Lucian Reinfandt

Petosiris the Scribe

Sometime in the early eighth century, a certain Petosiris in the Middle Egyptian town of Heracleopolis received a letter in Arabic (*CPR* XVI 4).¹ The sender was a Muslim Arab with the name Yazīd ibn Aslam. The letter is written *in Arabic* and deals with the taxes to be levied in the nome of Herakleopolis Magna (in Arabic *Ihnās*) and with an additional personal concern about forwarding a single *dīnār* to the letter writer. The mix of official and personal concerns in a single letter may be an indicator of a certain intimacy between the correspondents. From details in the letter, we learn that both were colleagues in the local Arab-Muslim tax administration, and the familiar tone of the language used suggests that both worked on much the same hierarchical level. The tax-related content of the letter reveals that the correspondents are members of the Muslim administration, as does Petosiris' epithet "the scribe" (*al-kātib*). One would not assume that Yazīd ibn Aslam, the Arab correspondent, would normally take the trouble to read Coptic, so Petosiris should presumably have written back in Arabic, too. Petosiris was a Copt and a professional chancery scribe treated as an equal partner by his Muslim colleague and he was able to read, and presumably also to write, refined official letters in Arabic at this rather early point in Muslim rule.

In papyri from the early Islamic period, we encounter individuals crossing borders that divided linguistic and social milieus but not necessarily also ethnic or religious milieus. Such cases provide us with important empirical data for tackling larger, and more controversial, questions such as the coexistence of and the relationships between ethnic and religious groups in the early Islamic period. The simultaneous appearance of languages in written documents is often indicative of an interrelatedness of social and technical aspects. These may concern multiple addressees belonging to different milieus, while others concern the context of usage, types of documents, their functions and needs. What we have here, however, is a proponent of a multilingual society in the true sense of the word. Petosiris the scribe was at home in more than one linguistic and social milieu and could switch between languages instantly when the need presented itself. Who was this early bilingual border

¹ The *Arabic Papyrology Database*, which is of intrinsic usefulness for any work with Arabic papyri, also formed the basis for the research of this study: www.naher-osten.lmu.de/apd (accessed 18 February 2020). Arabic quotations are given in transcription, as are personal names and toponyms (unless well known in the English language). Years of events are given according to the Common Era, as are years of documents except when explicitly dated by the Hijra, in which case both the Hijra year and the year of the Common Era (AH/CE) are given. I am immensely grateful to the anonymous proofreader for ameliorating my English and for enhancing my text with important suggestions.

crosser, and how representative was he for the rest of the society of early eighth-century Egypt?²

Only sparse biographical details can be gleaned from the document, but placing it in the context of parallel texts allows a clearer picture to emerge. The following investigation will (1) identify a first generation of “cultural brokers” between Arabs and locals in Egypt; (2) touch upon the historical framework underlying this phenomenon; (3) identify the individual socio-economic backgrounds of members of the new transcultural elite; and (4) assess motives for cultural assimilation and for collaborating with the Arab authorities as an indicator for the character of early Muslim rule.³

1 Cultural brokers in early Islamic Egypt

Petosiris was not a unique phenomenon; there were other crossers of social and linguistic borders in the early eighth century. A Coptic letter has been found in the Fayum (*P.Gascou* 24) that bears a single additional address line in Arabic (*ʿilā ʾabū ʿalī*). The writer of this Coptic letter was a certain Yazīd, who seems to have been an agent of the addressee, himself a certain Abū ʿAlī and some kind of agricultural landlord or entrepreneur in the Fayum. Yazīd writes that he had been traveling to al-Fuṣṭāṭ on the order of Abū ʿAlī and he is now reporting back to Abū ʿAlī about business transactions (wine sales on a large scale, more than 2,000 litres). In the letter, Yazīd also asks his superior to intercede on behalf of and assist a certain Maryam, who was a resident of al-Fuṣṭāṭ, and asks about a certain Abū ʿAlī’s shop, which was located in al-Fuṣṭāṭ as well. The correspondents of this letter were local businessmen, but as they had access to the military postal service (*barīd*) for transporting the letter (cf. the Arabic address line!), it can be concluded that they had positions as officials as well, which was common enough at the time.⁴

