Marwān.

⁶²⁷ Cromwell, "Coptic Texts"; Delattre, "Cinq Entagia".

⁶²⁸ Cromwell, "Coptic Texts". In the Coptic-Arabic *entagion* *P.Clackson* 45, issued in 753, each language is used to write a complete tax demand note, although neither text is an exact translation of the other: *P.Clackson* 45, p. 103. The Greek comment added at the top of this document presumably indicated that the tax had been paid.

relevant information from the document.⁶²⁹ Thus, the office of the pagarch or dux translated the tax-related communications from the governor to the local authorities, by producing relevant documents, i.e. individual tax demand notes for individuals members of the population), but also by using the relevant language, i.e. Coptic and/or Greek.⁶³⁰ The next section provides a detailed case study which, in my interpretation, exemplifies this mechanism of translation by which the district administrators transmitted the orders and instructions of higher officials down the administrative ladder to the villages.

Case study: Transmitting and translating: P.Ryl.Copt. 277

Besides transmitting orders from above by paraphrasing them in their correspondence with colleagues and subordinate officials, a second way in which local officials, pagarchs and *lashanes*, likely transmitted the instructions and demands of the government was by literally translating Arabic or Greek letters which they had received from the higher officials into Coptic, in order to communicate and carry out their contents on a village level. *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* is a document, written in Coptic, in which the sender orders the receiver to remove emigrants from other districts living in the receiver's district by sending them to the sender. The receiver is likely a pagarch or at least an important official within the pagarchy, as the sender refers to "your pagarchy" several times.⁶³¹ The sender is someone who has the authority to give the receiver orders such as this. Moreover, he has an agent whom he sent to the recipient and whom he instructed to stay until the recipient sent the people along with the sender's agent. The tone in the document is quite authoritative and even threatening towards the end. It is safe to assume that the sender is a superior of the recipient, someone who has the authority within the administration to write to a pagarch in this way. Both the first editor of this document, Walter Crum, and the specialist of the Greek Qurra letters, Harold Idris Bell, suspected that it was issued by the Umayyad governor of Egypt Qurra b. Sharīk, and therefore belonged to the archive of the pagarch Basilios. However, that interpretation can be challenged. We might take into account the chronology of the findings of *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* on the one hand, and the Basilios archive on the other. This document

⁶²⁹ Richter, "Unseren Herrn", 129. In section 5.3.1, I will discuss how *P.CLT3*, a request for a travel permit, presents a similar distribution of Greek and Coptic in the document.

⁶³⁰ These documents are attested in Middle Egypt in Greek and Coptic, and in the Fayum in Greek: Sijpesteijn *Shaping*, 236–237. See also Richter "An unsern Herrn"; Vanthieghem and Delattre, "Ensemble Archivistique", 128–129; Berkes and Younes, "Trilingual Scribe?" show how by the end of the 8th century trilingual individual scribes operated in the Fayyum.

⁶³¹ *P.Ryl.Copt. 277*, ll. 14, 21, 36.

was already published in 1898 by Crum, while the Basilios archive was only brought to light in 1901. It is therefore unlikely that this document was part of it.⁶³² On the other hand, my discussion below will present several similarities in terms of content and style between *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* and letters sent by Qurra b. Sharik to Basilios. However, as I will also show, the apparent similarities to Qurra's letters should not weigh too heavily, as we find similar topics and similar tone in the correspondence issued by other high government officials, as I will discuss below. Since the early nineteenth century, many early Islamic documents from Egypt (and other regions within the empire) have been discovered and published, and it is highly possible that without those newly discovered texts as material for comparison, earlier scholars such as Crum and Bell were influenced by a "Qurra bias".

The subjects and tone in *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* are reminiscent of Qurra's letters to Basilios and other letters from high officials to their subordinates. The main subject of the letter concerns the issue of fugitives, who in this letter are called "strangers" (ⲱⲙⲙⲟ, Greek: ξένοι). In Byzantine and Islamic papyri, "strangers" are the immigrants who are considered outsiders from the point of view of the district to which they moved.⁶³³ How to deal with these strangers was indeed a recurrent theme in Qurra's Greek and Arabic letters to Basilios, but in those letters he always calls them "φυγάδες", fugitives.⁶³⁴ The term ξένοι, however, is used in governmental correspondence on fugitives in the Flavius Papas' archive of the second half of the seventh century.⁶³⁵ In this case, the topic or theme of fugitives, immigrants or strangers thus connects this letter to those written by Qurra to Basilios, but the vocabulary used to describe the wandering tax-payers is different. Another example of

⁶³² I thank Naïm Vanthieghem for pointing this out to me. On the other hand, and while I still do not want to defend the idea that the document belongs to the Qurra-Basilios correspondence, I want to point out that if, as I will argue, this document was indeed used in a village rather than kept at the pagarchy administration, it is likely that it would not have been found together with the other documents of the archive. The provenance of the Coptic documents of the Rylands Library in Manchester, where *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* is kept, is mostly unknown, although some documents can be placed in the Hermopolite region and some in Fayyum. *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* is not included in Sebastian Richter's overview of the multilingual contents of this archive: Richter, "Language Choice", nor in Richter, "Unsern Herrn".

⁶³³ Morelli, "P.Brook. 26". See section 4.2.2.

⁶³⁴ *P.Lond. IV 1446*, a fiscal register in the Basilios archive, lists ξένοι settled in a certain district (ll. 28-39).

⁶³⁵ *P.Apoll. 13* (2nd half seventh cent), l. 5, from topoteretes Helladios to pagarch Flavius Papas: τὴν γνῶ]σιν τῶν ξένων τῶν ὄντων εἰς τὴν παγαρχίαν ὑμῶν: (the list) of strangers who are in your pagarchy. Compare *P.Ryl.Copt. 277*, ll. 20-21: ελλαγ νⲱⲙⲙⲟ νⲧⲉⲓⲙⲓⲛⲉ ⲉⲃⲟⲩⲛⲉ ⲛⲧⲕⲡⲁⲅⲁⲣϭ(ⲓⲁ): "every stranger of this sort, who is dwelling in your pagarchy". See also : *P.Apoll. 9*, l. 4.

the similarities between this letter and the letters from Qurra to Basilios, (section 5.2.1), is the function of the messenger bringing the letter. The mention of the sender's "man" staying with the recipient until he executes the sender's order is echoed in *P.Lond.* IV 1343, which deals with the same theme of sending away people from Basilios' pagarchy who had moved there from another pagarchy.⁶³⁶

The authoritative tone, including threats against the life of the recipient of *P.Ryl.Copt.* 277 are also reminiscent of the impatient and sometimes downright threatening comments which appear sometimes in the administrative correspondence of Qurra and other high officials writing to their subordinates.⁶³⁷ Towards the end of *P.Ryl.Copt.* 277, the sender writes: l. 29-31: ...ΝΚΟΥΡΩΜΕ ΕΨΗΩ ΝΡΗΚΑΤΑ- | ΦΡΟΝΕΙ ΕΒΩΟΟΠ ΖΑΟΥΘΟΡΗΘ ΝΒΩΠ ΕΤΥΨΥΧΗ | ΑΝ ΖΟΛΦΘ: ...you are a man in danger, who is neglectful, who is liable to be ensnared, who does not value his life at all (transl. Crum). We can compare this with examples from Qurra's letters, e.g. *P.Lond.* IV 1359, l. 20-21: λοιπὸν ἐὰν ἀγαπᾷς τὴν ψυχὴν σο(υ) μὴ καταφρονήσης | ἐν τούτῳ: So if you love your life do not be negligent in this matter.⁶³⁸ However, other high officials wrote in a similar tone to their subordinates, e.g. *P.Apoll.* 9/*PSIX* 1266), l. 3-4: ἴνα...[κ]αὶ κινδυνεύσατε εἰς τὴν ψυχ[ὴν] | ὑμῶν:...and you risk your life.⁶³⁹ *P.Mich.Copt.* 15 is a short Coptic letter, from a certain Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd al-Rahmān to Theodore, from the village of Titkooh in the Hermopolite region, demanding that the recipient pay his taxes himself rather than letting another individual pay for him. After this order, the sender writes: ΕΚΩΠΙΝΕ ΝΣΑ ΟΥΟΘΠ̄ | ΕΛΛΑΥ ΖΙΩΩΨ ΩΑΙΤΝΟΟΥ

⁶³⁶ *P.Ryl.Copt.* 277, 24-26: ΑΠΑΡΑΙΤΕΛΕ ΝΠΑΡΩΜΕ | ΧΗΝΗΨΑΔΑΤΚ ΕΒΟΛ ΩΑΝΤΨΧΙ ΝΕΩΜΜΟ ΝΤΕΙΜΙΝΕ | ΝΤΟΤΚ ΝΤΚΤΝΟΥΨΟΥ ΝΑΙ ΝΜΜΑΨ: "I ordered my man that he will not return from you until he receives the aforesaid strangers from you, and you send them to me with him." *P.Lond.Copt.* IV 1343, ll. 9-11: ἐπεῖτ[ρ]έψ[αμ]ε(ν) | γὰρ τῷ ἀποστόλῳ ἡμῶν μὴ ἀποκινήθῃναι ἐκ σοῦδ/ ἄχρις ἂν ἐκπέμψῃς | ἐντελῶς τὴν ὑστέραν ψυχὴν τῶν εὕρισκομένων ἐν τῇ διοικ(ήσει) σοῦ[ν]: "since we instructed our messenger not to move away from you until you send out the very last soul of those found in your district."

⁶³⁷ Certainly not all administrative top-down correspondence was written in such a style. On the various rhetorical strategies used by Qurra in his letters to Basilios, see Papaconstantinou, "Rhetoric". On the correspondence in Coptic between Muslims and Egyptians in Early Islamic Egypt, see Cromwell, "Religious Expression".

⁶³⁸ Transl. by Bell, "Translations".

⁶³⁹ The undated letter from a certain Abdella...Patrikios *SB* XVI 12575 scolds its receivers about tax arrears and threatens with violence. The letter opens with: l. 1: σώσατε τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν: "Save your lives".

