Muhammad's world in Egypt

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CHAPTER 7

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The Arab takeover of the Byzantine province of Egypt in the mid-seventh century CE introduced a new political regime in a new capital Fusṭāṭ, modern-day Cairo. With it came a new language, Arabic, a new religion, Islam, and new cultural, administrative, and social practices. Much, however, also continued unaltered and especially at the level of daily life the routines of Egyptians living under Arab rule were in most cases not much affected. Greek, Coptic, and Arabic papyri preserved from this period catch both these continuities and changes. This chapter examines to what extent Arab-Muslim Egypt built on, reacted against, and broke with classical, Byzantine Egypt. The practices that the Arab conquerors brought to Egypt arguably lead us to customs common in Muhammad's Arabia, but other influences are noticeable as well.[1]

1 Sources and Methods in the Study of Early Islam

Recent decades have witnessed a revolution in the historiography of early Islam. In the mid-twentieth century CE, revisionist historians raised important concerns about Arabic narrative texts as historical sources. But their skepticism also left the field in a state of defeatist paralysis. At the end of the century, a new generation of scholars began to push beyond this impasse by drawing upon alternative sources to tackle the bias of the Arabic literary sources. Documentary evidence from archaeology, papyrology, diplomatics, numismatics, and epigraphy, as well as literary texts produced by communities outside the Muslim realm, used in conversation with the Muslim-Arabic literary material, have opened new vistas. This combined with another important development—the study of the connections with the cultures that preceded

1 This work was supported by the European Research Council under grant number 683194. This chapter builds on my article Sijpesteijn 2007. Here I pay additional attention to material culture and religious aspects and give a more elaborate discussion of where these practices might have originated.

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and partially overlapped with Islam, most notably Late Antiquity and ancient Arabia. Together, these methodologies have resulted in a multitude of vibrant multilingual, multidisciplinary research that offers new insights into the world of Islam's rise and earliest history, and does so with a focus on different societal layers and historical processes.

The study of early Islamic Egypt has been able to make especially important contributions to these scholarly developments thanks to its rich documentary record preserved in the form of papyri. Papyrus was the writing material of choice in the Mediterranean and Near East from its introduction in the third millennium BCE until its replacement by paper in the tenth century CE. Horizontal and vertical layers of strips cut from the stem of the papyrus plant were glued together and smoothed to form a lightweight, durable, and versatile writing surface that was already in use in ancient Arabia.[2] When the Arabs arrived in the Mediterranean they continued to rely upon papyrus as their main writing material, using it for every kind of text imaginable. Private and official letters, decrees and petitions, legal contracts, debt acknowledgements, tax assignments and receipts, lists of prisoners, converts, taxpayers, and accounts of estates or government departments, short notes requesting someone's presence at court or at a private celebration, amulets, exercises and recipes, and fragments of theological, legal, and literary texts were all written on papyrus. Serving daily needs and practical purposes, the papyrus documents were discarded when they were no longer needed. As an organic material, papyrus does not generally fare well when exposed to the elements. In Egypt, however, the dry and unusable deserts in which unwanted papyri tended to be deposited offered conditions very nearly ideal to long-term preservation. Thousands of papyrus documents survived there untouched, until they were dug up at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries CE as part of that era's great hunt for antiquities. Retrieved from the sands, the papyri offer a uniquely direct view on the daily concerns and activities of Egyptians living under Muslim rule. By comparing the writing, language, movements, and preoccupations recorded in the documents from Arab-Muslim Egypt with Egyptian papyri produced before the Arab takeover, it is possible to reconstruct what practices and customs the new rulers introduced in the province and how these interacted with local habits and traditions. Comparing the papyri with writings from the Near East and Arabia, especially inscriptions, offers moreover important information on the background of such practices and customs.

2 Sijpesteijn 2013, 1.

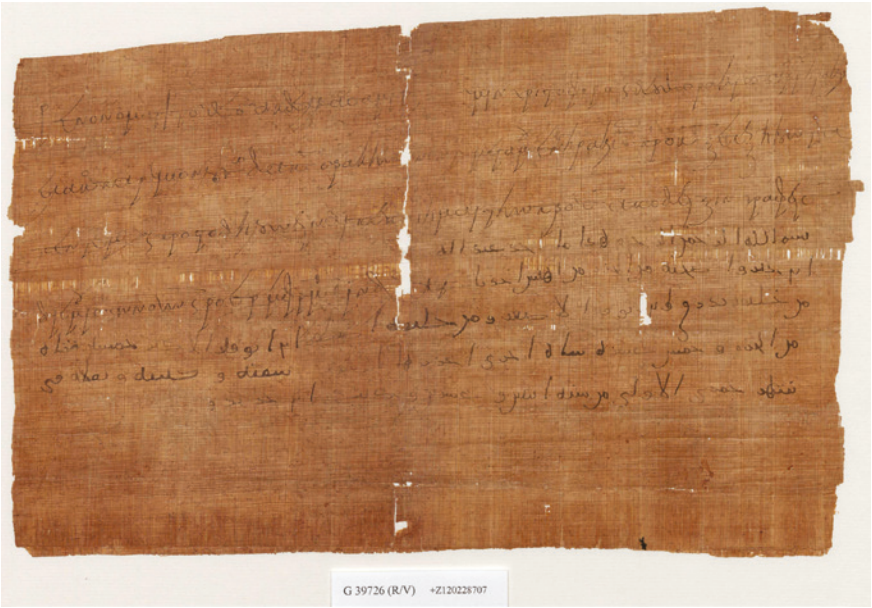

FIGURE 7.1 Papyrus PERF 558 recto, receipt for the delivery of 65 sheep from 643 CE
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2 A New Regime