² The intricate matter of religious conversion in early Islam is dealt with in Fournet (2009) based on Clackson (2000) 23: in a Greek graffito from Bāwīt from the beginning of the eighth century, a certain Georgios son of Sergios calls himself a *mawlā* of an Arab, which apparently means that a Christian in this early period could be a client of a Muslim without being a manumitted slave or a converted neo-Muslim. Other names of Christian scribes in the service of the early Muslim administration are attested in Arabic papyri, such as ʿĪsā (*P.BeckerPAF* 4; Ishqāw, 710) or Yaḥyā (*P.Dienstschreiben* d; Egypt, 102/720). A famous example known from Arabic literature is that of Sarjūn ibn Maṣṣūr, the client (*mawlā*) of caliph Muʿāwiyā I and possibly the father of John of Damascus; cf. Fournet (2009) 146 citing Crone (2003) 237 n. 358 and Sourdél/Bosch Vila (1988) 20. For more details on conversions from Islam to Christianity in early Islam, cf. Sahner (2016) and Simonsohn (2011).

³ For the concept of cultural brokers as intermediaries between groups, cf. Reimitz (2013).

⁴ The wine trade is a remarkable fact, since it was traditionally in the hands of the Coptic population. The Arabic writing correspondents in a ninth-century letter about the same business (*P.ReinfandtWeinguthbesitzer*) may have been Arabicized Copts as well. This minor facet notwithstanding, there was a general tendency towards an accumulation of professions among earlier Arabs settling

Yazīd, the letter writer, had initially been a Copt, but he had assimilated into Arab culture and society. He may also have converted to Islam, as has been suggested by Anne Boud'hors, because typical symbols of Christianity seem to be avoided deliberately in the letter.⁵ His continued use of the Coptic language for family purposes, however, even after his assumed conversion, may indicate that the letter writer had changed religion without having achieved a full command of the Arabic language, as Sebastian Richter has mentioned in this context.⁶ Or he perhaps had to adapt to a situation where the rest of the family did not command Arabic as he did. It is most likely, though, that Yazīd knew both languages but used them on different *functional* occasions, as has already been pointed out by Naīm Vanthieghem: for the purpose at hand, there may have been a need to use Arabic in the address line (the postal service) but the letter itself was naturally written in his first language and to an addressee who was also a Copt.⁷

Another case is an unpublished Greek and Arabic bilingual writing exercise (P.Vindob. G 39752).⁸ A Greek address line is practiced and reads “+ With God. Almugelêd son of Rabê, to you, Apa Iulios son of Johannes, from the village of Peen-samoi from the pagarchy [of Herakleopolis].” Interestingly, the Arabic line beneath is a direct translation of the Greek but with the slight cultural adaptation of changing the personal names into their Arabic pendants: “In the name of God the merciful and compassionate! From al-Mujālīd son of Rāfi‘ to ‘Abdallāh son of Muslim.” Both parts are written by the same hand, as can be assumed from the ink and from the similar pen strokes. Who could this scribe have been? Was he a Christian Egyptian who shifted back and forth from Greek to Arabic? The Arabic is remarkably well written but may have been a bit more unfamiliar to the hand, as there is a minor writing mistake in the first version of al-Mujālīd. Nevertheless, the text shows a certain mastery of both Greek and Arabic in their written forms.

2 Languages in the caliphal provincial administration

To understand the character of individual processes of cultural assimilation, one has to look at the wider historical framework. It is important to keep in mind that most of what happened in the wake of the Arab conquest can be explained by the largely

in the Egyptian *chōra*, and not a few of them were merchants and administrative clerks on the same time; cf. Sijpesteijn (2013).

