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Protective interventions by local elites in early Islamic Egypt

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Conclusion

The following pages provide some conclusions of this dissertation. First, I state briefly what each chapter of the dissertation has accomplished, and then I will formulate answers to the research questions I posited in the Introduction. As a third part to these conclusions, I would like to return to the different contexts that form the wider and narrower environment in which the protection letter mechanism operated. This will elicit some reflections on the lifespan of the Coptic protection letter mechanism, and how we can tie the seeming rise and fall of its popularity to the historical context.

What did each chapter accomplish?

Chapter 1 provided the historical context for the protection letter mechanism, as well as methodological comments on using (Coptic) documentary papyri as a source for historical studies, notably the difficulty of dating these documents. I discussed the meaning of “protection” in this dissertation, as well as two wider sources of processes and concepts in the background of the Coptic protection letters in seventh and eighth century Egypt: 1) Concepts of protection in Islamic law and examples of protection of subordinate people by government officials in the papyri, and 2) Roman or Byzantine asylum law, with special attention to the *logoi asylias*. I argued that the Coptic protection letters should not be seen as Coptic versions of or successors to the *logoi asylias*, but rather that they were distinct instruments of protection mechanisms of late antique Egypt. I also set out what was specific and new about my approach to the Coptic protection letters with respect to preceding scholarship, i.e. the inclusion in my analysis of the social relationships that underlay and were activated in the Coptic protection letter mechanism.

Chapter 2 examined in more detail on the corpus and categorizations of the Coptic protection letters as they were set out in previous editions and discussions. I pointed out where I disagree with the existing scholarship on the function of documents in certain subcategories (2.1.3). The chapter also presents a list of the 142 documents which I consider as Coptic protection letters in this dissertation. The chapter showed how the majority of the published Coptic protection letters were in fact written on ceramic or limestone shards, and were found in Western Thebes, in the town of Djeme (Medinet Habu) and surrounding monastic settlements. Moreover, the Coptic protection letters which have been dated to a certain year or a couple of decennia, are all dated to the first half of the eighth century.

Regarding chronology, the chapter also touched upon the apparent disappearance of Coptic protection letters after 750, a point which I will discuss further below in the last section of this conclusion.

Chapter 3 presented a detailed discussion of the formulary and of the procedures of the Coptic protection letter mechanism. The chapter argued that the Coptic protection letter mechanism was an institution embedded in local, rural communities, predominantly based in the village, and countered the claim in existing scholarship that the Coptic protection letter procedure was a matter of routine. I will discuss the results of these comparisons in more detail below, under the first set of research questions.

Chapter 4 expanded the discussion beyond the local context of the Coptic protection letter mechanism, similarly to Chapter 5. It provided a clear positioning of the protection letter mechanism among similar mechanisms operating in late antique and early Islamic Egypt. It discussed the 4 main categories of problems – taxation, fugitives, and private legal issues – which the protection letters aimed to solve, and compared the protection letters, both in terms of function and format, with (contemporary) documents with similar aims. I countered the argument in existing scholarship that the protection letters were essentially debt agreements between private debtors and creditors. Rather, I emphasized the importance of taxation in the protection letters, while acknowledging the role played by debt in the mechanism, while pointing at the ambiguity of the boundary between official/public and private in these contexts. I also refuted the idea that the Coptic protection letters functioned as short-distance versions of the Arabic (and Greek) travel permits, by comparing both mechanisms in detail. I will discuss the results of my comparisons in more detail below, under the second set of research questions.

Chapter 5 used the protection letters as well as other documents to argue that the village elites and their mechanisms were integrated in the provincial administration. It also focused on the social relationships and networks of dependency underlying the Coptic protection mechanism, and the motivations of the local elites to participate in it. I propose a new interpretation of the Coptic letter *P.Ryl.Copt. 277* as a translation to Coptic of the missive of a high government official to a pagarch, likely originally written in Greek or Arabic. I propose that the translation was made in the pagarch's office, and meant for consumption in the village, either to be read out loud to the villagers, or as a reference for the village authorities on what was expected from them according to the letter. I also propose new connections between the Greek *sigillion* *SB III 7240* and Coptic protection letters

O.Crum VC 8 and 9. These documents might have been issued for the same community of monks, four months apart, and illustrate the tensions between the expectations of the monks and those of the government regarding their tax payments.