In the Islamic year 22 (643 CE), an Arab unit consisting of cavalry, heavily armed soldiers, and marines moved up the Nile in a campaign to subdue and collect taxes from the areas in the south of Egypt. Passing through Middle Egypt they obtained sixty-five sheep from the local population. A receipt written in Greek and Arabic records the delivery of the sheep in minute detail (Figures 7.1–7.2). The text, preserved on papyrus and now in the Austrian National Library, tells us much about the new rulers, their way of operating, their military and administrative organization, how they interacted with the local population, in what languages they functioned, and even their food preferences.[3]

The receipt was drawn up in name of the Arabic general in charge of the army that pacified Upper Egypt, ʿAbd Allāh b. Jābir, for Christophoros and Theodorakios, the Christian Egyptians who functioned as pagarchs, heads of

3 Grohmann 1952, 113–15. For the following discussion, cf. Sijpesteijn 2013, 67–69. For a recent interpretation of this document as recording the practice of *murtabaʿ al-jund*, the seasonal grazing of animals in the Egyptian countryside in preparation of the campaigning season, see Bouderbala 2019, 375–79.

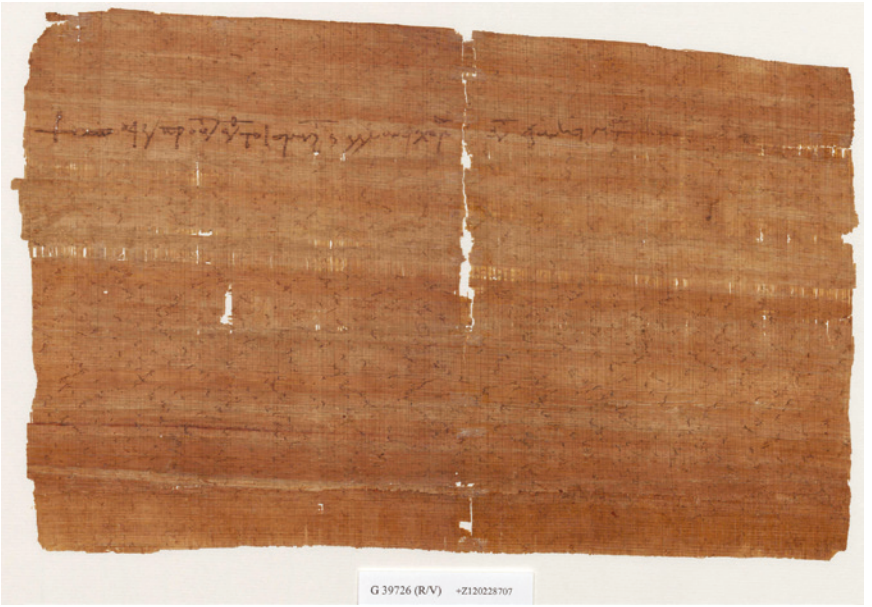

FIGURE 7.2 Papyrus PERF 558 verso

the administrative district of Ihnās (Gr. Heracleopolite). It is dated according to the Byzantine "indiction" calendar in the Greek section and the "*hijra*" calendar in the Arabic text. The Greek and Arabic parts of the document were written by two different scribes. The notary and deacon John wrote the Greek half, while Ibn Ḥudayd wrote the Arabic part, each according to his own scribal and legal traditions, with little coordination, it seems, between the two texts. Greek had been used in the Byzantine administration of Egypt and continued to be the main language of the Arab administration. Coptic, the last form of the Egyptian language, entered the chancery under the Arabs, whereas it had previously been used in private or semiprivate legal documents only.[4] Arabic meanwhile was immediately added as an administrative language as in this document, although its use compared to Greek and Coptic was initially limited.

The Arabic and Greek parts of the text on our papyrus, although conveying the same basic information, differ in focus and expression. The Greek text identifies the individuals in the document by their titles, including a Greek transliteration of the Arabic word for military commander, *amīr* (Gr. *amiras*), for ʿAbd Allāh b. Jābir. The Arabic scribe, however, used only names, but included

4 Cromwell 2017; Fournet 2020, 76–111.

patronymics, which are lacking in the Greek.[5] In the Arabic a distinction is made between "fifty sheep for slaughter and fifteen other sheep" (*khamsīna shā' min al-jazar wa-khamsa ʿashara shā' ukhrā*), while the Greek lists the number of sheep delivered in numerals and spelled out in letters, followed by the qualification "only" (*mona*).[6] The Arabic indicates that the sheep are given to ʿAbd Allāh's troops for slaughter, while the Greek mentions that they are part of the *dapanē*, a technical fiscal term referring to the taxes paid in kind intended as maintenance of the Arabs. Finally, the Arabic is constructed in the third person according to the practice of Arabic legal documents, while the Greek follows a subjective first-person style and specifies that the document functioned as evidence of the transaction having taken place.[7]

The receipt discussed in detail above records only one step in an extensive documentary procedure for the assignment and collection of levies imposed on the Egyptian population by the Arabs. Demand notes preceded the taking of goods and the issuing of receipts for the exacted products and services.[8] These demand notes, as with the receipt discussed above, contain references to the practice of recording transactions for future reference, explain the purpose of the impositions, and in general provide evidence of a calculation and recording system that extended from the capital Fusṭāṭ over the whole province starting directly with the arrival of the Arabs.