5 Boud'hors (2016) 74.

6 Richter (2008) 753 cited in Boud'hors (2016) 77.

7 Vanthieghem in Boud'hors (2016) 77.

8 The papyrus was part of the first Fayum finds and was found in Herakleopolis/Ihnās. It is described and translated in Karabacek, *PERF* no. 594 and dealt with in Jahn (1937) 175; Grohmann (1952) 72 and 227 n. 231; Grohmann (1924) 235; Vanthieghem (2014) 402 n. 4.

defensive character of Arab rule during the first two or three generations. No one knew whether the territorial gains could be retained on a long-term basis, and a culturally advanced local society reminded the Arab-Muslim elite of its own minority status. Conceptions of a gradual process of Arabization and the shaping of an Islamic (not necessarily Muslim) society are teleologically motivated and influenced by later knowledge; they do not reflect contemporary perspectives.⁹

This can explain why it took up to three generations until the first moves towards self-assertion were made on the Arab side. An Islamic dogma of strict distinction from other religious communities did not come into use and the Quran was not displayed in public before the end of the seventh century. Then, for the first time, Islam found expression in specific buildings (the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem), in the minting of new coins, and perhaps also in the issuing of bilingual Arabic-Greek official texts on papyrus.¹⁰ The need to unify the administration of the provinces under one general chancery language, which was to be Arabic, also became pressing only around this time. This major move was made by the Umayyad caliph ‘Abdalmalik ibn Marwān with his famous decree from c. 705 ordering the provincial chanceries to change their languages from Greek to Arabic (in Syria and Egypt) and from Pahlavi to Arabic (as in Mesopotamia).¹¹

We can gain an impression of the tremendous impact this had on contemporaneous society by seeing how Arabic literature in later centuries distilled these events into pithy anecdotes. The following one may serve an example: “At that time (i.e. 75/694) there were still two *dīwāns* in Kūfa and Basra, one in Arabic to count the men and their pay (this was the one established by ‘Umar), and the other in Persian for financial matters. The same applied in Syria, where one was in Greek and the other in Arabic. So it continued until the days of ‘Abdalmalik ibn Marwān.”¹² In what follows, a charismatic yet unknown hero enters the scene, a certain Abū l-Walid Ṣāliḥ ibn ‘Abdarraḥmān who promises the governor of Iraq, the famous al-Ḥajjāj, that he would be able to translate the opaque terminology of the Persian tax administration

⁹ Noth (1987) 291.

¹⁰ Johns (2003). Between 693 and about 720, there had been a transitional phase of the so-called protocol texts using a bilingual Greek-Arabic formulary until it switched entirely to a monolingual form after 732. The first dated Greek-Arabic bilingual protocol text known so far is from 74/693 (CPR III 1) and the latest dated example of a bilingual Greek-Arabic bilingual protocol is from 102/720 (CPR III 71), whereas the earliest dated example of a monolingual Arabic protocol thus far known is from 114/732 (CPR III 108); cf. Grohmann (1924) c–ci.

¹¹ Wüstenfeld (1875–76) 34–45 with reference to Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, Maqrīzi, Ibn Taghribirdī, and Suyūṭī (about Egypt); and Sprengling (1939–1940) (about Mesopotamia).

¹² *wa-lam yazal bi-l-kūfati wa-l-baṣrati dīwānāni ‘aḥaduhumā bi-l-‘arabiyyati li-‘iḥṣā’i n-nāsi wa-‘uṭṭiyātihim wa-hādḥā lladhī kāna ‘umarū qad rasamahu wa-l-‘ākharu li-wujūhi l-‘amwālī bi-l-fārisiyyati wa-kāna bi-sh-sha’mi mithla dhālīka ‘aḥaduhumā bi-r-rūmiyyati wa-l-‘ākharu bi-l-‘arabiyyati fa-jarā l-‘amru ‘alā dhālīka ‘ilā ‘ayyāmi ‘abdi l-malīki bni marwāna.* The quotation is taken from a tenth-century manual of administrative practice: al-Jaḥshiyārī, *K. al-Wuzarā’ wa-l-kuttāb*, ed. by M. as-Saqqā’ *et al.*, Cairo 1938, p. 38–40; engl. transl. by Lewis (1974) 191.

into Arabic in two days. To the surprise of all, he keeps his promise and makes this core business of imperial politics accessible to Arab rulers. In so doing, he breaks the monopoly of an entire class of local Persians who had been keeping the social capital of bureaucratic knowledge inside families for generations.