Answers to my research questions

1. *Can the Coptic protection letter be considered an institution of village life? In other words, was a Coptic protection letter a result of a routine or rather an ad-hoc procedure? Can we identify patterns in their production (including their language) and circulation?*

This question was the focus of Chapter 3. The Coptic protection letter was an institution of village life, predictable and recurring, but with variable expressions. I showed how there are recurring patterns in the formulary of the documents, including the combination of certain formulae which form the core of a Coptic protection letter. On the other hand, I showed that the well-known variability of the Coptic protection letters appears down to the level of the individual scribe. The chapter argued that this patterned variability was a reflection of the specific situation behind the production of the document. The chapter provided a similar conclusion with regard to the procedure of the Coptic protection letter mechanism. Some practices were repeated, as is clear from the language in the documents, but overall there was not a fixed procedure to obtain a protection letter. Therefore, the chapter concluded that the Coptic protection letter mechanism was an institution of village life in seventh-eighth-century Egypt. The issued document itself would not have been a filled-out template, but rather containing formulas and stipulations adapted to the specific situation. Villagers could expect to obtain a Coptic protection letter in certain circumstances, and there is evidence in the documents that they indeed expected it. However, the issuance of a protection letter was not routine, nor even guaranteed, as the evidence shows. Moreover, some protection letters seem to contain additional comments aimed at convincing the protectee to accept the protection letter, which might indicate that protectees sometimes hesitated to participate in the mechanism.

The Coptic protection letter was an institution of village life, but as such was connected to other contexts as well. The Coptic protection letter mechanism was primarily the domain of rural elites, especially village authorities, as the production of Coptic protection letters seems to have been mostly linked to the village. However, the occurrence of district

administrators in a few protection letters shows that the mechanism could go beyond the level of the village (Chapter 5). Moreover, monks and especially monastic authorities also played an important part in the Coptic protection letter mechanism, as protector, intermediary, or protectee, and the finding of these documents in monastic sites gives additional weight to their involvement. Chapter 3 discussed the collaboration between village elites and clerical or monastic elites in the procedures to obtain a protection letter. The corpus presents in particular a recurring pattern of village elites requesting that a monastic leader should issue a protection letter for a third party, and in the same letter promising that they will respect said protection letter. This pattern points to a practice of cooperation between village and monastic elites, to bring villagers who had sought refuge at a monastic settlements back to the village, even temporarily.

2. *What was the role and place of the Coptic protection letters in their contemporary documentary landscape, i.e. compared to (contemporary) Greek, Arabic, and Coptic documents with seemingly similar functions?*

This issue is the focus of the discussions in Chapter 4, where I argue that the Coptic protection letters were problem-solving instruments. They solved problems of various types, which were often related to taxation, or private legal issues, and the need to return home. They solved problems for the protectee, but also for the protector, and in some cases also for the intermediary, e.g. in some cases where the intermediary was a village administrator, asking the monastic authority to issue a protection letter for a villager who was needed at the village. Each protection letter resolved, or aimed to solve, a specific, individual situation, which is visible in the variable language of the documents.

Other types of documents in seventh and eighth-century Egypt similarly aimed to solve comparable problems. However, Chapter 4 has discussed in detail which unique role the Coptic protection letters played in the wider documentary landscape. First, when it came to fiscal matters, the Coptic protection letters discern themselves from other documents solving similar fiscal problems related to fiscal pressure and tax evasion in two main ways: 1) Coptic protection letters were issued by the lowest officials with responsibilities in the fiscal administration, 2) and they addressed the tax payer (or tax evader) themselves. In the Coptic protection letters, with very few exceptions, there was no interference from district or province administrators, in contrast to other mechanisms solving similar problems for the protectee.