While the Romans had also collected taxes in kind, the Arab administrators perfected and expanded the practice, increasing the amount and the range of products requested from the local population. Arab administrators also put

5 Sijpesteijn 2013, 67. For other examples dating into the early eighth century CE, cf. Sijpesteijn 2013, 119n10.

6 The same practice occurs in Bactrian documents from central Asia that stand in the same Hellenistic tradition but date to the Islamic period, namely the eighth century CE. Cf. "one hundred, 100 dinars" in documents dated 478 (700 CE) and 527 (750 CE) both from Kadagstan and in a document dated 490 (712/13 CE) from Rob (Sims Williams 2012, Document T line 19, p. 103; Document X line 29, p. 141; Document U line 26, p. 111); "one hundred 100 and twenty 20 local current Arab dirhams" in a document dated 525 (747 CE) (Sims Williams 2012, Document W line 31, p. 133) and "one hundred 100 and fifty 50 new Arab dirhams" in a document dated 490 (712/13 CE) from Rob (Sims Williams 2012, Document V line 11, p. 119).

7 Whether this use of the third person in the document is motivated by Islamic legal prescriptions or the result of Arabian practice brought from the Peninsula to Egypt by the conquerors remains a question. To what extent the conquerors of the seventh century CE should be called "Arab," "Muslim/Islamic," or "Arabian" remains a point of discussion. Cf. Donner 2003 and 2010; Hoyland 2014; Webb 2016. Cf. Sijpesteijn 2013, 68. Hoyland 2017 tries to reconcile the different views.

8 Four other Greek documents issued by ʿAbd Allāh b. Jābir dating to 642–43 CE are in fact demand notes for contributions (Morelli 2010b, 162–63).

into place arrangements to replace deliveries in kind by payments in coin via artisans and middlemen such as bakers and weavers.[9] The Arabs' decision not to divide the conquered lands among the soldiers, but to compensate them instead with a stipend and payments in kind provided for by the subjected population probably initiated the system that was then expanded to supply other groups and projects of the Arab administration. Papyri preserve large numbers of requests for fodder, food, clothes, and shelter for soldiers, travelling administrators, and their animals.[10] One such Greek demand note was issued in the name of the conqueror and governor of Egypt ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ (d. 43 AH/664 CE) himself. It commands that the pagarch of the same Ihnās/Heracleopolite district mentioned before in January of 643 CE arrange to have a village in his district sell to ʿĀmir b. Asla,[11] commander of a local unit of Arab troops, fodder at the fixed price of two dinar per four bundles, and to host ʿĀmir's men for a period of three days. "Make sure to obtain a receipt for it," ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ warns the pagarch and he adds that no other troops should be billeted in the town. On the back of the document a note specifies that the village of Kephalē indeed provided the requested fodder.[12]

Another set of Greek papyri records the demands imposed upon the Middle Egyptian district of Hermopolite (Ashmūnayn) in the years following the Arabs' arrival. The central chancery transmitted numerous requests to the pagarch and his officers for materials, timber, stone, and ropes to construct public buildings in Fusṭāṭ. Greek and Coptic papyri record how such requests were received and handled by one local official, Senouthios, a scribe (Gr. *notarios*) and fiscal and administrative officer (Gr. *anystes*) who had served the Byzantines in the same position that he held under the Arabs. In one case he receives the order to close off the roads to his town and charge anyone trying to avoid paying the head tax, newly announced by the *amīr*. The head tax is called *andrismos* in the Greek papyrus, a new technical term for a new tax introduced by the Arabs.[13] To what extent this tax should be equalled with the Qurʾānic *jizya* is discussed below.

Another new element in the fiscal regime concerns the form of the tax demand notes as well as the receipts issued by the Arab chancery. Adopting the ancient Near Eastern legal documentary practice of double documents, the

9 Sijpesteijn 2013, 74.

10 E.g., the texts in Grohmann 1957; Morelli 2001; Morelli 2010a; Sijpesteijn 2013.

11 The Greek reads a-s-l-a, allowing for a variety of readings in Arabic. The exact Arabic name intended remains unclear.

12 Kießling, Rupprecht and Hengstl 1997, no. 14443.

13 Morelli 2001, 19–24.

Muslim fisc introduced in Egypt a practice of providing secured summaries of official documents that were at once irremovably attached to the document and hidden from unauthorized readers. Tax demand notes and receipts contained the necessary information twice: once in a visible and fully formulated text and, at the bottom, in an abbreviated form that was rolled up and closed with a seal. The seal would only be broken, and the secured summary revealed, in cases of disagreement or suspicion of corruption. Greek, Coptic, and Arabic documents from Islamic Egypt attest this practice.[14]

These papyri show that the Arabs introduced to Egypt their own well-developed documentary and scribal practice, which differed from the local tradition. They also initiated new administrative, and possibly legal, concepts and practices. It is also clear that this new regime extended into areas remote from the capital Fusṭāṭ and other garrisons where the bulk of the Arab troops were settled. Finally, the papyri witness the sophisticated written administration that was in place to record the kind and frequency of impositions levied on communities and to produce documentation that ensured the accountability and tracing of transactions. These administrative practices introduced by the Arabs to Egypt combine Near Eastern and Greek (Byzantine) elements. Moreover, a background in Levantine or Arab Hellenized customs seems likely, as will be discussed in the conclusion.[15]

3 Consumption Patterns and Material Culture

The papyri record not only how food was delivered to the Arabs, but also the kind of products they consumed. The Arabs introduced their own dietary preferences and material culture in Egypt. In the bilingual receipt discussed above, the Arab troops receive sheep to slaughter, presumably for their own consumption. Other papyri confirm the Arabs' partiality to mutton. The papyri record requisitions of sheep meat and butter by the Arab administration that were intended for Arab soldiers and officials.[16] The Arabs' preference for butter contrasts with the consumption of oil in pre-Islamic Egypt.[17]