Similar episodes are recounted for Syria, but in this case with Greek changing to Arabic in the chanceries.¹³ The charismatic role of these heroic linguists and the literary topos of the two-day deadline for translating the directives should raise our suspicions, however: the changeover of languages in the chanceries was not a smooth process at all. The papyri show that, in Egypt at least, it took the administration decades to implement 'Abdalmalik's decree in practice, and one can only guess at the tremendous social consequences the changeover had for at least some social groups.

A typology has been developed by Sven Tost and the author on the basis of large numbers of texts from the Vienna collection. It identifies four types of documents that make evident the trend of bringing different languages into one administration and making them subject to the primacy of one Arabic standard.¹⁴ From the first decades of Arab rule, quite a few exemplars of a somewhat natural kind of (1) *translated* bilingual documents have been preserved. These consist of Arabic writing that was subsequently, and on the same papyrus, translated into Greek. Famous examples are P.Vindob. G 39726 from 643 but also the bilingual receipts SB XVI 13018 and XVIII 13771 from 677, the Nessana papyri, the *entagia* and perhaps even the “double letters” from Qurra ibn Sharīk's chancery of the early eighth century. The Arabic and Greek parts of these documents are of similar length, but they were written by different hands and for different addressees and had a hierarchically descending direction (i.e. the Arabic part had primacy over the Greek).

Over time, however, the languages in the documents became more interwoven, and this seems to indicate closer relations between formerly separate parts of the administration. The result was the appearance of a new type of (2) *complementary* documents that are written mainly in one language but contain later addenda in another. In these cases, both parts differ in length and addressees and have a hierarchically ascending direction: the main text ranks lower than the subsequent addenda. An example is CPR XXII 15 from the eighth century: this is a Greek document that refers to taxes in grain, with an additional docket indicating the total sum in Arabic. Another example is P.Vind. inv. A.P. 738 (PERF 628) from the eighth century; this is a register in *Coptic* containing the names of Arabic taxpayers and their individual amounts due signed in *Arabic* by a certain Ibn Ṣālīḥ; the verso bears what looks like a writing exercise probably written by the same hand, or at least with the

¹³ Jaḥshiyārī *op. cit.*, 39–40. Cf. also the account given in al-Balādhurī's *K. Futūḥ al-buldān*, transl. Hitti, vol. I, p. 465–466 [300–301] with more details about the actual terminology of accounting numbers and similar administrative matters.

¹⁴ Reinfandt/Tost (2017).

same stylus, as the Arabic on the recto.¹⁵ A final development is the appearance of (3) *integrated* documents, where different languages were used in the same document by the same hand and intended for the same addressee, as is the case in P.Vind. inv. A.P. 50 and 8386.¹⁶ Here, also, a fourth type of (4) *reused* writings becomes relevant in those cases where two or more texts are written in different languages on the same papyrus and are connected contextually or at least prosopographically connected. All these are examples of an endpoint of the inclusion of bilingual writers in the true sense of the word, and Petosiris and his like are good representatives of this trend.¹⁷

3 The social background of a new transcultural elite

Taken together, the topoi in literary anecdotes and the real people we encounter in the papyri suggest that the scribe Petosiris and his like were early representatives of a new trend: local non-Arabs had started entering the Arab-Muslim administration. In

¹⁵ Karabacek (1894) 164, now published as *CPR* XXXIV 22.