ⲡⲉⲧⲉⲱⲁϥⲉⲛⲧⲓ | ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲛⲛ ⲛⲉⲕⲕⲥⲉ: “If you seek to break anything in it, I will send one who will extract it from your bones”.⁶⁴⁰

The fact that a letter such as *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* was written in Coptic is noteworthy, as it does not fit the patterns of language distribution that have been identified in Early Islamic Egypt, i.e. that communications between the pagarchical elite and higher-ranking officials, the government in Fustat, was conducted in Arabic and Greek, while Coptic was reserved for communications between the pagarchical elites and the villages.⁶⁴¹ As in the example just cited, individuals bearing Arab names did send letters with administrative orders in Coptic to Egyptians recipients.⁶⁴² However, these letters are much shorter letters than *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* and the recipients, as in *P.Mich.Copt. 15* seem to have functioned at a village level. These letters do not contain titles which would allow us to precisely identify the administrative status of the senders or the recipients.⁶⁴³ It is only in very rare cases that in a Coptic letter we can with some degree of certainty identify the recipient as a district administrator and the sender as an official ranking higher than that. One such letter is *P.Ryl.Copt. 277*. One other possible instance is a fragmentary letter from the archive of the Flavius Papas, the pagarch of Edfu in the second half of the seventh century, who received a letter in Coptic with instructions concerning the fleet, from someone who is interpreted by the editor as a Muslim official.⁶⁴⁴ *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* is almost certainly sent to a pagarch – someone in charge of a pagarchy – by someone who outranks the addressee and has the authority to give them orders and threaten them. Palaeographically it is possible to date this letter to the eighth century, and the parallels and similarities in content and style to other administrative letters from the Early Islamic period sent by Arab-Muslim officials (see

⁶⁴⁰ *P.Mich.Copt. 15*, transl. Jennifer Cromwell, “Religious Expression”. On the reading of the name Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, which was not read by the original editor, see Delattre, “Monastère de Baouît,” 47 (cited in Cromwell, “Religious Expression”).

⁶⁴¹ The multilingual administration of Early Islamic Egypt is discussed in 1.2.3..

⁶⁴² Cromwell, “Religious Expression”.

⁶⁴³ *P.Ryl.Copt. 324* concerns a village head embezzling tax money. *P.Ryl.Copt. 346* concerns the fodder to be supplied by a certain village. In *CPR II 237* the recipient is asked to collect and deliver 1/3 *nomisma*, an amount that corresponds to a common capitation-tax instalment.

⁶⁴⁴ This interpretation is based mostly on the letter’s final greeting ⲧⲣⲏⲛⲏ ⲛⲁⲕ “Peace (be) upon you”. Berkes, “1. Letter from a muslim official about requisitions for the fleet”, in Boud’hors et al., “Nouveau Départ”. More examples of Coptic letters in the Papas archive bearing this final greeting are cited as further evidence of Muslim officials writing to the pagarch. Cromwell, “Religious Expressions” states that this formula is also used in letters between Christians. . The letter mentions an *amir*, but he is not the sender of the letter.

above), make it highly likely that the sender in question was such an Arab-Muslim governor or other high official.

I argue that it is probable that this document was not issued directly from the office of governor or other high official who issued it, but that it is rather a translation made at the level of the pagarchy or maybe even at village level, of a Greek or Arabic letter issued from the governor's office in al-Fusṭāṭ, or from the office of another high official with similar authority over issues regarding fugitives.⁶⁴⁵ Why would anyone need a Coptic translation of such a letter? As I have shown in section 5.2.1, Qurra explicitly ordered that some of his letters on fugitives in the villages of Basilios' district should be read aloud to all the inhabitants of those villages, so that his message would be heard by all of them. He ordered that to that effect copies of his letter should be made in the pagarch's office. However, in order for the villagers, and probably even village heads and local policemen, of the countryside of Early Islamic Egypt to understand fully any governmental message, this message would have had to be read – and written – in Coptic. By the seventh century, Coptic was the main language in most of the Egyptian countryside for lower level administration and private legal documents, replacing Greek.⁶⁴⁶ It is most likely that *P.Ryl.Copt.* 277 is a Coptic translation made for consumption at the village level.

Most probably the translation process itself was done at the office of the respective pagarch who had received the Greek or Arabic letter from a higher office. It was at the office of this kind of district administrator, after all, that Greek-Arabic tax-demands of lump sums were “translated” into Coptic-Greek tax-demands for the individual taxpayer. Moreover, taking an example once again from the archive of the district administrator Basilios, we know that he had both Greek and Arabic scribes in his office. *P.Lond.* IV 1434, 229-230: ...δαπάν[η(ς)] (καὶ) τη[ρ]οφ[η(ς)] ἀλόγ(ων) Ἀραβικ(οῦ) νοτ(αρίου) | συ(ν)όντ(ος) ἐνδ(όξω) παγάρχ(ω): ...maintenance of an Arab notary belonging to the esteemed/glorious pagarch and the keep of his (sc. that notary's) horses”.⁶⁴⁷ The presence of these Arabic scribes in the pagarch's office meant that Arabic documents were read and produced at the pagarch's office level and sent to Fustat, as Richter argues, but also, I would add, that Greek and Arabic letters and other documents could be translated into Greek/Coptic at the pagarch's

⁶⁴⁵ E.g. the “*amir* (in charge) of the fugitives who dwell abroad, the addressee of *P.Sijp.* 25, l. 2: ἀμῖρ(ᾱ) τῶν ἐπιξενουμ(ένων) φυγάδων”.

⁶⁴⁶ Section 1.2.3.

⁶⁴⁷ Translation in Richter, “Language Choice”, 212.

office level and distributed in the villages. The content of the orders given in *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* definitely fits such a context. The letter concerns people who should have been identified and prepared for sending, and tells the receiver that they should be sent from their villages to the sender of the letter. The message is thus directly relevant to the villages and their inhabitants.

There are also formal aspects of *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* which seem to corroborate this interpretation. The document seems to start with a sort of title or subject line, stating that the document concerns men from different localities in Egypt, but is not followed by an internal address.⁶⁴⁸ Moreover, although there was still space for it, a closing statement at the end of the text is also lacking. This lay-out seems to suggest that the document was not sent as a letter per se. Giving only the content of a letter, cutting out the less relevant opening and closing parts. However, while Coptic letters usually do contain formulas opening and closing the letter, they are not always necessary. In fact, *P.Mich.Copt. 15*, cited above, presents the same lack of internal address and closing. This letter also has authoritative and threatening tone, and contains several orders to the recipient, presented in imperatives. This letter *does*, however, seem to have been sent as a letter itself.⁶⁴⁹ We can thus imagine that *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* was sent as a letter without opening and closing phrases, or as a separate document accompanying another piece of conveyed information and instructions.

Conversely, the lack of reference to the authority of the issuing official, including his titles, in *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* might actually be an argument against an interpretation of this document being read out loud in the villages. It is also possible, then, that *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* functioned as an instructive document containing the relevant information for the village officials who would be responsible for rounding up the fugitives and drawing up the lists requested in the message. Coptic, again, would be the most relevant language for this, and a translation of a Greek or Arabic message an efficient mechanism for transmitting orders. This interpretation is given additional weight by a recent brief discussion of a Coptic administrative letter, from Nājid b. Muslim, district administrator of the Fayyum in the 730s

⁶⁴⁸ Some of the letters from Qurra also have such titles, yet also include the internal address. E.g. *P.Lond. IV* 1353.

⁶⁴⁹ The text is only preceded by the non-linguistic marker double oblique strokes, which signals the beginning of the letter. The external address on the back of the papyrus gives us the names of sender and recipient: Cromwell, “Religious Expression”.

to the headmen of the village of Arsinoe.⁶⁵⁰ Nājīd b. Muslim used Arabic in his administrative letters to his fellow Arab-Muslim administrators.⁶⁵¹ The use of Coptic seems to have been a deliberate choice in order to communicate effectively with the village heads. These language choices point to the integration of the local, village elites in the administration of the province.⁶⁵²

In this section, I have discussed two ways in which the local administrators of Egypt transmitted policies to the local population, including village officials. In both processes, pragmatic concerns were connected to language use, namely Coptic (and Greek) instead of Greek or Arabic, which I will also discuss below in section 5.5.3. Translating tax-demand notes of lump sums to individual tax demands in the language used by the taxpayer does transmit the demands of the government, but they are mediated by the intervention of the local administrator's office, aside from the translation: the provincial government decides that taxes need to be paid, but the district administrator tells the taxpayer exactly how much.⁶⁵³ In other words, demands of the central administration are digested and reformatted by lower administrative offices, requests are divided amongst tax-payers, conveyed to fellow administrators, assigned to specialized agents and the like. In these cases the provincial authorities are present through a cascade of communications from the center outwards, and along the way they were 'translated' into new executive orders. By contrast, some instructions were transmitted directly as exact quotes albeit translated linguistically into Coptic. Such orders of an official of high rank, giving instructions about the potentially delicate social subject of fugitives, threatening the life of the original receiver if he does not do as he is told, brings this high provincial authority very close to the daily lives of the local

⁶⁵⁰ Berkes and Vanthieghem, "Notes", 158-159 identify Nājīd b. Muslim as the sender of this letter (*KSB* II 912) through the reading of the address on the papyrus. Of the content of the letter the original editor could understand only that it was an administrative letter about a money, possibly tax, issue. On the dossier of Nājīd b. Muslim see Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*.

⁶⁵¹ Berkes and Vanthieghem, "Notes", 159, note that the Coptic letter in question is Nājīd's only attested Coptic letter.

⁶⁵² Tax-demand notes to individual tax-payers in the Arsinoite (Fayyum) district and the Heracleopolite district were issued by Nājīd b. Muslim in Greek (Sijpesteijn, *Shaping*, 124-125). The difference in language choice might be related to the formulaic nature, including a high amount of abbreviations and numbers in dates and amounts, of the tax-demand notes vs a custom letter addressed to the village heads. The original editor of the Coptic letter,

⁶⁵³ The latter part of the translation process could also be made on the level of the village, as Aristophanes wrote *entagía* in Jeme: Cromwell, *Recording*, 179-180; Gonis, "Reconsidering", 198-199.

population - or the village officials, who would be part of the village's elite group. We do not know where exactly in Egypt *P.Ryl.Copt.* 277 was produced and circulated, but it seems clear that it was produced in Coptic in order to communicate effectively the orders of a high official in the provincial government, possibly the governor in Fustat. This translation mechanism, paralleled in Nājid b. Muslim's Coptic letter to the village elites of Arsinoe, indicates the integration of these village elites as actors in the administration. Deliberate linguistic effort was made by the offices of higher officials to ensure efficient communication with the village elites, who were taken into account as integral parts of the administrative system.

Section 5.2 has focused on the communication and transmission of policies and orders down the administrative ladder, and the role of language choice in those mechanisms. In the following section 5.3, I discuss through two shorter case studies, the extent to which village elites of Djeme, and the protection documents which they issued, were knowledgeable of and integrated into the administrative processes and customs of higher levels of the administration.