The large amounts of *hepsēma*, must boiled to a syrup, that the Arab administration demanded from the Egyptian population remain somewhat of a mystery. The drink was known in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, but by far the most

14 Sijpesteijn 2012a; Sijpesteijn 2020a.
15 See also the discussion in Sijpesteijn 2013, 70.
16 Morelli 2001, 255; Morelli 1996, 111–12; Sijpesteijn 2013, 408–15; 428–31.
17 Sijpesteijn 2013, 66n115.

attestations occur in papyri from the Arab period, starting directly following the Arabs' arrival.[18] The Arabs ordered the syrup in large quantities for their sailors and workers on the fleet housed at the wharfs in Alexandria, Clysma, and Rhoda Island, and for administrators located throughout the province.[19] The large numbers of wine amphorae found in Egypt, by contrast, show that wine consumption, especially of wine produced in Palestine, actually increased under the Arabs.[20] The earliest mention of Egyptian lands administered for the caliph occurs in a labor contract for work on a vineyard located in the Fayyūm oasis.[21]

The papyri also contain information about a material culture that took shape in Egypt under the Arabs. Too little is known about the many buildings erected by the Arabs in the capital Fusṭāṭ immediately following the conquest to know whether new styles were introduced. Initially, the kinds of building materials and their intended use for administrative or ceremonial buildings were not distinctive. Only at the beginning of the eighth century CE do texts include requests for building materials and manpower specifically for the construction of mosques, albeit in Damascus and Jerusalem rather than in Fusṭāṭ. Attempts to connect structures in Fusṭāṭ with the supposed ethnic background of the Arab conquerors are difficult to support.[22]

It is, however, possible to trace changes in the material culture through the papyri in other areas. The Arabs used seals on documents for identification and to control access to the contents of the text, as was customary practice in the Near East as well as Egypt. Nevertheless, the application of seals on documents also witnessed innovations under the Arabs with Near Eastern, non-Egyptian, practices such as that of the double document being (re)introduced into Egypt by the Arabs (see above). The forms of and decorations on seals similarly simultaneously showed innovation and continuation, resulting in new forms.[23] Arab, Byzantine, and Sasanian practices were exchanged throughout the Muslim empire. Arab seals combined eastern and western iconography, joining

18 Cf. the order for *hepsēma* in a Greek papyrus dating to 644 from Ashmūnayn (Gr. Hermopolite), which belongs to the Senouthios archive (Kießling, Rupprecht and Hengstl 1997, no. 14219; cf. Morelli 2010a, 21–27).

19 Morelli 1996, 93–96; 112–13; 117–18.

20 Dixneuf 2011; Sijpesteijn 2013, 300–1. See also the evidence in Palestinian vineyards of an increase in wine production for export in the late seventh and early eighth centuries (Avni 2014, 204–7).

21 Sijpesteijn and Worp 1983, 226–29.

22 Kubiak described the first layer of buildings in Fusṭāṭ as having Yemeni features, but an exclusively Yemeni origin for Egypt's conquerors is untenable, something that Kubiak confirms (Kubiak 1987, 61–64; 126).

23 Sijpesteijn 2017, 655.

animals, celestial bodies, and texts in the local Egyptian context to form new imagery and decorative patterns. Thus, depictions of crescents and stars, which are commonly found on Sasanian seals, appear on seals used in the chancery of the Egyptian governor Qurra b. Sharīk (r. 90–96 AH/709–14 CE), along with deer, other quadruped creatures, and even people (Figure 7.3). Similarly, the practice of adding multiple seal impressions onto clay sealings was introduced to Arab Egypt from the Sasanian realm. The multiple imprints on the sealings attached to Egyptian documents, however, do not belong to multiple individuals as they do in the Sasanian examples, but rather show the same seal being used repeatedly.[24] The Sasanian practice moved to Egypt where it was adapted to local usages and given new meaning and form, through a process of "mutability of things through recontextualisation" as defined by Nicholas Thomas.[25]

At the beginning of the eighth century, administrative measures aimed at greater Islamicization and Arabicization were introduced throughout the Muslim empire. The measures are most clearly visible on the coins issued by the Muslim state where Arabic (Qur'ānic) phrases replaced images of rulers and religious symbols (Figure 7.4).[26] Similarly, in the Muslim chancery, Arabic was introduced in addition to local languages as the caliphate promoted a multilingual policy.[27] As discussed above, the use of local languages such as Greek and Coptic in the Egyptian chancery indeed continued for several generations. Eventually, however, the use of Arabic spread until all Egyptians used it for private as well as official, written and oral communication. By the ninth century CE, Arabic had become the written language of choice for most Egyptians and by the twelfth century CE Egyptian Christian literature flourished in Arabic. Another Islamicizing measure prohibited the use of crosses in public, including on official documents. The Greek text in the bilingual receipt for 65 sheep discussed above, is, however, preceded by a cross as were all Greek and Coptic documents of the time and another cross is used in the scribe's signature. This symbol of the Christian faith was soon replaced by one neutral oblique stroke or two in Greek and Coptic documents produced by or for the Arab-Muslim administration. The practice of beginning a text, including official ones, with a cross continued occasionally, however, into the eighth century CE.[28]

State-sponsored religious buildings such as the great mosques in Jerusalem, Medina, and Damascus, which were erected in the early eighth century, did not

24 Sijpesteijn 2018.
25 Thomas 1991, 28.
26 Treadwell 2009.
27 Sijpesteijn forthcoming.
28 Cf. Rémondon 1952, 259.

FIGURE 7.3 Seal on a letter from governor Qurra b. Sharīk to the pagarch of Ishqūh/Aphrodito, Basileios dated Ṣafar 91 AH/December 709–January 710 CE (D. 13296: Papyrus Qurrah III, detail of lead seal [OIM E13756])
COURTESY OF THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

FIGURE 7.4 Coins of Hishām 'Abd al-Malik with Qur'ānic phrases from al-Andalus, Marw, and al-Jazīra OMJ 307–F03, OMJ–307–H03 and OMJ–308–C10.
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include imagery. By contrast, the seals that officials working for the Arab chancery in Egypt used on documents continued to depict images of people and animals. Clearly, administrative measures initiated in the political center of the empire were not implemented throughout the empire at the same time.[29] Nor were all administrative domains considered to be alike, with the result that more private objects such as seals and documents resisted the impetus toward imperial standardization.