¹⁶ P.Vind. inv. A.P. 50 is the fragment of a Greek contract with subsequent witness attestations in Arabic. P.Vind. inv. A.P. 8386 has a fragmentary letter in Arabic plus an insertion of one or two lines in Greek rotated 180° on its one side as well as the Arabic address of the letter, but several lines in Greek and an additional Arabic section on the other. There is every indication that the Arabic letter had been written first. Soon after, a second hand may have contributed the Greek text, also rotated 180° on its backside the back and mentioning tax districts (*choria*) in alphabetical order. It was probably also the latter hand that had added the Greek line or lines on the other side. Finally, someone supplemented the second section in Arabic that was written below the Greek text on the backside and that seems to have made a reference to the content of the Arabic letter. Similarly to the aforementioned writing exercise, analogies of ink and stroke width suggest that at least the Greek parts and the supplement written in Arabic originate from one and the same hand. It would indicate that in some way or the other, all these texts were kind of interrelated in one way or another.

¹⁷ More examples of “unexpected language use” are *P.BerkesTrilingualScribe* = *CPR* XXII 17, publ. by Berkes/Younes (2012) (Arsinoites/Fayum; 789–790) with an Arabic part (“scribal exercise”) on the verso seemingly written by the same hand as the Greek–Coptic part on the recto, a fiscal register listing entries about different payments from the inhabitants of a village; *SB* I 4790 (Arsinoites; VIII); *MPER* XVII 37a (findplace unknown; VIII); *MPER* XVIII 307 (Fayum; VIII or later). An example from the ninth century is *P.DelattreEntagion*. Evidence for language interference in the papyri is found in the use of Arabic addresses on Coptic letters (but *nota bene* *P.Gascou* 24 is the only example known so far where both a Coptic *and* an Arabic address line appear): *P.Lond.Copt.* 580 (letter in Fayumic Coptic written by ‘Alī to Aḥmad, with an Arabic address line written by a third party for the postal service); *P.Lond.Copt.* 584 (letter in Fayumic Coptic written by Muḥammad ibn Abū Yahyā); *P.Ryl.Copt.* 376 (letter from Severus “his brother” to N.N., *min ‘akhi(!)hi sawirus*); *P.Ryl.Copt.* 377 (the end of an Arabic docket, written perhaps by the same hand as the Coptic part); *SB Kopt.* II 884; *BKU* III 458. Arabic letters may also contain address lines in Coptic or Greek: *CPR* XVI 34 (Egypt; IX) and *P.Heid.Arab.* III 27 (Hür; 1004/1005) in Coptic; *P.ArfaHaendler* 2 (al-Fuṣṭāṭ?; IX–X) in Greek.

Egypt and Iraq alike, “cultural brokers” appeared on the scene who had the skills to tie together the spheres of Greek or Persian financial specialists and those of Arab military elites.¹⁸

They were a new phenomenon in society, at least insofar as we can tell from the documentary evidence. There had been Arabic scribes before, such as the famous Ibn Ḥadīdō already mentioned in the bilingual P.Vindob. G 39726 from 643, and others are mentioned in documents from subsequent decades in the seventh century.¹⁹ From historiography, a certain Wardān is known; he was of slave origin and eventually became the scribe of the first Muslim governor of Egypt, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ in al-Fuṣṭāṭ.²⁰ These were translators, however, in the strict sense of the word and essentially belonged to the Arab sphere of administration. It can be seen from the Qurra dossier that in the pagarch’s office in Aphrodito an “Arabic” notary (*arabikos notarios*) had a social status different from his Greek-writing fellow next to him.²¹ We can only guess at whether this “Arabic” notary was still one of the earlier “translators” or already an example of a bilingual local financial specialist with a bilingual qualification jumping on the train of Arabization, but with the appearance of Petosiris and his like in the early eighth century, we can definitively observe for the first time such local specialists *de facto* making their entry to the Arab sphere of administration.

On the documentary level, the first tax lists drafted in Arabic and with a chancery quality (support, ductus, and layout) do not appear before the mid-eighth century.²² Most of them still remain unpublished, but their digital images are increasing-

18 Reimitz (2013) 268, defining, with reference to E. Wolf and C. Geertz, “cultural brokers” as “cultural intermediaries who stand guard over the crucial junctures of synapses of relationships.” Cf. also Richter (1988) 41 cited in Reimitz (2013): “As simultaneous members of two or more interacting networks (kin groups, political factions, communities, or other formal or informal coalitions), brokers provide nodes of communication with respect to a community’s relation to the outside world (...). Their intermediate position, one step removed from final responsibility in decision making, occasionally allows brokers to promise more than they can deliver. The resulting manoeuvring room allows skillful mediators to promote the aims of one group while protecting the interests of another – and thus to become nearly indispensable to all sides.” On the larger context of cultural brokers in early Islam, cf. Zaborowski (2008) and Kaplony (2016) for Egypt and Sprengling (1939–1940) for Iraq.