There are various documents regulating travel contemporary to the Coptic protection letters, especially dating to the first half of the eighth century (see below). Travel was an important component to most of the protection letters, but the Coptic protection letters differed in many ways from the Arabic and Greek travel permits issued by higher representatives of the Arab-Muslim government in Fustat, or from the very local Coptic travel permits used in Western Thebes. While it has not been stated or discussed explicitly in publications, on various occasions at academic meetings scholars have described to me the Coptic protection letters as essentially travel permits, but in their local, Coptic, form, instead of their provincially central, Arabic (or Greek) form. Through a comparison between the Coptic protection letters and the Arabic/Greek and Coptic travel permits I argued that these types of documents were issued with different principal aims: the travel permits' chief aim was to regulate mobility, while the Coptic protection letters' chief aim was to provide (partial) amnesty in order to solve a problem in the village. Yes, Coptic protection letters often explicitly allowed (or ordered) the protectee to travel (home), but the protection offered was not focused on the travel away from home, but rather on the protectee's life once returned to the village.

In some cases, the protection letters seem to aim at providing a safe space for a settlement of a conflict of some sort. Rather than mentioning fiscal elements, these protection letters seem to be instruments of private conflict resolution, asking the protectee to talk and settle, sometimes with the protector, sometimes with others, and allowing them to leave in peace if a settlement was not reached. The key element explaining the specific role of the Coptic protection letter mechanism as a private legal mechanism is that the protection letters did not aim at punishing the protectee or another party, but rather at leading to a solution between the protectee and other parties, to the extent that the protectee could leave again unharmed if a solution should not be found.

3. *What can the Coptic protection letters tell us about the role of local elites in Early Islamic Egypt, both as wielders of power in their own communities and as members of an administrative system in service of an Arab-Muslim provincial government?*

The Coptic protection letters were instruments of negotiation and power in the local communities in which the protectors and intermediaries of the Coptic protection letter mechanism had an authoritative role. Issuing such a document could strengthen the protector's position in the village community, through the activation of a reciprocal

relationship with the protectee, which functioned through the exchange of favors and/or services. I have shown how this reciprocity is worded in the documents. My discussions of the procedures which led (or not) to the issuance of a Coptic protection letters have shown that there were multiple relationships behind the documents. In fact, Chapter 3 has shown the importance of intermediaries in the Coptic protection letter mechanism. Chapter 5 then, has argued that these multiple relationships between the various parties actually could form networks of dependency relationships, in which protector, protectee, and intermediary needed something from each other. The formulary of the protection letters focuses on the position of power of the protectors, but the dissertation has argued that the protection letters are also a result of a negotiation. I have proposed in Chapter 3 that oral interactions between intermediaries and protectors could take the form of negotiations, performed before the issuance of a protection letter, shaping some of the contents of the document (e.g. the amount of money still to be paid in the exception clause). The local elites engaged in the Coptic protection letter mechanism in their capacity of authority figures in their communities, leveraging that authority and their responsibilities in the communities to solve problems and facilitate the return of villagers stranded away from home.

However, I have argued that we also often see the local elites engage in the Coptic protection letter mechanism in their capacity as low-level fiscal administrators, functioning within the provincial administration. I have shown that the so-called Coptic protection letters, if not all of them, were embedded in fiscal practice. This makes them excellent points of entry into the study of the provincial administration of the caliphate in the seventh and eighth centuries, including the relationship between local elites and the central provincial government. The Coptic protection letter mechanism protected the protector's position in the administration of the province, through the ensuring of the flow of revenue to the central administration. The recipients of the protection letters presumably returned home, paid often a part of their taxes, resumed their work, and might hopefully be counted on to be there to pay taxes for the next tax instalment, rather than be lost to the desert or another village, or even another district.

I have argued that the Coptic protection letter mechanism, and the local elites engaged in it, contributed to the success of empire, through insuring the flow of revenue, and, relatedly, curbing flight from the village. These documents show the fiscal practice of local village authorities, beyond following orders from above and collecting taxes: they acted creatively in the fiscal administration, combining governmental policies with the realities on the

ground, to their own interests and those of the village. Yet, the Coptic protection letters as a whole were not “fiscal documents”, in the way that tax-receipts or tax-demands are, they were not instruments of the fiscal administration of Egypt. They are, in the first place, problem-solving instruments based in the variegated responsibilities and competencies of the village elites. The Coptic protection letters show the village elites shaping the fiscal practice of the province as part of a protection mechanism of their own, by which they solved various problems in their communities, a mechanism which operated autonomously from the central provincial administration, yet had a direct impact on it.