4 Muslim Rule?

The arrival of the Arabs thus had a clear impact on the documentation and material culture in Egypt, indicating that the new rulers brought their own customs and habits, which differed from but interacted with local practices. To what extent can the changes observed in the documents be connected to a new religious regime? The Greek part of the 22 AH/643 CE-dated bilingual Greek-Arabic receipt for 65 sheep discussed above conforms to much of the style and practices in place in pre-Islamic Egypt, including the cross with which it begins. In other ways, too, the Greek part of this official document produced by and for the Muslim-Arab and Egyptian-Greek administration represents local Egyptian practices. The Greek text contains, however, one striking indication that the Arab-Muslim context in which the receipt was written up did exercise some influence of a religious nature on the Greek text. The Arabic text starts with the well-known invocation, "in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (*bi-sm allāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*). The Greek invocation, by contrast, reads: "in the name of God" (*in onoma tou theou*). While this expression is perfectly acceptable to a Christian-Egyptian audience, it is a complete break with contemporary practice in Greek and Coptic documents, which customarily started with the mention of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, or a variation thereof.[30]

The Greek-Arabic receipt for the sixty-five sheep is dated in the Greek part according to the Byzantine indiction reckoning using a Coptic month name. The Arabic part is dated to "the later Jumādā of the year twenty-two." While there is no reference in the papyrus to the calendar used, the correlation of the two dates falling in 643 CE indicates that the Arabic part is dated according to the *hijra* calendar. The *hijra* year is, in Greek and Coptic papyri, sometimes

29 On the one hand, reform coins are found far and wide across the Islamic empire (Sijpesteijn forthcoming). On the other hand, a certain monetary independence can be observed in coins minted in different areas. Legendre 2020, 136.

30 Bagnall and Worp 2004, 99–102; 292–95.

identified with the phrase "according to the Saracens" (*kata sarakēnous*) or "according to the Arabs" (*kata arabas*), but no corresponding way identifies the calendar in the Arabic texts.[31] Yet the Arabic expression "according to the practice of the believers" (*ʿalā sunna qaḍāʾ al-muʾminīn*), which occurs in several early legal documents in relation to the dating, suggests that the signalled legal regime had religious associations.[32] The most important observation is, however, that the Arabs introduced a calendar throughout their empire established upon an event that took place in the year 622 CE, one important enough to signal a new time reckoning. *Hijra* years provided an absolute date in Greek, Coptic, and bilingual Arabic-Greek documents related to the fiscal administration.[33] That the *hijra* calendar was also considered to have an imperial and perhaps even religious meaning is suggested by a reaction in the dating systems that can be observed in Greek and Coptic papyri. The calendar based on Emperor Diocletian's rule starting in 284/5 CE, which later became known as the "era of the Martyrs," was initially used exclusively in Egypt for horoscopes and gravestones.[34] Only after the Arab conquest is the "era of Diocletian" attested in papyrus documents. A Greek papyrus dated 657/8 CE is the earliest attestation of the use of this calendar in documents; it appears in Coptic documents from the eighth century CE onward.[35] It implies that Egyptian non-Muslims juxtaposed "their" Diocletian calendar to the *hijra* calendar.

The earliest reference to Islam/Muslims (*ahl al-islām*) and Muhammad occurs on a tombstone from Egypt dated 71 AH/691 CE.[36] Papyrological attestations, however, do not occur before the 720s CE. In the 22 AH/643 CE-dated bilingual receipt, the Arab-Muslims are simply called "companions" (*aṣḥāb*) in the Arabic, while in the Greek they are identified as *sarakēnoi* and *mōagaritai*, a transliteration of the Arabic *muhājirūn*. *Sarakēnos* refers to individuals of supposed Arab descent in pre-Islamic and Islamic Egyptian papyri.[37] *Muhājirūn* is the word used in Syriac (*mahgraye*) and Greek (*mōagaritai*) sources from Syria and Egypt for the Arab newcomers. It refers to the migration that brought the conquerors from their hometowns to new territories.[38] *Muʾminūn*, believers, is another

31 Worp 1985; Bagnall and Worp 2004, 300.

32 Bruning 2015, 352–74. The phrase has also been interpreted as referring to "the year (Ar. *sana*) of the believers' rule." For the most recent overview of the different interpretations, see Tillier and Vanthieghem 2019.

33 Worp 1985, 114–15.

34 Bagnall and Worp 2004, 64.

35 Bagnall and Worp 2004, 63–87.

36 El-Hawary 1932.

37 Mayerson 1989; De Jong 2017.

38 Crone 1994.

term used to refer to the Arab-Muslims. The use of the expression "according to the practice of the believers" has already been mentioned. The caliph is generally called "prince of the believers," *amīr al-muʾminīn*, also in Greek and Coptic transliteration. There is a unique attestation in a late seventh-century CE Greek papyrus of *prōtosymboulos*, first counsellor, to refer to the caliph.[39] The papyri mention palaces, maintenance, and other expenditures of the *amīr al-muʾminīn*, mostly in relation to deliveries and contributions to be made by the Egyptians. They also include references concerning the caliph's agricultural estates, but it is not clear whether these refer to the caliph personally or to caliphal rule in general. Finally, the imperial administration and the individuals working there are occasionally identified as the *amīr al-muʾminīn*'s servants.