19 Ibn Ḥadīd(ō) in 22/643 (*P.World*, p. 113 = *SB* VI 9577); Abū Sa‘īd in 54–57/674–677 (*P.Ness.* 60 and 66); Ḥamid (or Ḥumayd) in 55/675 (*P.Ness.* 63); Khālīd in 55/675 (*P.Ness.* 62); Juhaym in 56/677 (*P.StoetzerSteuerquittungen* 2); Khālīd in 61–62/680–682 (cf. Abbott [1965] 22); Abān (or Iyās) b. N.N. in 65/684–685 (*P.DiemGouverneur*); Sa‘īd in 75/694 (*P.StoetzerSteuerquittung*); ‘Abdallāh ibn Jarīr in 87/706 (*P.BeckerPAF* 16 = *P.Cair.Arab.* 286); al-Ḥārith in the seventh century (*P.Berol. inv.* 10601); Mūsā in the seventh/eighth century (*P.Giss.Arab.* 6).

20 Cf. Rāḡib (1996) 9 citing Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh* (ed. De Goeje), I:2589; Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ* (ed. Cairo 1331–1338/1913–1919), XIII:324; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Nujūm* (ed. Cairo 1348–1392/1929–1972), I:25; A. Z. Ṣafwat, *Jamharat rasā’il al-‘arab* (Cairo 1356/1937), I:208, no. 164.

21 Cf. Richter (2010) 211–213 and, summarizing, Berkes/Younes (2012) 99.

22 Examples are P.Vind. inv. A.P. 8339 (Medinet el-Fayum; VIII/IX); 8409 (Medinet el-Fayum; VIII/IX); 11233 (*PERF* 675; Ihnās, VIII/IX); P.Vind. inv. A.P. 11329 (*PERF* 686; Egypt, VIII), dated by Karabacek

ly becoming accessible through an ongoing digitization project in the Vienna collection.²³ It is important to point out that these early Arabic tax lists are monolingual and not bound to the former bilingual procedure of translation as a link between separate spheres of administration. Scribes with specialist knowledge *and* multilingual competence (such as Petosiris) effectively took over from the former Greek administration and introduced the Arabic language into the documents. Their collaboration was presumably linked with social advancement upwards even as it enabled the Arabic language to reach ever lower and more local administrative levels.²⁴ This created the necessary links between different spheres and paved the way for a consolidation of the Arab-Muslim presence in Egypt. A direct consequence was the “lifting of the ban” of a previously rather defensive mentality of defensiveness among the Arabs (see above n. 9).

In social terms, the emergence of a new generation of multilingual scribal experts can be explained against the background of a Weberian typology of administrative personnel in Egypt which can be established on the basis of the data provided by the papyri. An important type is the *household official* who is a member of a trans-regional elite and lacks local family ties. He has an ethos of obedience and loyalty towards the ruler. Non-Arab Muslims initially made their careers mainly in the service of their patrons, but their education, skills and large number was such that they rapidly achieved positions of influence in their own right. Another type is the *aristocrat* who is a member of a local elite and who has a tribal or landholding background and an ethos of rank (*Standesbewusstsein*). Influential groups of non-Muslim landholding elites kept their influence under Muslim rule, such as the pagarchs in Egypt and the *dihqāns* in Persia. Their loyalty to their overlords tended to be low, and the government continuously had to negotiate with this type of official. A third type is the *expert*. He is a specialized clerk and tends to be lower ranking yet is indispensable for the smooth running of the administrative machine. His uniquely combined characteristic is a local background and a sought-after technical knowledge.

