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Protective interventions by local elites in early Islamic Egypt

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Summary

This dissertation is dedicated to the Coptic protection letters, a group of documentary texts from seventh and eighth-century Egypt. They are the instruments of a specific administrative, legal, and social village mechanism, with both written and oral components, which was in the hands of the local rural elites. This dissertation examines the mechanism of the Coptic protection letters and what it can tell us about the role of the local elites in early Islamic Egypt. The Coptic protection letters are questioned in order to garner information on social cohesion, interaction with the state, the self-regulation of the local communities and the role played by the local elites therein.

Chapter 1 provides 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 discuss 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 is 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 examines in more detail on the corpus and categorizations of the Coptic protection letters as they were set out in previous editions and discussions. I point 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 shows 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.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed discussion of the formulary and of the procedures of the Coptic protection letter mechanism. The chapter argues 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.

Chapter 4 expands the discussion beyond the local context of the Coptic protection letter mechanism, similarly to Chapter 5. It provides a clear positioning of the protection letter mechanism among similar mechanisms operating in late antique and early Islamic Egypt. It discusses the 3 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. It also discusses the Coptic protection letters' connection to documents and mechanisms related to the release of prisoners. I counter the argument in existing scholarship that the protection letters were essentially debt agreements between private debtors and creditors. Rather, I emphasize 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 refute 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.

Chapter 5 uses 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 focuses 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.CrumVC* 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.