The new rulers in Egypt were thus identified by their own names and terminology in the documents, but these terms are not exclusively or recognizably Muslim or even religious.[40] These terms emphasize that the rulers differed from the local population, but do not indicate how that distinction was religiously defined. *Muʾminūn* might have referred in the seventh century CE to believers of different monotheistic religions.[41] *Muhājirūn*, by contrast, indicates that the newcomers had migrated out of Arabia as part of the large conquests. How was their relationship vis-à-vis the Egyptian subject population defined? It is clear that a distinction was made not so much between Egyptian Christians and Jews on the one hand and Muslim Arabs on the other, but rather between ruled and rulers, or between taxpayers and recipients of income generated by the land and its people. In other words, the juxtaposition was defined in economic-political rather than religious terms. This is confirmed by the way in which the papyri identify Egyptians. Egyptians occur not as "Christians" or "Jews," but as "people of the land," *ahl al-arḍ*. The term *aqbāṭ*, Copts (*qibṭ*), or *qibṭī* (Coptic), occurs as well, but not with the purely miaphysite Christian connotation it would get in the high Middle Ages. *Qibṭ*, the Arabic rendition of the Greek Aegyptos is, after all, a reference to the inhabitants of the province regardless of their religion, and this is the meaning it has in the Arabic documents as well.[42] Early references in papyri to the *dhimma*, the protection offered in the conquest treaties to the non-Muslim inhabitants, has a purely

39 Sijpesteijn and Worp 1983, 226–29. For the meaning of *amīr*, see Sijpesteijn 2013, 117–23; Morelli 2001, 21; Morelli 2010a, 16–17; Morelli 2010b.

40 Cf. Donner 2010, who has argued for an inclusive monotheistic character of the earliest conquerors.

41 Donner 2010.

42 For a discussion of the term in the ninth-century CE history of Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, see Omar 2013. For the papyri, see Sijpesteijn 2020a.

political-administrative rather than an explicitly religious meaning.[43] A classification of different groups of inhabitants dating to 168 AH/784 CE lists the *ahl al-dhimma*, people of the covenant, as a remainder category of landholders and agricultural workers who were supposedly all Egyptian non-Muslims.[44] In a text from the finance director Sufyān b. Qurʿa for the governor ʿAbd Allāh b. Musayyab (in office 176 AH/793 CE), the inhabitants of the districts of Ihnās, al-Bahnasā, and its oasis are addressed as "Muslims and protected people (*ahl al-dhimma*)," but here too the importance is their legal status, rather than their religious one.[45] In other words, these texts identify the non-Muslim Egyptian rural population by political-economic category, rather than religious status, with only one group of non-Muslims labelled as *ahl al-dhimma*. It is only in the ninth century CE, two hundred years after the Arabs' arrival in Egypt, that religious identity markers, as well as ethnic and geographical denominators, become prevalent in the documentary record from Egypt. The change is the result of a profound reconfiguration of the demographic landscape as a result of migration and conversion.[46]

The identification markers used for the Arab-Muslim rulers indicate that they formed a group distinguishable and separate from the local population, with their own linguistic, cultural, and administrative customs. While the identification markers of the new rulers do not point to an exclusively Muslim identity, there are some indications that the Arabs also had identifiable religious ideas and practices that set them apart from the local population. The way in which the Arab emphasis on exclusively monotheistic expressions of belief found its way into the headings of documents has been discussed above. Some other elements in the Arabic papyri can be linked to Islamic legal prescriptions discussed in later law books. One example is the legal status of documents. The bilingual Arabic-Greek receipt referred to above contains a phrase in the Greek which is lacking in the Arabic: "As evidence thereof [i.e., of the delivery of the sixty-five sheep] I have drawn up this document." According to Islamic law, it is not the written record of a legal transaction that constitutes the legal evidence thereof, but rather the observation of the transaction by two male (or four female) Muslim witnesses. The contrasting legal status of written documents in Roman and Islamic laws might explain why this phrase is absent

43 For a discussion of the term in legal sources as well as the earliest attestation of the term in a papyrus from Nessana, see Hoyland 2014, 55–57.

44 The other categories are landholders (*anbāṭ*), great landholders (*jamājim anbāṭ*), and fugitive landholders (*jawālī*): Diem 1984, 136–41.

45 Grohmann 1952, 132–34.

46 Sijpesteijn 2020a; Sijpesteijn 2011b.

in the Arabic part. The Arabic half of the receipt, in fact, conforms in another way to the same Islamic legal precept. While the Greek part of the document is written in the first person, the Arabic is in the third person, fitting the design of Islamic legal documents that are written from the point of view of the witnesses to the transaction.[47] Although not many Arabic legal documents are known from the first two centuries of Islam, they overwhelmingly take this objective form.[48] Other early Arabic documents contain references to Islamic legal institutions and concepts that are discussed in detail in later law books.[49]