5.3 The integrated system: village elites and their documents and mechanisms in the administration

5.3.1 Case study 1: The involvement of the local elites in travel permit procedures

The first case study examines a request for a travel permit and which was sent by Chael and Johannes, the *dioiketeis* or village administrators of Djeme, to an unnamed *amīr*.⁶⁵⁴ In 728, three monks, named Joseph son of Patzuen, Theodoros son of Athanasios, and Marcus son of Taurinus, from the monastery of Apa Paul next to the town of Jeme wanted to go to the Fayyum, about 600 km North down the Nile, to sell the basketry which they had produced. We know this thanks to the measures taken by the Egyptian government to control people's movements: the monks needed a passport to travel this distance, and their application for the permit has been preserved. The document was written by the well-known scribe

⁶⁵⁴ *P.CLT* 3. Till, "Koptischen Bürgerschaftsurkunden", 184–185, Delattre, "Checkpoints". I also discuss this document in Chapter 4. On the date, see Cromwell, *Recording*, 76–77. Cromwell *passim* on several aspects of the production of the document. As Palombo notes they apparently had to go to the *dioiketeis* of the nearby town instead of their abbot to start this process, in contrast to the monks at the Apa Jeremias monastery in Saqqara, who could ask their superior to ask that a travel permit be issued. Palombo, "Christian Clergy", . The documentation related to travel permits from Apa Jeremias monastery in Saqqara is discussed in Chapter 4.

Aristophanes.⁶⁵⁵ It was kept in the monastery of Saint Paul's archive and as such probably a copy of the letter sent to the *amīr*.⁶⁵⁶

Till interprets the addressee of the letter as the pagarch, although this title is not explicitly mentioned in the text. Cromwell argues that this *amīr* is likely Sahl b. 'Abd Allāh, pagarch or district administrator of Hermonthis/Armant at the time. In the Coptic letter he is called ΕΥΚΛΕ(Ε)ΣΤΑΤΟΣ ΔΜΙΡΑ (*eukleestatos amira*), which is an honorific and title used for the *amīr* of the pagarchy of Hermonthis/Armant (in which pagarchy Jēme lay) in 750 and for the *amīr*, pagarch, of Latopolis in 724.⁶⁵⁷ This is the only attestation of *dioiketeis* of Jēme writing to an Arab official.⁶⁵⁸

The *dioiketeis* ask that a travel permit (ΟΥΓΙΓΕΛΛΙΝ, l. 5) be issued for the three monks. If we compare the contemporary Arabic travel permits from Egypt and the documentation related to them, to the information given in the request letter, we can see that *P.CLT3* provides all the information needed for the production of such a travel permit.⁶⁵⁹ First, the document mentions that the monks have paid their taxes for the year: ΔΥΩ ΔΥΤΙ ΠΕΤΣΙΧΩΟΥ 2Ν ΝΑΗΜΟCΙΟΝ ΝΙΒ Ι(ν)Δ(ικτίωνος), “Moreover, they have paid what was due of them in the taxes (in money) of the 12th indiction year” (l. 10), and they are described as “free men” (ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΟΣ ΝΡΩΜΕ ll. 8–9). Having paid your taxes, or having a guarantor for said taxes, was a condition for receiving a travel permit. As discussed in section 4.2.3.1, the actual travel permits contain a standardized amount of information: how many months the permit holder can travel, where they are travelling to, and aside from the names of the permit holders, also a physical description. *P.CLT3* tells us that the monks want to travel for three months, to the Fayyum (which is quite far away, about 600 km North down the Nile), in order to sell their basketry products. Below the Coptic text a summary is added in Greek,

⁶⁵⁵ On the Coptic protection letters written by Aristophanes, see section 3.3.1.2.

⁶⁵⁶ Cromwell, *Recording*, 61.

⁶⁵⁷ Respectively *P.KRU* 70 + *SB* I 5591 and *P.KRU* 50 + *SB* I 5582. On the other hand, *P.Sijp*. 25 (698 or 713), a Greek letter concerning a travel permit for seven monks, is addressed to an *eukleestatos amiras* responsible for the fugitives of Upper Egypt. Could *P. CLT3* also be addressed to such an *amīr*, responsible for the fugitives of the region? The same question can be asked of the addressee of *CPR* IV 19, recently read as an *amir* 'Ubayd Allāh (see below).

⁶⁵⁸ Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*, 180, n. 68. The *dioiketeis*' position in the administration was immediately under the that of pagarch of Hermonthis and above that of the *lashanes* or village headmen: Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*, 129-135 and 180-181 specifically on the *dioiketeis* of Jeme. Coptic protection letter *SB Kopt.* V 2265 is issued by two *dioiketeis* of Jeme, the office could also be carried out by 1 person.

⁶⁵⁹ See sections 4.2.2.3 and 4.2.3.1.

repeating the timeframe and destination of the proposed travel, as well as the names and physical descriptions of the three monks. These details would all be mentioned in the eventual travel permit, as the extant examples show.

The distribution of the languages in this letter is very similar to that identified in the Coptic-Greek guarantee documents from the Basilios archive in Aphrodito and the Coptic-Greek tax-demand notes from Hermopolis: the more narrative part of the document is written in Coptic, while Greek is used for specific but important information like the address (including names), amount and date in the tax-demand notes, and lists of names and origins of the individuals who are the subject of the guarantee declarations in those documents.⁶⁶⁰ Even if the person responsible for issuing the travel permit did not understand Coptic, the Greek parts in the application letter provided all the information on the applicant monks that were needed for the permit. The scribe Aristophanes writing the request and the two village administrators issuing it, apparently knew exactly which elements of information were needed to write an effective request letter for a travel permit, including the specific details on the proposed travel and on the permit holders which would be “filled out” in the travel permit template. They were well informed about the formal requirements of a travel permit. There is no direct evidence as to where the *dioiketeis*, or the scribe, acquired this knowledge of chancery-issued travel permits. The *dioiketeis* of Djeme were the highest officials in the town and worked directly under the district administrator of Hermonthis. Thus, they could have had access to documents produced at higher levels of the administration. As for the scribe Aristophanes, Jennifer Cromwell has argued that he had received training from outside the village of Djeme, but that it is unclear how and where this happened.⁶⁶¹ In any case, the content and form of the letter show how integrated the knowledge of the *dioiketeis* was in the scribal and administrative practice at the highest levels of the administration.

⁶⁶⁰ Richter, “Unsern Herrn”; Cromwell, “Coptic Texts”. See also above, section 5.3. Cromwell, *Recording*, 175, notes the similar pattern in language distribution between *P.CL.T3* and *P.Lond. IV* 1518, a guarantee declaration about captured fugitives. The Coptic letter to pagarch Papas about the requisitions for the fleet presents a similar pattern: the narrative part of the letter is written in Coptic, and followed by a summarizing list of items requisitions in Greek. Berkes, “1. Letter from a muslim official about requisitions for the fleet”, in Boud’hors, “Nouveau Départ”.

⁶⁶¹ Cromwell, *Recording*, 177, “There are two options, neither of which is supported by the extant material. Either Aristophanes left the village to receive his technical training (perhaps at Hermonthis, the closest nome capital), or a master scribe was sent to the village to train scribes in this particular style.”

The closest parallel to *P.CLT3* in the papyrological record is *CPR IV 19*, dated to the eighth century, as it is also a request for a travel permit for a third party, consisting of several individuals. The addressee of the document was not deciphered in the ed.pr., but Lajos Berkes has notified me that he reads ΝΑΜΕΛΛ ΟΥΠΕΕΤΑΛΛΑ on l. 1 of the document, rather than the ΝΑΓΕΛΛ ΕΥΠΕΕΡ, ΛΑ read by Till.⁶⁶² This would mean that the request for the permit was addressed to “our Lord of all honor [worthy], the *amīr* ‘Ubayd Allāh, who is Lord...”. The identification of the addressee of the letter with an *amīr* would constitute a noteworthy parallel to *P.CLT3* discussed above, in which an anonymous ΔΜΙΡΑ is the addressee of the request.⁶⁶³ The text of *CPR IV 19* is unfortunately very fragmentary, and there are 5-6 lines in the document where only traces of letters have been read. The following is my attempt of a reconstruction of the situation behind it. The senders of *CPR IV 19* (possibly an Apa Isaak and the others whose names have been lost mentioned on l. 3) seemingly from the district of the city of Akhmim/Panopolis,⁶⁶⁴ ask the *amīr* ‘Ubayd Allāh for a travel permit for several people: we can read the names Daveid, Kostantinos, Askla and Johannes on l. 5. They are then probably referred to with ΝΑΥ (*nau*, “for them”, on l. 6 (see below).

From a comparison of what is extant of the document with *P.CLT3*, I raise a couple of points of similarity and difference. Both request letters were made for a third party. Both were directed at an *amīr*; (probably) by local authorities.⁶⁶⁵ Both requests seem to have been made for several people at once.⁶⁶⁶ However, in *CPR IV 19* their names seem to have been mentioned in the text itself (l. 5), while in *P.CLT3* the applicants’ names, provenance and physical description are included in the Greek summary below the Coptic text, while in the main text in Coptic they are only stylized as “some monks of the (community of the) Jar of Apa Paul on the mount of Djeme”. In his edition of *CPR IV 19*, Till noted that the document had a different style than *P.CLT3*, without going into details. One of these differences is

⁶⁶² Private communication by email.

⁶⁶³ That *P.CLT3* does not contain the name of the *amīr* might be a result of the document probably being a copy of the letter sent to the *amīr*, for the purposes of the monastery’s record keeping. Cromwell, *Recording*, 181.

⁶⁶⁴ In the lacuna, a more exact location of the senders within the district might have been written: a village or a monastery, as in *CPR IV 20*, l. 2-3.

⁶⁶⁵ It is difficult to say anything about the senders of *CPR IV 19*. If Apa Isaak is indeed one of the senders, he might have been a monastic authority, which would strengthen this document’s similarity to the Coptic letters related to the travel of monks from the Apa Jeremias monastery in Saqqara, see Chapter 4.