Of these three types, the expert seems to be most strongly represented in the papyri. Specialists served in the middle and lower ranks of the hierarchy but could rise to top consultant positions in provincial centers as well, thereby emancipating themselves from local aristocracies’ influence. An example is the Christian Sergios ibn Maṣṣūr “whose family had long been prominent in the administration of Damascus”²⁵ and who himself became a leading administrator in Syrian affairs under the caliph Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān. Other specialists had a more transregion-

(1894) 179 into the ninth century, but for palaeographical reasons may be dated up to a century earlier.

²³ *Papyri from the Early Arab Period Online* (funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation), www.onb.ac.at (accessed 23 February 2020).

²⁴ Cf. the detailed study by Kaplony (2016).

²⁵ Foss (2010) 83.

al background, such as the Christian financial expert from Edessa, Athanasios bar Gumoye. When the underage brother of Caliph ‘Abdalmalik became governor of Egypt, Athanasios escorted him and served as the effective Umayyad governor of the province.²⁶ Most of these transregional specialists in the service of the Umayyads were non-Muslims and had Greek, Coptic, or Middle Persian as their native languages.²⁷ A serious moment was the change of chancery languages under ‘Abdalmalik and his son al-Walīd, as a consequence of which the expert clerks now had to adapt to Arabic. During the first half of the eighth century, non-Arabs occasionally converted to Islam and became clients (*mawālī*) in the ranks of the administration;²⁸ this gave them the *de facto* status of household officials. Increasing centralization and professionalization in the middle layers of administration during the later Umayyad period attracted more expert administrators, who now show up without client status in the papyri. Their social capital was the family, and administrative positions were transmitted within families together with the requisite administrative expertise. An accumulation of client status and expertise, however, continued to play a key role, as the status of household official became even more important the higher an expert administrator rose in the hierarchy.

4 Motives for collaboration and assimilation

What motivated a first and second-generation transcultural elite to collaborate with the Arab authorities? The mid-680s saw a handover of centralized power from the Sufyanid to the Marwanid branches of the Umayyad family that brought along a change in the social composition of administrators in Egypt. Local non-Muslim aristocrats who had acted as traditional intermediaries between the Arab authorities and their subjects were replaced by household officials that were more directly responsible to the caliph and his governor but had no local support (and needed cultural brokers, that is, local clerks). A centralization of administrative structures was expected to augment caliphal power and provincial productivity at the expense of local landholding elites. At the same time, a first generation of Arab landholders appears in the sources. And finally, a relatively large group of expert clerks with aspirations to enter royal households as clients existed.

In all of this, there were two principal driving forces at work. One of them was the generation of income by participation in the economic value created. The other one was legal security attained through improving one’s personal legal status. The sources related to administrative practice in Umayyad Egypt create an impression that both economic participation and legal security were the main motives

²⁶ Donner (2012) xx.

²⁷ Hawting (2000) 62.

²⁸ Hawting (2000) 64.

for collaboration with imperial power at local level. Old elites may have worried about the protection of their vested interests, while new elites benefitted from prospects for social mobility that exceeded the conventional limitations of group and class. Such was the conglomerate of conflicting interests that determined territorial cohesion at the provincial level.

The transition in Egypt from Byzantine to Muslim rule took place first and foremost in the administration of the territory and its inhabitants. The ways in which local elites were integrated or replaced are indicative for the character and “quality” of Muslim domination at this time. Administrative papyri provide details of the tax administration and the dispensation of justice, but also of the individuals who produced the papyri. Quite a few of the earlier Arabic papyri must have been written by scribes with a different mother tongue. Here we are witnesses to an early process of cultural adaptation and assimilation which is usually, and perhaps imprecisely, subsumed under the headings of Arabization and Islamization. With Petosiris and his like, a first generation of multilingual specialists in the administration can be identified. But are they representatives of a multilingual society in the true sense of the word? It seems more likely that we are looking at interconnected but separate social and linguistic milieus. The full change to Arabic as the language of public life was to happen later.

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