Only a few papyri from the first two Muslim centuries refer to Muslim rituals. Egyptian contributions in kind, coin, and manpower are requested for the building of the great imperial mosques in Jerusalem and Damascus in the early eighth century CE, but no references to mosques in Egypt occur in the papyri before the ninth century CE.[50] One exception is the Hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. An Arabic letter dating to 86–99 AH/705–17 CE shows how two members of Egypt's governing elite arranged their affairs to join the caliph's pilgrimage caravan.[51] Other eighth-century CE letters contain further information of the practical and spiritual preparation for the Hajj.[52] The papyri also show that Muslims in Egypt paid *ṣadaqa*/*zakāt,* the alms tax obligatory for Muslims, from the second quarter of the eighth century CE onward. This tax on Muslim property seems at this time to have functioned as a fiscal imposition rather than a religious duty, although religious references do accompany the tax demands.[53] Similarly, the poll tax introduced during the first generation of Muslim rulers in Egypt under the new (Greek) term *andrismos* can easily be explained as having been a relatively painless way for the new regime to raise money. It can also be interpreted, however, as implementation of the poll tax (*jizya*) mentioned in the Qur'ān collected from non-Muslim monotheists.[54] The Qur'ānic term *jizya* does appear in Arabic papyri from the early eighth century CE, but has the more extensive and general meaning of taxes collected in money rather than the poll tax per se.[55] The Arabic terms used in the papyri for the poll tax are *jizyat al-ra's* and, from the early ninth century CE onward, *jāliya*, but again no definite religious character can be ascribed to

47 See also Sijpesteijn 2013, 68 for this observation.
48 Only two legal documents written in the subjective, first person are known.
49 Sijpesteijn 2013, 68–69.
50 Morelli 1998.
51 Sijpesteijn 2014.
52 Cf. Younes 2013, 220–22.
53 Sijpesteijn 2013, 172–98.
54 Morelli 2001, 19–24. Cf. Sijpesteijn 2013, 72–73.
55 Frantz-Murphy 2001, 143; Morimoto 1981, 53–62, 136.

this otherwise commonly applied tribute on conquered peoples, neither in its application nor in its Arabic terminology.[56]

Terms, concepts, and regulations discussed in later Arabic Islamic theological and juridical treatises as part of a fully developed religious-legal system are already present in the papyrological material from the first two centuries of Muslim rule in Egypt. It is not possible to determine if such references are part of a full-fledged system based on the religion of Islam already present at the time. Alternatively, the mentions should be interpreted as part of the same Near Eastern religious and legal culture that formed the foundation of Islamic law and religion continually adjusting to and accommodating a new sociopolitical reality in the Arab-Muslim empire and through interaction with the cultures encountered in the conquered lands.[57]

5 Patterns of Innovation and Influence

The Arab takeover of Egypt compares well with ancient and medieval Near Eastern patterns of regime change.[58] The Arabs arrogated the highest offices, including governor, chief judge, supervisor of tax collection, and head of police in the capital, and also removed military responsibilities from local appointees, assigning their own military-administrative officials. The bulk of the administrative offices remained unaltered, as well as the officials in charge. Continuation was further motivated by an uninterrupted use by the Arab chanceries in Fusṭāṭ and throughout the province of the administrative languages, terminology, and symbols that had been in place in Byzantine Egypt. The same people were thus in charge of the administration and executed their duties in a form and language that differed little from what had been in use in the preceding centuries. In short, a prevailing sense of continuity characterized the Arab takeover in the mid-seventh century CE. This continuity, as I have argued elsewhere, resulted from both the strategic choices by the Muslim-Arab regime and the conditions of the Arab conquest.[59] The establishment of Arab rule in Egypt followed patterns of regime change in the Near East, but the prolongation of

56 Morimoto 1981, 176; Frantz-Murphy 2001, 143; Legendre 2020, 138. *Jizya* becomes the commonly used term for poll tax in later medieval documents (Frantz-Murphy 2001, 143).

57 See also the idea of a shared late antique Near Eastern basis for the Qurʾānic text (CorpusCoranicum.de) and for Islamic-Arabic historiography, as well as ideas of piety and violence (Sizgorich 2004; 2009).

58 Sijpesteijn 2007, 197–98.

59 Sijpesteijn 2013, 84; Sijpesteijn 2007, 186–91.

this situation in Egypt was the result of specific historical circumstances. Only some sixty years after the Arabs established their rule over the province of Egypt were empire-wide reforms, initiated by the Umayyad Marwānid caliphs in Damascus and aimed at greater Islamicization and Arabicization of administration and rule, implemented there. Partially motivated by internal developments in the caliphate, including financial pressure, but also brought on by external political circumstances, the Arab regime was only at that point strong and confident enough to execute a fundamental reorganization.[60]

The story of continuation as the prevailing approach to Egypt's government and organization, with large-scale change taking place two generations later, has one further dimension. The papyrological record shows that the Arabs, while initially maintaining most of the administrative, fiscal, and governmental structures and organization in place, did simultaneously introduce administrative, scribal, and fiscal innovations. The new rulers operated in a new language, collected new taxes based on a new economic infrastructure, and produced a documentation that was both more voluminous and different in its aims than that of their predecessors. Institutions such as the *dīwān*, the personal register on the basis of which Arabs in Egypt obtained a stipend, *'aṭā'*, the seasonal grazing of riding animals used in the military campaigns, and the *cursus*, the annual raids on Byzantine lands, required extensive documentation and record keeping. Lists of Arab "companions" (*aṣḥāb*) and other documents related to the organization and payment of the stipends to Arab troops and their dependents were recorded on papyrus.[61] Censuses and large-scale land surveys generated detailed reports of land holdings, descriptions of property, and individual circumstances.[62] The new rulers and the administrative measures they undertook were obviously aimed at maximizing the exploitation of the earth and the income generated by it. At the same time, the documentation generated for this purpose served the Egyptians as much as it did the Arabs. From receipts for deliveries made to Arab troops travelling through the countryside to the tax demand notes and receipts related to the regular tax collection, the papyrus documents witness a striking culture of audit trails and accountability. Other early Arabic documentation revolved around regulated payments to orphans and the poor, seemingly of concern to the authorities.[63]

60 This concerned among others the relation with the Coptic church in Egypt, the Byzantine threat on the coastal cities and the Egyptian Arab regime's preoccupation with fighting on its southern frontier (Sijpesteijn 2007).