⁶⁶⁶ More than one person can appear on a travel permit, see Chapter 4.

how the actual request is made: In *P.CLT* 3 the *dioiketeis* write: ΤΗΠΑΡΑΚΕΛΕΙ ΟΥΝ ΝΤΕΤ[Ν]ΜΝΤΧΟΕΙC ΕΤΤΑΙΕΙΗΥ ΕΤΡΕΤΕΤΝΚΕΛΕΥΕ ΝCΟΥΤΙ ΟΥCΙΓΕΛΛΙΝ | ΝΑΥ : “Therefore, we request your revered lordship to order that a permit be given to them.” (ll. 5-6). In *CPR* IV 19, the senders also include God in their request: ΤΑΡΕΠΝΟΥΤΕ ΜΝ ΤΕΚΜΝΤΜΝΧΟΕΙC †CΥΚΕΛΙΟΝ ΝΑΥ: “that God and your lordship give them a travel permit” (l. 6).⁶⁶⁷ *CPR* IV 19 calls itself a “guarantee and declaration” on the other side of the document: ΤΕΝΚΥΕ (ἐγγύη) ΔΥΩ \†/ ΤΞΟΜΟΛΟΓΙΑ (ὁμολογία). This document thus acted as a request and at the same time as a guarantee for the applicants’ taxes, which was confirmed by the signing of several witnesses at the bottom of the document.⁶⁶⁸ *P.CLT* 3 does not contain witness signatures, but the senders state that the monks had already paid their taxes for the year and were thus “free men” (see above). However, in the Greek list there is a reference of a guarantee next to at least one of their names.⁶⁶⁹ The fragmentary state of *CPR* IV 19 does not enable us to draw conclusions about the information given in the document related to the proposed travel. If this request letter was indeed sent to the *amīr*, the letter might have contained information similar to what can be read in *P.CLT* 3. There doesn’t seem to have been a Greek γνώσις or list attached to the text as in *P.CLT* 3. In any case, both documents, show how the local elites, in the case of *P.CLT* 3 the administrators of a village, and in *CPR* IV possibly monastic or clerical elites,⁶⁷⁰ actively contributed to the administration of the control of the countryside by the Arab-Muslim government. In this case it concerned the supervision of movement of Egyptian tax-payers through the distribution of the travel permits necessary at the time for undertaking long-distance travel. What these documents, and especially *P.CLT* 3, show also, is the local elites’ knowledge of the procedures involved in obtaining and honoring requests for travel permits, i.e. the importance of the tax payment or the guarantee of it, as well the formulation of the eventual travel permit itself, and all the

⁶⁶⁷ This combination of God and “your lordship” is repeated on ll. 7 and 8, but nothing else has been read on those lines. Till in ed.pr. notes that this is a common characteristic of request letters in Coptic. On the other hand, this inclusion of God in (public) legal documents is also part of the Coptic documentary tradition: MacCoull, “Coptic Documentary Papyri”. Moreover, the juxtaposition of God and a worldly administrator as the providers of a protection document related to travel, is reminiscent of the role of God in the Coptic protection letters: see Chapter 1.

⁶⁶⁸ See the guarantees for the tax payments of monks from the Apa Jeremias monastery in Saqqara: *CPR* IV 20, 21.

⁶⁶⁹ *P.CLT* 3, l. 12 ὑπὸ ἀγ(ι)ω(νήτου), l. 13 and 14 only have ὑπὸ.

⁶⁷⁰ Apa Isaak might have been a priest, or monastic leader. The names and titles of other senders of the letter have been lost.

bits of information that were needed to compile the permit. They corresponded, as far as we can understand in an effective manner, with the higher officials of the administration, in order to procure travel permits for members of the local population.

The next section will also examine documents showing the involvement of the local elites in the government's control of the countryside in early Islamic Egypt. I will particularly pay attention to the Coptic protection letters which reached outside the village or monastery context: those which mention the involvement of a pagarch or *dux*. I will also discuss two Greek documents issued by the *dux* Flavius Atias that are similar to the Coptic protection letters.

5.3.2 Case study 2: Protection letters beyond the village

As a protection mechanism, the Coptic protection letters mainly operated on a very local level, in the context of villages, monastic centers, and the interaction between them.⁶⁷¹ The individuals issuing the protection letters (protectors), or the intermediaries in the protection letter mechanism, were mostly clerical or monastic authorities and lay village officials, the highest-ranking of which were, respectively, Pesynthios, bishop of Coptos in the early seventh century, and the *dioiketeis* of Djeme who issued *SB Kopt.* V 2265 for Johannes, son of Samuel.⁶⁷² However, a small number of Coptic and Greek documents show that the protection letter mechanism could involve officials at higher levels of the administration, namely to the pagarch and *dux*. Three Coptic protection letters who are products of village administration, also seem to refer to a higher official who was involved in the situation at hand. The structure and content of *SB Kopt.* V 2248, a fragmentary ostrakon from Djeme, is fairly standard: it opens with the $\epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \pi\alpha\rho\omicron\varsigma\ \mu\eta\nu\omicron\gamma\tau\epsilon$ formula, an instruction clause (“Come to your house”), a promise clause (“we will not sue you”) and exception clause (1 *trimession*). However, it also mentions a “lord the *dux*” ($\chi\omicron\epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \pi\alpha\omicron\gamma\chi$), after the promise and exception clause, at the beginning of l. 6. Unfortunately, the text is too fragmentary to understand the role of the *dux* in the procedure. The name of the protectee is Elias, son of Petros (?), but the name(s) of the protector(s) are lost.

⁶⁷¹ On the production and circulation of the protection letters, and the procedure to obtain the protection letters, see section 3.2.

⁶⁷² See also *SB Kopt.* V 2240, which is fragmentary, but probably issued by Palots, the *dioiketēs* (ll. 1-2).

In *SB Kopt.* V 2309, the respective roles in the protection mechanism of the various actors mentioned in the document are clearer, as the text is complete.⁶⁷³ The text, written on an ostrakon, was issued by Moyses and addressed to Moses. The address is followed by the standard *eis plogos mpnoute ntoutk* (“Here is the promise, by God, for you”) formula, but then the phrasing starts to deviate. Moyses promised “that he will uphold the validity of the *logos* of our lord the pagarch (ll. 3-4).” Similar phrases are found in protection letters in which village heads promise to uphold the *logos* issued by a third party, who is however usually a clerical authority.⁶⁷⁴ Then follow three promise clauses from the point of view of Moyses, and a date. Thus, formally, the text is a protection letter in and of itself, with the *εις παλογος μνουγτε* formula and the promise clauses. Those elements frame the promise to uphold the *logos* of the pagarch. The pagarch had apparently issued a protection letter for Moses, and Moyses now adds his own protection letter for Moses, to confirm not only the protection letter issued by the pagarch, but also to add his own promises. Unfortunately, the document does not preserve the text of the *logos* of the pagarch.

Before discussing the third protection letter mentioning an official ranking higher than the village level, I discuss a Greek letter, *CPR* VIII 84, issued by Flavius Atias the *dux*, which has been identified by Jean Gascoü as a protection letter written in Greek.⁶⁷⁵ This document is issued for one person only, a certain Theodore. The document orders Theodore to go with his *logos* (most probably *CPR* VIII 84 itself) to the city where he is registered, without fear: “τὸν λόγον ἔχων | εἴ(σ)ελθε εἰς(ς) τ(ήν) ἰδίαν σου πόλιν ἀφόβως” (ll. 3-5). An *eis plogos mpnoute* formula is lacking in the text, but the phrasing is still reminiscent of the Coptic protection letters. Thus, ll. 4-5 can be read as an instruction clause, and ll. 6-7 as a promise clause: οὐκ ἀφῶ σε ἀδικηθῆ(ναι) | ἀλλ(ὰ) τὸ δίκαιόν σου ποιῶ σε: “I will not permit that you will be treated unjustly, rather I will treat you justly.” The involvement of God in this promise is mentioned right before the promise clause: θεοῦ κελεύον(ς): “If God

⁶⁷³ *SB Kopt.* V 2309.

⁶⁷⁴ See Chapter 3.1.2.4.

⁶⁷⁵ Gascoü, “[Review of] *CPR* VIII”, 338. Lajos Berkes reads on l. 8]ε μη ἀμφιβ(ά)λ(ης) rather than the φιβ . λ() read in the *editio princeps* (private communication by email). This reading further approximates the formulary in *CPR* VIII 84 to that of the Coptic protection letters, in which the signature of the protector was often preceded by an assurance clause “so that you do not doubt” (the Coptic equivalent of the proposed Greek reconstruction): *ξε ννεκαμφιεαλε* (I drew up this *logos* and I sign it). Atias was active as *dux* of the Thebaid between 697 and 703, or 712: Legendre, “Byzantine nor Islamic?”, 11ff, on the dates and activities of the *duces* of the Thebaid after the conquest until the beginning of the 8th century, when the office seems to have become obsolete.

orders (it)". Their might be a link between the fact that Theodore seems to have been at least registered as an inhabitant of a city and the involvement in his protection letter of an official residing in a city, like the *dux*. Unfortunately the document is not complete, the bottom part is lacking.

The third Coptic protection letter which mentions a lay official on a higher administration level than the village was issued for a group of monks. This is i.e. *O.CrumVC* 9, which mentions a *dux*: [ΚΕΛΕΥ?]CIC ΜΠΕΝΧΟΕΙC ΠΕΡΦΥΕCΤΑΤ[ΟC - ?-] | ΝΤΟC ΠΕΥΚΛΕ(ΕCΤΑΤΟC) ΝΧΟΕΙC ΝΔΟΥΧ : “(the order of) our lord the most excellent... the most famous lord the *dux*” (ll. 4-5). This document is also interesting because of its possible links with one other Coptic protection letter, *O.CrumVC* 8, and a Greek *sigillion* *SB* III 7240. Both *O.CrumVC* 8 and 9 were written or issued on the same day, Mecheir 30 of the indiction 11, or 24/25 February 698 or 713.⁶⁷⁶ Both documents were issued by the *lashanes* of Djeme, Severus and Johannes, and written by the village scribe Psate, son of Pisrael.⁶⁷⁷ Both protection letters were issued for a group of monks: *O.CrumVC* 9 is addressed to CΝΗΥ ΤΗΡΟΥ, “all the brethren” (l. 2) and *O.CrumVC* 8 ΝΝΕΝCΝΗΥ ΕΤΟΥΔΔΒ ΝΘΕΝ[ΕΕ]ΤΕ ΜΝΝΕΤΩΟΟΠ ΝΜΜΑΥ ΤΗΡΟΥ ΚΑΤΑ ΝΕΥΡΑΝ: “to the holy brethren of the monastery, and all those that are with them, according to their names (ll. 3-4)”. Both protection letters are thus addressed to a monastic community as a whole, which is an exceptional occurrence in the corpus. The documents do not mention to which monastery these monks belonged, and the documents could be issued on behalf of two groups of monks, or both documents for the same group. In the following, I examine the possibility that at least one of these documents, and maybe both, were addressed to the monks of the monastery of Apa Paul in the neighborhood of Djeme,⁶⁷⁸ and that they were written around the same time as *SB* III 7240, the *sigillion* by the *dux* Flavius Atias issued for the monks of the monastery of Apa Paul.⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷⁶ On the dating of these two document to either 698 or 713, contrary to Crum’s proposed dates to 698 or 728, see the arguments by Cromwell, “Village Scribe”, 133. If dated to 698, they would be the earliest dated documents for the Djeme village scribe Psate son of Pisrael.

⁶⁷⁷ On Psate’s protection letters, see Chapter 3.

⁶⁷⁸ This is the monastery of the three monks on whose behalf the *dioiketeis* of Jeme would write a request for a travel permit in 728, thirty to fifteen years after *O.CrumVC* 8 and 9 were written. The possibility that the addressees of *O.CrumVC* 8 and *O.CrumVC* 9 are monks of the Apa Paul monastery is also entertained by Cromwell, “Village Scribe”, 133, the scribe of these documents also having written two other documents in which the monastery was a party (*P.CLT* 1 and 5).

⁶⁷⁹ Delattre, “Checkpoints”, 544 on this document and its connection to tax-related unrest in the region. On Flavius Atias, *CPR* VIII 72-84; Cromwell, “Coptic Texts”.