The timeframe of the Coptic protection letter mechanism

In Chapter 2, I discussed two interesting facets of the chronological distribution of the Coptic protection letters: 1) all protection letters which could be dated to a specific year or within a timeframe of a few decades, were dated to the first half of the eighth century, and 2) with one exception, none of the Coptic protection letters have been attributed a date after the eighth century. Thus, the mechanism seemed to thrive in the first half of the eighth century – at least in Western Thebes and in the village of Djeme specifically. Yet, while we have to take into account that some protection letters should receive a later date, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, by the end of the eighth century the Coptic protection letter mechanism seems to have become obsolete. The Coptic protection letter mechanism already existed in seventh-century pre-conquest Egypt, as evidenced by the letters sent to bishop Pesynthios included in the corpus. In Chapter 1 I have set out the reasons why I do not believe the Coptic protection letters as a whole, and certainly not those produced in Djeme in the first half of the eighth century, were Coptic versions or direct successors of the so-called *logoi asylias*, known only from sixth-century legal literature. The Coptic protection letters, in my view, were instruments of a similar yet different mechanism of protection functioning in seventh and eighth century Egypt, specifically designed to meet the needs of the situation, and located in village and monastic communities, at times tying those communities together. While the first attestations of the Coptic protection letter mechanism thus predate the incorporation of Egypt into an Islamic empire, I believe it is empire which allowed the Coptic protection letter mechanism to thrive when it did. Umayyad (Marwanid) policies of survey, control, and documentation of revenue and mobility, from the end of the seventh century to the middle of the eighth century, well documented in the sources and addressed in scholarly literature (see section 4.2), coincide with the period in which all the

more precisely dated protection letters can be dated. I have discussed several Arabic and Greek documents which were products of those policies in Chapters 4 and 5. Above I have stated that the Coptic protection letter mechanism operated independently from the central provincial administration, that is was not a product of it. However, I believe that the apparent blossoming of the Coptic protection letter mechanism was connected to the Marwanid policies, as local reactions to the heightened attention to and control of revenue flow and mobility of people from the provincial government.

Could a change in governmental policies also explain the apparent disappearance of the Coptic protection letters after the eighth century? Taking into account the linguistic situation of Egypt at the time, we might expect that by that time Arabic might take over from Coptic to issue the protection letters, similarly to the evolvement of tax-receipts which were more often produced in Arabic as opposed to Greek and Coptic from the second half of the eighth century onwards. However, there does not appear to have been an Arabic equivalent to the Coptic protection letters. Arabic letters reflecting similar mechanisms have been published, but these were not instruments of a particular protection mechanism comparable to the Coptic protection letters. We might consider indeed changes in the policies regarding taxation and mobility after the middle of the eighth century, when the Abbasid dynasty supplanted the Umayyads and commenced their rule over the caliphate. The range of dates for the published Arabic travel permits is 717-751, making them seemingly obsolete as well, while limited phrases from the travel permit formulary recur in published Abbasid Arabic tax-receipts, as well as in tax-receipt produced in the Fatimid periods.⁷²⁸ Were the Arabic travel permits and the Coptic protection letters both “victims” of transitioning fiscal policies, in which taxation and mobility were regulated differently, and/or less strictly? In the second half of the eighth century, lists of fugitives were still compiled in the Fayyum region.⁷²⁹ At this moment, there is no satisfying answer to these issues, which might be provided in the future by an in-depth and all-encompassing investigation of the fiscal documentation in Arabic, Greek, and Coptic of the Abbasid period.

⁷²⁸ Abbasid tax-receipts: *P.DiemFrueheUrkunden* 7 (784), *P.GrohmannProbleme* 18 (812), CPR XVI 1 (821). On this topic, oral communication by Marie Legendre, at the International Congress of Papyrology, Paris, 25 to 30 July 2022.

⁷²⁹ CPR XXII 35(750-769?).