61 Sijpesteijn 2008; Sijpesteijn 2011a; Morimoto 1994; Bouderbala 2019.

62 al-Qāḍī 2015.

63 Khan 1992, text 1; Sijpesteijn 2011a; Sijpesteijn 2012b.

These new administrative practices and institutions generated a new vocabulary, including Arabic titles and other words transliterated into Greek, and Coptic and Greek technical terms, among which were words translated from Latin or of Latin origin that were not in use in Egypt before the arrival of the Arabs. *Symboulos* for governor and *prōtosymboulos* for caliph are newly attested in Greek papyri from Arab Egypt, as are *amiras* and *amiralmoumnin* as Greek transliterations of Arabic terms for these officials. *Andrismos* for poll tax and *cursus* for the annual Muslim raid on Byzantium have already been mentioned. Plenty of other examples can be listed.[64] Administrative practices such as the use of seals in documents to control access to the information described therein and the expansion of payments of taxes in kind, and the system that made that possible, were implemented by the new rulers as well. Administrative reforms such as the introduction of smaller agricultural tax units show a desire to rationalize the organisation of the countryside.[65] Finally, the papyri show that the new rulers also had different dietary preferences and cultural customs.

It is clear that the Arabs introduced an administrative, material, and perhaps even a religious and legal culture that set them apart from the local population. That the new rulers were experienced governors is not only clear from the administrative innovations described above and the extensive documentary record they generated, but also from the balance they struck in their rule between forcing change and accepting continuity, between cooperating with the local population and imposing their regime. Arab governance was, moreover, motivated by economic and administrative rather than religious concerns. Some Greek words that appear for the first time in the papyri of Arab-Muslim Egypt point to a Levantine background.[66] Administrative and scribal practices introduced at the conquest and in the decades following, show, moreover, a continuous interaction with Byzantine traditions.[67] The Arabic words and names that appear transliterated in Greek papyri from southern Jordan and the Negev dating to before the Arab takeover show linguistic features that differ from those in the papyri dating to after the arrival of

64 See Sijpesteijn 2013, 69–71.

65 The introduction of the village (Gr. *chorion*; Ar. *qarya*) as a fiscal unit was introduced in Egypt by the conquerors (Legendre 2020, 135–36). The same fiscal division of the countryside based on villages (Gr. *choria*) can be found in the Byzantine Empire already in the seventh century (Haldon 1990, 138).

66 Morelli 2002.

67 See the discussion above about the introduction of the village as a fiscal unit in postconquest Egypt following Byzantine practice. Greek papyri of the seventh and eighth century CE attest scribal innovations that are clearly connected to Byzantine practices (Morelli 2001, 53).

the Arabs. The preconquest Arabic names and words in the Greek papyri are more Hellenized than those of the later papyri. This difference suggests that a new group of Arabic speakers, less integrated into the Greek-speaking milieu than those who had been there before, became dominant in these areas after the conquest.[68] At the same time, Greek papyri from postconquest Egypt attest Hellenized Arabic names, also suggesting a migration of those Hellenized Arabic speakers from the Levant into Egypt with the conquests.[69] Other Arabic names in the postconquest papyri from Egypt show linguistic features pointing to a non-Hellenized background, suggesting a simultaneous influx from Arabia.[70] The script used by the earliest generation of Arab administrators and scribes in Egypt equally shows a connection with Arabian writing traditions as presented in inscriptions from the Peninsula and adjacent regions.[71] It is striking that when Arab administrators appear in Egypt, at the end of the seventh century CE, they seem to have a Hellenized background as well. It is possible that these officials utilized administrative and governmental experience acquired in the Byzantine Empire, transferring and transmitting it into Egypt when they were appointed there. Arab but steeped in Byzantine cultural and administrative practice, these men would have been especially attractive executors of the administrative reforms. Sasanian administrative influences and iconographic traditions also reached Egypt under the Arabs as cultural practices were exchanged across the Muslim empire. Cultural and administrative practices were thus introduced in Egypt by the new rulers immediately after the conquest and in the decades following, building on Near Eastern and Roman-Byzantine practices from Arabia and the Near East, including Egypt.

The papyrological material from Arab Egypt shows how the newly established rule affected the daily life of the Egyptians and Arabs living in the country. By contrasting what changed with what remained in place, it is possible to reconstruct the administrative, material, and cultural baggage that the new rulers brought into Egypt potentially leading us to the governmental and administrative context of Muhammad's time. At the same time, the papyri show us that the Arab rulers, with the aid of their Egyptian partners, struck a delicate balance

68 al-Jallad 2017.

69 See for example the Hellenized form Atias for Arabic ʿAṭiyya, the first Arab-Muslim administrator attested in the papyri, who stood at the head of a local district in Egypt from 694 to 697 CE (Sijpesteijn 2013, 201).

70 The name Ḥudayd, the scribe writing the Arabic part in the bilingual Arabic-Greek papyrus dated 643 discussed above, is by contrast written with a *wāw* at the end, pointing to a non-Hellenized background. I would like to thank Ahmad Al-Jallad for clarifying this point for me.

71 Some striking features of the script of the early Arabic papyri show that there was an influx of scribes who introduced different Arabian scribal conventions (Sijpesteijn 2021).

between conservatism and innovation, continuity and change, to facilitate a successful transition from a conquest society into a functioning Muslim empire.

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