Comparing *O.CrumVC* 8 and 9, it is clear that *O.CrumVC* 9 is more concise in length and phrasing than 8. The text of *O.CrumVC* 9 is more fragmentary than that of 8, but what remains of the text follows the standard content, structure and formulae of a Coptic protection letter more than 8, except for the conspicuous mention of the *dux*, lacking in *O.CrumVC* 8.⁶⁸⁰ *O.CrumVC* 9 opens with the address, followed by the *εἰς πλοῖος μνηοῦτε* formula and the instruction clause (“Come and stay in your place”), the mention of (order of) the *dux*, and then the promise clause (“We will not prosecute you (*παρε*) for anything...”), followed by signatures, the date, the scribal signature, and an oath, which is uncommon but not unique in the corpus, but is also present in *O.CrumVC* 8.⁶⁸¹ The text also mentions the “brethren who are with you” after the promise clause.⁶⁸² The mention of (the order of) the *dux* thus comes between the instruction clause and the promise clause, which usually follow each other. It is plausible that the “order of the *dux*” refers to the instruction clause, i.e. that it is according to the order of the *dux* that the monks should “come and stay in their place”.⁶⁸³ *O.CrumVC* 8 also contains formulaic elements typical of the protection letters, but was written in a more elaborate style, e.g. the unusual and unusually long *εἰς πλοῖος μνηοῦτε* formula which was noted in Chapter 3, and also contains some additions to the “usual” formulary. The elaborated *εἰς πλοῖος μνηοῦτε* formula is followed by the instruction clause (“Stay in your holy place”) and the promise clause (“that no one will [...] to you, and we will not permit that anything new be imposed on you, beyond your deceased fathers that were before you”). The monastic community is thus protected by the document against a higher taxation than the community had to pay in the past.⁶⁸⁴ The *lashanes* also promise to uphold this protection against claims from civil or ecclesiastical authorities, which is a unique occurrence in the Coptic protection letters, and which is a type of protection more often associated with higher offices (sections 4.1.2, 1.1.3.2.4). The *lashanes* also mention that they will uphold the validity of the *logos*, which is a formula commonly used by intermediaries, i.e. in the letters which mention that a third party issues the *logos*

⁶⁸⁰ See Crum’s note 1 in *O.CrumVC* 9: “What is their connexion, if any? The formulae in this are usual, in 8 not.”

⁶⁸¹ See Chapter 2.

⁶⁸² Reminiscent of *SB Kopt.* V 2234, a protection letter issued for a priest who “went away”, and for the “men who are with you”.

⁶⁸³ Does the use of the common “Come” instruction clause imply here that the community of monks had left their monastic dwelling?

⁶⁸⁴ Protection from taxation see Chapter 4, section 4.1.

and the sender of the letter promises to uphold it.⁶⁸⁵ E.g. in the example of *SB Kopt. V 2309* above, sender Moyses promises to uphold the validity of the *logos* of the pagarch for Moses. Aside from lashanes Severus and Johannes, three more people sign *O.CrumVC 8*, among which one former lashane of Djeme. The text also mentions that the community (*koinon*) of Djeme signs the protection letter.⁶⁸⁶

Both *O.CrumVC 8* and 9 are reminiscent of *SB III 7240*, the *sigillion* issued by the dux Flavius Atias on 17 October 697 to monastic community of the monastery of Apa Paul.⁶⁸⁷ The monks had not paid their taxes ἐν καιρῷ τῆς ἀνταρσίας “during the period of insurrection” (l. 13). When the dux inquired about this, the monks had shown him a *sigillion* issued by the dux’s predecessor, “providing that you should remain in your domicile, on condition however that you paid your quotas of capitation tax.”: περιέχον τοῦ μέναι ὑμᾶς | εἰς τὸν τόπον ὑμῶν συντελοῦντας μέντοι τὰ διάγραφα ὑμῶν (ll. 14-15). Atias’ letter served as a confirmation of the earlier *sigillion*, and promises protection for the monks, under certain conditions. καὶ ἐπιβεβαίων | τὸ τοιοῦτο σιγίλλιν τῷ παρόντι σιγίλλῳ ἐχρησάμην, δι’ οὗ ἐπιτρέπω ὑμῖν | ἀφόβως μέναι τῇ ταυτότητι εἰς τὸν τόπον ὑμῶν καὶ λόγον ἔχειν τοῦ μὴ | συγχωρῆσαί με παρελθεῖν δι’ ὑμῶν τινα ὑμῶν μέντοι φυλαττόντων | τὴν εἰρηναίαν ὑμῶν κατάστασιν καὶ συντελούντων τὸ διάγραφον ὑμῶν | ὅπερ ἠγνωμονήσατε ὡς εἴρηται ἐν καιρῷ τῆς ἀνταρσίας: “Now, in confirmation of the said *sigillion*, I have issued the present *sigillion*, by which I permit you without molestation to remain as heretofore in your domicile and to have the promise that I will not suffer anyone to transgress against you, on condition however that you continue to live peaceably and pay your capitation tax, in which you defaulted as aforesaid during the period of the insurrection” (ll. 15-20).

While the Greek text of Atias’ *sigillion* and the Coptic texts of the two protection letters are certainly not translations of one another, there are striking similarities in the documents. All three of them were issued for a community of monks, permitting them to stay in their place and protecting them against transgressions. Both *O.CrumVC 8* and *SB III 7420* are explicitly related to taxation, but in different ways.⁶⁸⁸ Whereas *O.CrumVC 8*

⁶⁸⁵ Section 3.1.2.4.

⁶⁸⁶ Probably represented by the three individuals signing.

⁶⁸⁷ On the date see *BL VIII*, 326-327.

⁶⁸⁸ *O.CrumVC 9* might be related to taxation too: the words following the promise clause *ⲡⲁⲣⲁⲣⲉ ⲙⲓⲙⲱⲧⲛ ⲉⲗⲗⲁⲁⲩⲩⲛ ⲛⲉⲱⲉ*: “...prosecute you for anything” (l. 6) are in the lacuna, and the legible text resumes on the next line. In this lacuna an exception to or limitation of the protection promise, related to tax payment could have been written, as is often the case in the Coptic protection letters.

promises the monks that they will not have to pay more than their predecessors had done in the past, the protection offered in *SB III 7240* is conditional upon the monks paying their capitation tax. However, both documents refer to certain elements from the past from which the monastic community seems to derive certain rights regarding their situation. *SB III 7240* mentions a *sigillion* issued by the predecessor of Flavius Atias, by which, it is said, the monks were allowed to live in their place, on condition of paying the capitation tax. Whether this document also contained the protective promises included in *SB III 7240* is not stated. The monks had shown Atias this previous *sigillion* when he had asked them about their lacking capitation tax payment. Atias' *sigillion* explicitly states that it confirms the previous *sigillion*, including its promises and conditions. *O.CrumVC 8* on the other hand, confirms that the amount of taxes paid by the monastic community in the past, by the current monks' "ΝΕΝΕΤΝΕΙΟΤΕ ΜΜΑΚΑΡ(ΙΟΙ) ΝΤΑΥΩΩΝΕ | ΣΑΤΕΤΝ: "deceased fathers who were before you" (ll. 8-9) was what was expected from them in the present, and nothing more.

Which other connections can be made between these three documents? They might all be placed in the same specific time and place: as discussed they all seem to be addressed to the same monastic community. Moreover, the dates of their production might be only four months apart, if we assume the earlier date for *O.CrumVC 8* and 9: 24/25 February 698, while *SB III 7240* was written on 17 October 697. If this was the case, the Greek *sigillion* and the Coptic protection letters could be considered more or less contemporary responses, on different levels of the administration, to the same or related problems concerning the monastery of Apa Paul. The "order of the *dux*" mentioned in *O.CrumVC 9* could then very well be a reference to *SB III 7240* and its contents, and *O.CrumVC 9* could be considered a sort of confirmation, on the administrative level of the village, of the stipulations in Atias' *sigillion*.⁶⁸⁹ Ideally, the Coptic protection letters would have included a phrase such as the one we find in *SB Kopt. V 2309* discussed above, by which the *lashanes* stated that they would uphold the *sigillion* of the *dux*. But even if we assume the later date, 24 February 713, for *O.CrumVC 8* and 9, a narrative can be constructed in which all three documents play a role. Apparently, at that time the *lashanes* of Djeme had the authority to

⁶⁸⁹ Crum reads ΔΟΥΞ Δ[, suggesting that the name of the *dux* would have started with a D, which would make an identification with Atias impossible. This would date the document to 713, as in 698 Atias would have been the *dux* of the Thebaid. He is however, considered the last *dux* of the Thebaid: Legendre, "Byzantine nor Islamic?". An inspection of the original document is necessary to ascertain the reading.

issue documents with the same function as those issued by the *dux* only 15,5 years earlier. This could be a testimony to the contemporary changes in the administration, i.e. the growing obsolescence of the office of the *dux*, and of an increase in the authority and effectiveness of local protection mechanisms such as the issuance of Coptic protection letters.⁶⁹⁰

Another question remains, namely why two Coptic protection letters were written for the monks of Apa Paul, on the same day, by the same scribe, in name of the same village officials? There is a possibility that they are two different drafts of the same letter, which could account for the consistent differences in style between the documents. However, the more concise and “standardized” protection letter, *O.CrumVC 9*, does include the phrase about the *dux*, which is lacking in the more elaborate and “deviating” letter *O.CrumVC 8*. Whatever the extent was to which these three documents were interrelated, they show that in around the turn of the eighth century, monastic communities in the neighborhood of Djeme were experiencing and/or creating problems, related to taxation, for which they received collective protection documents from officials at different levels of the administration. These problems were clearly related to a certain friction between the expectations of the administration and those of the monks concerning their tax payments. While the *lashanes* of Djeme in their protection letters refer to the higher authority of the *dux* in the matter at hand (*O.CrumVC 9*), they also assert their own authority and power to provide protection for the monastic community, even when, they claim, it would be challenged by another lay or clerical authority (*O.CrumVC 8*).

5.4 Local elites and their interests between Djeme and Fustat (through the lens of the protection letters)

In section 5.2 I have shown how the local, pagarchical, elites adapted the communications and orders from the government, when transmitting them to the villages, in such a way that these communications and orders made sense in those villages and to the people who were supposed to hear them and carry them out. The villagers and the language which they spoke, and in which they issued their documents, were acknowledged and used as part of the administration. In section 5.3 I argued that the village elites, on their part, were not just receiving orders from above and issuing documents which were only authoritative within their village. They were knowledgeable actors within the administration who, at least in

⁶⁹⁰ Legendre, “Byzantine nor Islamic?”, 11-18.

some cases, were well aware of the contents and formats of documents which were issued at the highest levels of the provincial administration, and their own documents connected seamlessly to those. Moreover, while most Coptic protection letters seemed to have been issued for village use only, I discussed a few examples which show that the protection letter mechanism could reach the offices of higher administrators, or could be connected to similar protective documents issued by those offices.

I showed how the documents and mechanisms of the village elites did not circulate and operate in isolation. The Coptic language and the Coptic language-using village elites appear as integrated, active, knowledgeable, and authoritative participants in the administration of the province.

Thus far, the chapter has focused on the village elites as administrative actors in the same integrated system in which district administrators and officials of the central government operated. The next and last section of the chapter will address the second focus of the chapter. This section will delve deeper into the village elites as protectors and intermediaries in the Coptic protection letter mechanism, and what this meant for their role, relationships, and interests in the village, as well as in the provincial administration. At first sight, the Coptic protection letter mechanism seems to contradict some of the fiscal policies of the government: with their protection letters, the village elites offered protection for tax evaders, rather than arresting them, and allowed tax exemption for these individuals. The Coptic protection letters, in my view, show how the local elites did not just passively carry out the governmental orders and demands which were communicated to them, but adapted to the realities on the ground, including the interests of the village and their own interests. The interests of the village elites were connected to their position in their local social network on the one hand, and on the other to their position in the provincial administrative network. These interests were related, overlapped and influenced each other. I argue that this active, apparent “disobedient” participation in the administration was in fact an essential element in the administrative system and supported the goals of the empire through the social, economic, and fiscal stability and continuity of the village. I argue that through the Coptic protection letter mechanism we can see the village elites in their role as stakeholders in empire: the Coptic protection letters helped the village elite further their own interests in various ways, while furthering the interests of the empire (see section 5.1.2).

5.4.1 Activating social relationships in the village

The Coptic protection letters operated for the most part in the villages and monasteries, and the relationships which they represent were part of those local contexts. In Chapter 3 I stress the importance of intermediaries in the protection letter mechanism, and I argue that the issuance of a protection letter was not a matter of routine, but rather part of a negotiation in which several people were involved. In this section, I wish to highlight what these negotiations and social interactions tell us about the social fabric and the social relationships in place in the rural communities of Early Islamic Egypt.

The people involved in the protection letters would have, for the most part, been part of each other's personal networks:⁶⁹¹ village official and villager; bishop and lay administrator in his diocese; monastery head and monk; a brother, a sister, and a father;⁶⁹² village officials and monks of a nearby monastic community. The Coptic protection letter mechanism activated these relationships, through the procedures, the various letters and oral interactions involved in the mechanism.⁶⁹³ All the documents testifying to these various steps represent moments in which social relationships were activated. What I mean by the activation of a relationship, within the context of the protection letter mechanism, is that a new relationship could be formed, e.g. between a protector and protectee, through the issuance of the protection letter. Another type of activation could be that a pre-existing relationship was triggered and strengthened or weakened by the interactions surrounding the production of a protection letter.⁶⁹⁴ Indeed, these relationships were not just created out of nowhere. It is plausible that the actors involved in the protection letters in most cases had been involved with each other before, e.g. when the village official (protector) had assigned an amount of taxes to the village tax payer (protectee). Various relationships between the actors of the Coptic protection letters preceded the offering of protection. Most importantly, relationships related to taxation, i.e. between tax collectors, guarantors and tax payers, but also to private debt. The generally local nature of the Coptic protection letters makes it

⁶⁹¹ On the protection letters in village life, see chapter 3. Local nature see Chapter 4.

⁶⁹² We do not know whether the kinship terms represented biological relationships or other types of relationships for which kinship terms could be used.

⁶⁹³ On the procedure see Chapter 3.

⁶⁹⁴ For a "weakened" relationship within a protection letter mechanism, see the letter in which the sender declares that he will not issue a protection letter for vinedressers who had fled: *P.Ryl.Copt.* 385. I would also argue that not respecting a protection letter you had issued weakened your protective relationship with the protectee: SB Kopt. V 2226.

plausible that the actors were part of each other's social networks and had pre-existing and different types of ties to each other.⁶⁹⁵ While these relationships are not difficult to imagine, the protection letters generally tell us little about them in specific terms.

Among the different types of pre-existing ties between people, I am most interested in evidence of pre-existing ties of protection in these documents. Protective relationships could involve multiple acts of protection, and such protective interventions performed in the past, could be used as a justification for the request of another one. I cite an example also mentioned in section 4.1.2.2: in *CPR XXX 21*, a land owner named Georgios asked a regional administrator to intervene on behalf of a farmer, probably working on Georgios' estate. The farmer's brothers had been requisitioned together to work on the caliphal fleet, and Georgios asked the addressee to order that the brothers could alternate their work at Babylon, presumably so that enough people would be present to do the necessary work locally. As a justification for this request, which is in fact how he started his letter, Georgios wrote that he had written to his addressee about the farmer before, and that on that occasion the addressee had helped the farmer.⁶⁹⁶ Letters of request asking for help used not unfrequently such an argument of precedence.⁶⁹⁷ As for the Coptic protection letters, the argument of precedence was used by the sender of *O.Medinet.Habu.Copt.* 136, in which he requests a Coptic protection letter and mentions that he gets one every year.⁶⁹⁸

The protection letters and related documents do testify to compound relationships of protection, confirmations, and extra layers of protection. A pre-existing relationship of protection, including a document of protection, was what led the *dux* Flavius Atias to issue

⁶⁹⁵ See e.g. the man from prison writing to one sister with a protection letter for another sister who should ask her father for help: *SB Kopt.* V 2304. While we do not know the nature of those relationships, it is clear that the relationships activated here were pre-existing and of a more personal nature than an administrative relationship between a tax official and a tax-payer.

⁶⁹⁶ † καθὼς καὶ ἄλλοτε παρεκάλεσα τοὺς θεοφυλά(κτους) ὑμᾶς διὰ τῶν οἰκτρῶν μου γραμμάτων χάριν τοῦ | γραμματιφ[ό]ρου ἀναγνώστου καὶ τὸ ἔλεος ὑ(μῶν) κατέλαβεν/ | αὐτὸν: “As at another time I have entreated you, protected by God, through my piteous letter on behalf of the letter-bearer, a reader/lector, your compassion also reached him.”

⁶⁹⁷ *CPR XXX 21*. The editor categorizes this letter as a crossover between a petition and a recommendation letter. On precedence as an argument in Arabic letters of request, see Sijpesteijn, *Righting wrongs*, Chapter 4 (forthcoming).

⁶⁹⁸ On this document, see also sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.4, and Scheerlinck, “Procedures”. The corpus of Coptic protection letters does not contain two or more protection letters addressed to the same protectee. *O.CrumVC* 8 and 9 are probably exceptions, but they were issued or rather written on the same day and might have been different versions of the same document: see 5.3.2.

his sigillion for the monks of the monastery of Apa Paul.⁶⁹⁹ The protection relationship existed between Atias' predecessor and the monastic community, and clearly Atias saw it as a valid argument for the renewal of the sigillion. The monks had used this precedent as an argument in their negotiations with the dux. As I have argued above in section 5.3.2., the Coptic protection letters *O.CrumVC* 8 and 9 might have been confirmations of or additions to the dux's *sigillion* and his tie of protection with the monks. In the other protection letters in which the protectors state that they are following the order of an administrator, or intermediaries' promises to uphold a protection letter, we can recognize again such compound protective relationships between the actors of the protection letter mechanism.

The protection letter mechanism created and strengthened networks of dependency relationships in the local communities. The Coptic protection letter was the perfect instrument for the village elites to maintain their position of power in the village, although as I will discuss in section 5.4.4, this is not the whole story. However, I will first show how the village elites' position of power is reflected in the seemingly contradictory characteristic of the protection letters, namely that the protectors in these documents, i.e. the village elites, often constitute the threat from which protection is offered by the document.

5.4.2 The protectors as threat

One of the most striking features in the Coptic protection letters, is that many promise clauses suggest that the main danger from which the protectees are protected, are actions performed against them by the protectors themselves. These are the promise clauses formulated with a negative verb, which are used most commonly: "I will not prosecute you", "I will not ask of you", "I will not do you harm", "I will not arrest you", etc.⁷⁰⁰ The protectors issuing the documents had the right and authority to prosecute, ask, harm, or arrest the protectee, but are prevented, or rather prevent themselves from doing that by the document. This right and authority came from their official position, e.g. as tax administrators, and could be caused by the actions of the protectee ("We will not prosecute you because you fled").

Many protection letters mention "harm" or "evil" as a danger from which the protectee is shielded by the protection letter, be it harm or evil done by the protector or by

⁶⁹⁹ Section 5.3.2.

⁷⁰⁰ In contrast with these negative promise clauses (3.1.2.1) are the affirmative promise clauses discussed in sections 3.1.2.2 and 3.1.2.3.

others. What exactly this harm or evil entails is not clear. One of the protection letters mentions protection against – implicitly referring to – physical violence. In his protection letter to his brother Timotheos, Biktor promises not to detain the protectee for a certain affair, and adds – almost as an afterthought – after the date and before his signature, that “I will not hit you this time”.⁷⁰¹ The addition of “this time” (μνηicon) is a clear testimony of this identification of the protector and the threat: Biktor had already physically assaulted Timotheos in the past. We do not know the relationship between Biktor and Timotheos. We do know that physical violence was something that tax payers had to fear from village officials: That people needed protection against the abuse by officials is a theme that recurs frequently in the papyri, discussed in section 4.1.2.2.

The protectors in the protective relationships offer the protection, and that protection is sometimes explicitly against threats posed by others (see e.g. *O.Crum VC* 8 which offers protection against fiscal claims by ecclesiastical and lay offices). However, in most cases, the protectors are also the source of the threat. Do they protect against abuse and violence performed by themselves or against legitimate punitive actions such as a rightful prosecution or arrest or simply legitimate actions such as collecting (back) taxes from the protectee? When the document offers protection against prosecution or a requisition (“We will not ask”), these “threats” seem legitimate actions, or at least they are presented as such. When the promise is against doing harm or evil, the threat becomes a little vaguer, and possibly violence is referred to.⁷⁰² In the case of Biktor and Timotheos, the threat seems to be a legitimate action, even justified in the letter, as Biktor takes the trouble to mention the affair for which he apparently could – but will not – arrest Timotheos, combined with the protection against physical violence which had already happened at least once in the past (see section 3.3.2).

The protection letters present the protectors in a position of power, both literally by referring to their authority concerning taxation and their ability to decide on legal matters or detain people, but also as the person holding the power in the social relationship: the protector (or intermediary) is extending protection, a favor, to the protectee. The next section will discuss

⁷⁰¹ *SB Kopt.* V 2224; on this document see also section 3.1.5.

⁷⁰² The references to the “what is just” or “fair share” in e.g. *SB Kopt.* V 2240 (exception clause I. 7: παρὰ πεκαδικαί[ον]), “other than your fair (share)”) and *SB Kopt.* V 2261 (promise clause II. 20-22: ἐνναδ|ροεῖς παῖκακαῖον νμμ|κ: we will respect/observe what is fair for you”) have been interpreted by Till as testimonies in the Coptic protection letters of the phenomenon that tax-payers had to fear unjust behaviour or abuse in their dealings with the village officials.

the reciprocal nature of these relationships. This will also lead us to complicate that position of power of the village elites: they also needed something from the protectee in order to maintain their position of power, and the Coptic protection letters supported them therein.

5.4.3 Reciprocity

In section 1.5.4, I introduced solidarity and reciprocity (including patronage) as concepts to help understand social cohesion of a society. The society of the late antique and early Islamic Egyptian countryside has been characterized as heavily reciprocal. However, it has also been argued that both reciprocity and solidarity can be recognized in any “real” society.⁷⁰³ This section aims to show how the Coptic protection letters reflected the reciprocity based system of the Early Islamic Egyptian countryside, but also to examine whether any part of the protection letter mechanism can be seen as a reflection of solidarity-based relationships in that context.

Reciprocity relationships are based on the exchange of favors, so the question is, how do we see these exchanges in the Coptic protection letters? The protection letter documentation is rather one-sided, most of the extant communication is directed top-down, from protector to protectee. E.g., the corpus does not contain a letter in which a protectee explicitly offers certain services or goods if their addressee helps them obtain a protection letter. In his request letter to his superior, Shenoute, the banned monk, does offer his addressee help if the superior or the monastery should need anything, although this help is not – explicitly – referred to as offered in exchange for the protection letter.⁷⁰⁴ The same goes for communications between protectors and intermediaries: the exchange of favors triggered by a protection letter is never mentioned. However, the protection letters addressed from protectors to protectees do include clauses that at least hint at reciprocity, or in which we can see the reciprocal system at work, particularly the instruction clause and the exception clause. Exchanges in reciprocity relationships are personal, and are felt to be obligatory. When these exchanges are put in a legal document, this emphasizes their obligatory nature. As I mentioned in section 5.4.1, the formulary of the protection letters reflect personal relationships rather than highly impersonal bureaucracy. However, in the Coptic protection letters the reciprocity relationships interact with administrative regulations, and the interests

⁷⁰³ Papaconstantinou, “Hagiography”. See section 1.5.

⁷⁰⁴ *SB Kopt.* V 2300, discussed in more detail in Scheerlinck, “Procedures”.

of the village elites issuing the protection letters concern their position in the administration, as well as their status in the village.

I argue below in detail that both the instruction clause and the exception clause can be seen as reflecting reciprocal relationships. The clauses do not explicitly mention advantages to the protector, but I am interpreting them with the context in mind. Because we know the responsibilities of the protectors, we can understand how they benefited when a fugitive returned to the village, or when someone contributed a partial amount of their taxes. So from that knowledge, I argue that the instruction clause and the exception clause reflect reciprocity, and I will discuss this in more detail below.

5.4.3.1 *Instruction clause*

The instruction clause tells the protectee what to do. It is usually the first clause of the document after the characteristic opening formula “Here you have the promise, by God”.⁷⁰⁵ As I have discussed in other sections, the instruction is usually to “Come to your house”.⁷⁰⁶ Whether taken literally, or metaphorically, being at home was an obvious condition for the protectee to take up his life in the village, including doing his work. I have also shown that instruction clauses could also include references to the protectee’s work.⁷⁰⁷ Often this work will have been on the land as the society was agriculture based, and this is explicit in e.g. *SB Kopt.* V 2263, where the protectee is told to ⲙⲱⲧⲧ ⲛⲉⲕⲉⲛⲛⲉ, “gather (*lit.* cut) your dates”.⁷⁰⁸ The protectors would have benefited from the protectee’s taking up his economic tasks in the village or monastery. Directly if they were the proprietors or agents on the land on which the protectee worked, or indirectly if they were in some way responsible for the taxes of the land that the protectee was assigned to work. Looking at the Coptic protection letters in the framework of reciprocity, we can interpret the action in the instruction clause as a service rendered to the protector by the protectee in exchange for the protection offered

⁷⁰⁵ An internal address and letter opening formulas could precede the *eis plogos mpnoute* formula.

⁷⁰⁶ Instruction clause: section 2.4.1.

⁷⁰⁷ *O.DanKopt.* 36, *O.Phoibammon* 4, *O.Saint-Marc* 322 (uncertain), *SB Kopt.* V 2224, *SB Kopt.* V 2240. See also the protection letters which functioned as permissions to work with a camel: *SB Kopt.* II 915, *SB Kopt.* V 2279, and *O.CrumVC* 64, and as permissions to till a plot of land: *SB Kopt.* V 2277 and 2278

⁷⁰⁸ See also the vinedressers who were mentioned in the letter *P.Ryl.Copt.* 385, in which the addressee states he would not give them a protection letter. Palme has interpreted references to the protectee’s work in the instruction clauses as possible indications that the protector and protectee had a pre-existing – dependency and reciprocity based – relationship of land owner and dependent farmer: Palme, “Asyl”, 213.

by the protection letter. While being at home might not literally be a particular service or favor, when the protectee took up his life and work again, this generally directly and indirectly benefited the protector. The instruction clause indirectly points to the benefits gained by the protector from the protectee's labor and social role in the local communities, and can as such be considered an expression of reciprocity.

5.4.3.2 *Exception clause*

The exception clause mentions an amount of money or the name of a tax that the protectee had to pay – hence my identification of it as exception clause: the protectee was freed from duties *except* for the amount mentioned in the exception clause. I have argued that this payment stipulated in the exception clause was a condition for the protection offered in the protection letter to take effect (see section 4.1.1.2). These payments can be interpreted as services rendered in exchange for (the protection offered in) the protection letter, and as such as expressions of reciprocity. *SB Kopt.* V 2292 contains an interesting variation of the exception clause. This variation emphasizes the reciprocal nature of the relationships between protector and protectee: the exception is not expressed as a sum of money or a tax, but rather as a person: "... I ask you to issue a protection letter for Triphanios, that he comes to his house, I will uphold the protection letter/promise for him, that no man seizes him or asks anything of him, *except your Paternity.*" The exception clause is placed right after the promise clause, just like the more "standard" exception clauses.⁷⁰⁹ The sender of the letter asks the protector, a high-ranking cleric, to issue the protection letter: it is plausible that the sender intended the protector to stipulate an exception clause according to the protector's wishes – which could include a negotiation with the protectee – in the protection letter. We do not know what the protectee owed the protector, or what the protector could ask the protectee in the context of their relationship. In many other cases, as I have mentioned above, we do not know the exact relationship between the actors of the protection letter mechanism either. This is related to the issue of private debt vs taxation in the protection letters: were the Coptic protection letters concerned with private debt and as such did they reflect (private) debtor-creditor relationships? Or were they rather concerned with taxation and tax debt and did they reflect tax payer – tax official relationships? In section 4.1.1 I showed the embeddedness of the Coptic protection letter mechanism in fiscal practice. In

⁷⁰⁹ On the different ways in which unique, situational, phrases are integrated in the formulary of the Coptic protection letters, see section 3.3.2.

any case, the interdependency of a debtor-creditor relationship is also an aspect of the protectee-protector relationship, even when they are tax payer and tax official – or rather village official or monastic authority in their role as tax administrator. Therefore, I would say that generally, the exception clause, similarly to the instruction clause, highlights benefits gained by the protector from the protectee’s return, specifically their contributions to the tax revenue of the local community. The exception clause and the instruction clause are two elements of the protection letter formulary which allow us to recognize the reciprocity of the mechanism behind the documents. What is more, the clauses suggest that the protection letters were in more general terms determined by concerns of reciprocity, as the issuance of a protection letter, or acting as an intermediary on behalf of a protectee, would strengthen the protector’s position in local dependency networks (see section 5.4.4).

5.4.3.3 Solidarity

In the sections above I have argued that the protection letters reflected reciprocity relationships, and that this is especially apparent in the instruction and exception clauses. It is more difficult to recognize relationships of solidarity in the Coptic protection letter mechanism (on solidarity, see section 1.5.4). There is even less tangible evidence in the language of the protection letters for solidarity relationships than for reciprocity relationships (see beginning of section 5.4.3). Solidarity based groups are usually considered to include people who do not necessarily know each other, but who share a common characteristic on which the solidarity is based, e.g. a religious or political ideology. The Coptic protection letters are rife with Christian verbiage and symbols, but so are other types of Coptic legal documents, not to mention Arabic and Greek documents as well: religious language was part of scribal traditions in this context.⁷¹⁰ It is thus unlikely that the elites participating in the Coptic protection letter mechanism did so out of piety, as sort of act of charity because they were Christians. Moreover, the Coptic protection mechanism is a very local mechanism, built on networks of relationships between people from the same village, people who would have known each other.⁷¹¹ Then can the Coptic protection letters be seen as reflecting a type of village solidarity, through which individual reciprocal relationships are put in second place after a communal village bond? In a number of protection letters the protector is the “community”, *koinon* or *koinotès* of the village in

⁷¹⁰ MacCoull, “Coptic Documentary Papyri”.

⁷¹¹ See section 4.2.3.5.

question.⁷¹² Arietta Papaconstantinou has interpreted these acts by “village communities” as the only evidence we have for village solidarities in late antique and early Islamic Egypt.⁷¹³ At the same time, *koinon* and *koinotès* should be understood, not as the whole village community, but as a smaller group within, the group of elites, responsible for running the village and from among whom the village officials were chosen.⁷¹⁴ The expression “brothers of the *koinotès*”, in a protection letter for a monk, suggests that indeed the protectors are individuals, representatives of the *koinotès*, rather than the community.⁷¹⁵ The sender of *O.MedinetHabuCopt.* 136, sends a request for a *logos* to be issued for him “in the name of the *lashane* and in the name of the entire village”.⁷¹⁶ I have discussed in section 4.1.2.2 one document, produced in Djeme in 741-742, in which the local elites of the village formally organized solidarity among themselves in the face of the “burden” (*pbaros*) of taxation. Again, we should keep in mind that the people involved in this agreement of solidarity, and protected, could be the village elites only, not the entire village. When it comes to the Coptic protection letter mechanism, I believe it favored vertical bonds over horizontal ones: resources and services, i.e. tax exemption and other types of protection, were distributed preferentially to some and not to others. People who fled from the village to evade taxes or were threatening to do so could negotiate their position and obtain a protection letter with exemptions. Protection letters allowed the protectees to pay less taxes if any, which is rather a preferential treatment, as it seems unlikely that every villager would have obtained a protection letter.⁷¹⁷ Other people might have resorted to taking out loans or selling possessions in order to pay their taxes, rather than fleeing the village and hoping for a protection letter. In that sense, the protection letter mechanism favored socio-economic inequalities and thereby could actually have weakened any existing village solidarities.⁷¹⁸

⁷¹² *O.MedinetHabu Copt.* 136; *O.CrumVC* 8; *O.GurnaGorecki* 69; *SB Kopt.* V 2236; *SB Kopt.* V 2259. *P.Lond.Copt.* 1227 might be another example but is unclear.

⁷¹³ Papaconstantinou, “Great men”.

⁷¹⁴ Berkes, *Dorfverwaltung*, 171-172.

⁷¹⁵ *O.GurnaGorecki* 69.

⁷¹⁶ Il. 3-4: ἀπὸν μηλαῶαν | ἀγὼ ἐπὶραν μητῖμε τηρῶ. Compare to the *logos* that had been issued by two estate managers “in the name of the *topos*” (*SB Kopt.* V 2226, likely the *topos* of Apa Epiphanius) The same expression (μητῖμε τηρῶ, *p̄time tèrf*: entire village) occurs in legal documents from Djeme: see the discussion in Papaconstantinou, “Great men”.

⁷¹⁷ We know that fleeing did not mean an automatic triggering of a protection letter procedure.

⁷¹⁸ Woolf and Garnsey, “Patronage”, 157 on patronage weakening solidarities.

Thus, in my view, the relationships activated through the Coptic protection letters were reciprocal in nature. They represented negotiations between protector, protectee, and intermediary, through which a compromise was reached that could be beneficial to everybody, although the distribution of power in the relationships was not equal. The relationships activated in the mechanism were not simple unilateral relationships, but formed networks of dependency, in which the several parties could be dependent upon one another, which I will discuss in the next section.

5.4.4 Dependency networks

There were various levels of dependency at work between the protector, protectee and intermediary in the protection letter mechanism.⁷¹⁹ Of course the protectees were dependent on the protectors for issuing the protection letter and upholding it. But the protectees were also dependent on their intermediaries, e.g. for communicating with and convincing the protectors to issue the document, but also for physically transporting the letter.⁷²⁰ I argued that the intermediaries probably negotiated the conditions stipulated in the document. Moreover, when an intermediary promised to uphold a protection letter issued by someone else, the protectee was also dependent on the intermediary to do so. However, you could also argue that in such cases the intermediary was dependent on the protector, who was asked to issue the protection letter so the protectee would come to the intermediary's village. The fact that letters from intermediaries requesting a protection letter for someone sometimes contain arguments to convince the addressee or indirectly the protectee, that the protectee should come home, puts a spotlight on this dependency. The protectees are needed at home, but the intermediary – village officials – cannot achieve this without the help of the protector.⁷²¹ In other cases protectors were dependent on intermediaries, to have access to the (hidden or run-away) protectee and transmitting the protection letter to them.⁷²² While arguably the balance of power and dependency in these protection letter relationships mostly worked to the disadvantage of the protectees – especially given that the protectors often

⁷¹⁹ On the multiple levels of dependency in request letters, specifically those related to travel documents, see also Palombo and Scheerlinck, "Asking".

⁷²⁰ E.g. *O.MedinetHabuCopt.* 136, O. Lips. Copt. II 170.

⁷²¹ The *Iashane* who sent *O.Crum VC75* repeatedly mentioned the urgency of the case for which the protection letter was needed. This is complemented by the comment, found in two of the three letters with requests for a protection letter sent by the protectees themselves, that they could or would not travel without a protection letter: *O.MedinetHabuCopt.* 136 and *SB Kopt.* V 2300.

⁷²² E.g. *SB Kopt.* V 2295, discussed in section 3.2.2..

constituted the threat, as discussed in section 5.4.2 – the protectors were also dependent on the protectees in the protection letter mechanism, especially on their tax contribution and their labor, but also on their contributions to the social fabric of the village (e.g. families left without a father, entire families leaving the village).⁷²³ I will elaborate this point further in the next section, where I discuss the protection letter mechanism in the light of the role of the protectors, particularly the village officials, in the administration of the caliphal province. That these dependency relationships – or rather dependency networks – were unbalanced is highlighted by the letter in which the sender states that he will not issue a protection letter for vinedressers who had fled, but that new men had to be hired.⁷²⁴ Not everyone who might have occasion and authority to issue a protection letter for someone decided to do so. Even if there was such an expectation, for which I have argued in section 3.3.3, not everyone felt bound to it.

5.4.5 Stakeholders in empire

In this final section I argue that through the Coptic protection letter mechanism we see the village elites operate as stakeholders in empire. The village elites furthered the interests of the empire by issuing and requesting protection letters for villagers who had left their home, which furthered their own interests as well as the interests of the village.

How did the protectors and intermediaries in the Coptic protection letter mechanism further their own interests? When people were absent from the village, whether because they had fled or were away performing duties for the government, this caused stress on the socio-economic fabric of a village. Families could be left without their breadwinner, the absentee's work in the village did not get done, land did not get tilled.⁷²⁵ Moreover, when people fled, this cut down on the tax revenue collected in the villages, both in the short and long term. The fled individuals would not be there to pay their taxes that year, and their plots of land would be neglected, endangering revenue flow in the future.

The village elites, among whom would be the local landowners and the village officials responsible for collecting and forwarding the taxes to the central tax administration,

⁷²³ See Papaconstantinou, “Credit”, for a similar interpretation of the dependency relationships between debtors and creditors in Early Islamic Egypt.

⁷²⁴ *P.Ryl.Copt.* 385.

⁷²⁵ On the inconvenience of labor requisitions for the villages, see section 4.12.

had high stakes in supporting the flow of revenue to the capital.⁷²⁶ Their position of power in their communities benefited from their authority in the fiscal system, and at the same time supporting at least adequate tax collection was likely also in their benefit financially, not just socially. I have discussed above in section 5.4.3, how the instruction clause and the exception clause of the protection letter formulary indicated the reciprocal “favor” to be performed by the protectee, and pointed to how this benefited the protectors and intermediaries. First, the exception clauses stipulated a certain amount of money or tax that still needed to be paid by the protection receiver. The variability of this amount indicates that this was not a fine for fleeing, but rather a sum on which the protectors issuing the document had decided in this particular case – possibly in negotiation with an intermediary. The protection letters likely reflect a type of negotiation between the village officials, and the person who had fled, who was not “at his house”. If the village officials were responsible for collecting and forwarding the taxes towards the central tax administration, it was in their interest to collect as much as possible, so as to avoid reprimands and loss of station. If the local tax administrators were expected or obligated to pay the tax deficits out of their own possessions, this would constitute an immediate financial incentive to prefer a partial payment to no payment at all. Indeed, collecting as much as possible might mean not the correct or full amount from everyone, but a negotiated and partial amount from fugitives, rather than not receiving any contributions from them. The instruction clauses of the protection letters also seem to hint at another motivation why they would provide amnesty to people who are presented as deserving of punishment. The fugitives are needed in the village to keep (the economy of) the village running (“do your work”), which eventually was necessary for an enduring flow of taxes to the capital. Thus, the Coptic protection letter mechanism represents a balancing act between sending enough taxes in the short term and keep tax revenue going in the longer term. This supported the local elites of the Coptic protection letters to maintain their position in the fiscal administration of the province, which also helped strengthen their position of power in the village.

In order to consider the protectors and intermediaries of the Coptic protection letter mechanism as “stakeholders in empire”, the mechanism should benefit the Islamic empire. It did, in two main ways. Firstly, as I discussed above, by securing revenue flow in the

⁷²⁶ Papaconstantinou, “Propriétaires”. In section 4.1.1, I show the different ways in which the Coptic protection letters were connected to fiscal practice in the countryside.

shorter and longer term, through partial payments and socio-economic continuation in the village. Secondly, the Coptic protection letter mechanism benefited empire by limiting the displacement of village inhabitants and the creation of so-called “strangers” or fugitives. I have discussed several examples of governmental correspondence ordering to arrest and fine fugitives (see section 4.2.2 and *P.Ryl.Copt.* 277 discussed in section 5.2.2), yet, the Coptic protection letters suggest that this not always happened in the villages. Rather than arresting, the village heads granted (conditional) amnesty to fugitives. As I have discussed in sections 4.2.2. and 4.2.3, the arrested or to be arrested fugitives in the Greek papyri are usually located in districts that are different from the one they are said to have come from. The local nature of the protection letters (see section 4.2.3.5) suggests that the people receiving them had not gone that far. In other words, the fugitives who were allowed to return to their place of residence had not ventured beyond the borders of their district. The protectors offering them amnesty were indeed those responsible for the fugitives’ administrative and fiscal tasks, in charge of the geographical area within which the fugitives operated. By allowing fugitives who were still close to home to return to the village, these are kept in the district and the creation of more “strangers” or “fugitives”, in the sense of those tax-payers who had moved away from their place of residence where their taxes were typically due, was avoided.⁷²⁷ This benefited the central provincial administration directly, as it saved on the labor of government representatives, in the form of searching and arresting fugitives, and generating the related paperwork. While the Coptic protection letter mechanism does not show us the local elites as reinvesting collected taxes locally, as did the “stakeholders in empire” in Grafe and Irigoin’s example, the mechanism does show us how intimately the interests of these local elites and the interests of the province, and ultimately the empire, were intertwined. Using their authority in the village and in the fiscal administration to adapt governmental policies, in order to support the flow of revenue to the capital, and acting to their own benefit as well as the benefit of their local communities, the local elites engaging in the Coptic protection letter mechanism supported the success of the Early Islamic Empire.

This Chapter has partly adopted a top-down view. I have discussed how the orders from the government were transmitted to the Egyptian population, and shown how these

⁷²⁷ Of course we do not know how far they would have gone without the existence of such a local protection mechanism.

processes can provide evidence of the integration of the village elites in the provincial administration. The case studies reveal how the choice for a certain language, including the translation of administrative correspondence (5.3.1), or for a certain language distribution in a single document (5.4.1), was a deliberate strategy to ensure effective communication, not only top-down, but also bottom-up. It is not possible to examine these processes fully without involving the view from below. The officials working at village level worked as an integrated part of the administration, were knowledgeable about administrative and documentary procedures, and issued the corresponding paperwork (5.4.1). The documents discussed in section 5.4.2 show that the protection letter mechanism did not only operate on a village level, but that higher officials in urban contexts such as the pagarch or dux could also be involved. The Coptic documents discussed in that section show the village elites as intermediaries between the dux or pagarch and the protectee, while also producing and issuing their own documents under their own authority. I have shown how the protective interventions by the local elites can be seen as local expressions and adaptations of provincial policies and demands regarding the control of the countryside, particularly concerning taxation and the control of people's movements. The Coptic protection letters, promising (partial) tax exemption and other types of amnesty for fugitives, in first instance seem to oppose governmental policies and demands regarding fugitives, visible in the administrative letters and other documents discussed in Chapter 4. By providing protection in specific cases on their terms, the local elites negotiated and adapted the policies and demands of the government to the realities of village life on the ground which benefited the protectees, but especially the protectors and via them the empire which they formed a crucial part of.

