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Eline Scheerlinck

Procedures of Protection. Coptic Protection Letters and Village Life

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Procedures of Protection

Coptic Protection Letters and Village Life

ABSTRACT

In the villages of late antique and early Islamic Egypt local authorities, such as village officials or monastic leaders, could issue documents, which promised some sort of protection to the receiver. Until now, about 140 of these documents—generally referred to as "protection letters"—and documents related to them have been published. Fairly little attention has been paid to the procedure that led up to the production of a protection letter. The Coptic papyrological record preserves testimonies of this procedure, such as letters with requests for protection letters. Through the analysis of five such testimonies, I examine the different steps people could take to obtain a protection letter. These analyses will highlight the importance of relationships and intermediaries in the communities as well as the roles of written and oral communication as part of the procedure.

Keywords: Egypt, local elites, papyrology, protection, social history, village communities

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✦ **RÉSUMÉ**

Procédures de protection : lettres de protection coptes et vie au village

Dans les villages égyptiens de l'Antiquité tardive et du début de la période islamique, les autorités locales (fonctionnaires villageois ou supérieurs de monastères) pouvaient rédiger des documents qui assuraient une sorte de protection à la personne à qui ils étaient adressés. Jusqu'à présent, environ cent quarante de ces « lettres de protection » et de documents qui leur sont liés ont été publiés, mais on a prêté peu d'attention aux procédures qui menaient à l'émission de ces lettres de protection. La documentation copte conserve pourtant quelques textes qui illustrent ces procédures, en particulier des lettres qui réclament ces documents. L'article propose, à partir de cinq de ces témoins, un réexamen des différentes démarches que les gens pouvaient entreprendre pour obtenir une lettre de protection. L'étude met en évidence l'importance des relations personnelles et le rôle des intermédiaires au sein des communautés, ainsi que la fonction des communications écrites et orales dans le cadre de la procédure.

Mots-clés : Égypte, élites locales, papyrologie, protection, histoire sociale, communautés villageoises

✦ **ملخص**

إجراءات الحماية: كتاب الأمان القبطي وحياة القرية

في قرى مصر في العصر القديم المتأخر وبداية العصر الإسلامي، كان من الممكن للسلطات المحلية، مثل مسؤولي القرى أو رؤساء الأديرة، إصدار وثائق تكفل قدرًا من الحماية لمتلقيها. وحتى الآن تم نشر نحو ١٤٠ من هذه الوثائق – المعروفة باسم «كتاب الأمان» – مع وثائق أخرى ذات صلة بها. بيد أن الإجراءات والمساعي التي كانت تؤدي إلى إصدار كتاب الأمان لم تنل إلا القليل من الاهتمام. هذا رغم أن البرديات القبطية تشتمل على شواهد عن هذه الإجراءات، وعلى نحو خاص على رسائل للمطالبة بالحصول على كتاب الأمان. وعبر تحليل خمسٍ من هذه الشواهد، يرمي المقال إلى إعادة دراسة الخطوات والمساعي المختلفة التي كان من الممكن للناس اتخاذها للحصول على كتاب الأمان. وتسلط الدراسة الضوء على أهمية العلاقات والوسطاء داخل المجتمعات، فضلًا عن دور التواصل الكتابي والشفهي في إطار تلك الإجراءات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مصر، نُخَب محلية، علم البرديات، حماية، تاريخ اجتماعي، مجتمعات قروية

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1. The Egyptian Countryside after the Arab Conquest

This paper[1] looks at acts and mechanisms of protection in the villages of the countryside of Egypt in the 7th and 8th century. At that time, Egypt's countryside was made up of small towns, villages and hamlets, grouped into larger districts, or *pagarchies*. These were administered by a *pagarch*, seated in the district capital. For about the first 50 years after their conquest of Egypt in 642, the new Arab-Muslim government kept the Byzantine administrative structure in place, and left the administration of *pagarchies* and the villages in the hands of the local urban and rural elites.[2] To say, however, that life went on as before for the local population might be a bit of a stretch,[3] given the introduction of the poll tax, to be paid by non-Muslim adult "males",[4] the seemingly increased control over people's movements,[5] and the well-documented requisitions of large amounts of materials, supplies and labour for the fleet and for various building projects in the new Egyptian capital of Fustat as well as in Damascus and Jerusalem.[6]

While the new government used Arabic and Greek in its administration and in its communications to the various *pagarchs*' offices, communication between the *pagarchies* and the village administrators was dominated by Coptic, with the addition of Greek. Coptic was the main language of administration in the villages, where it was also used for private matters, such as letters and legal documents.[7]

Over 2,500 documents in which Coptic is used and which are dated to the period after the conquest of Egypt have been published so far.[8] These documents are invaluable sources for understanding the social history of the countryside of Egypt as it became and developed

1. This article emerges from research done in the context of the project "Embedding Conquest: Naturalising Muslim Rule in the Early Islamic Empire (600–1000)", directed by Petra Sijpesteijn and funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 683194. I thank the participants in the "Acts of Protection in the early Islamic Empire" workshop (24–25 January 2019) for the stimulating discussions. I also thank the reviewers of this article for their helpful suggestions.

2. Sijpesteijn, 2013.

3. Wilfong, 2008, p. 181; the discussion which follows the statement does qualify it.

4. Gascou, 1983, pp. 100–101; Papaconstantinou, 2010; Sijpesteijn, 2013, pp. 72–74.

5. For an overview of different documents related to control over people's movement at the time see Delattre, 2019.

6. CPR XXX; Morelli, 1998; Foss, 2009.

7. Richter, 2009; Richter, 2010; Richter, 2013; Papaconstantinou, 2007.

8. This approximate number is the result of combined searches in the Trismegistos database (TM, www.trismegistos.org) and the Brussels Coptic Database (BCD, https://dev.ulb.ac.be/philo/bad/copte/base.php?page=accueil.php). However, the number of Coptic documents from the early Islamic period must be higher: the databases mentioned depend on the dating given in the document editions, which has tended in the past to date documents to earlier rather than later periods. Moreover, the number given here does not take into account documents dated to the 7th century generally, but only those which were dated after the Arab conquest. Coptic and Greek papyrological sources are cited according to the Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets, available online at http://papyri.info/docs/checklist.

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as an imperial province under caliphal rule. They provide snapshots of the life of ordinary people, and studying these snapshots together can reveal the mechanisms through which the rural communities functioned, and can allow us to better understand the relationships and acts, which shaped society.

2. The Coptic Protection Letters

If we look in particular at acts of protection in these villages, they are illustrated by, among others, the Coptic documents generally called "protection letters". In the 1930s, about 100 Coptic documents were first grouped together and labelled "*logos mpnoute* documents" and "Schutzbriefe", or protection letters.[9] They included the actual documents promising protection (see below) and other documents related to them, such as letters requesting the issuance of a protection letter.

The label is still used today, as more and more of these documents are being published, highlighting both their shared characteristics and their variegated nature in terms of phrasing as well as purpose.[10] They were written in Coptic, sometimes with some Greek elements such as the date or the signature of the scribe, if present. The region around Thebes or modern-day Luxor has produced most of these documents, which were predominantly written on potsherds or flakes of limestone rather than on papyrus, but the documents and their use in society are also attested in different places in Middle Egypt. The documents, when dated, use a relative type of dating: by indiction year, which means that they can only be absolutely dated when we already know the people mentioned in them—including when they lived—from other documents. These absolutely dated protection letters are dated to the first half of the 8th century.[11]

The protection letters stand out by their use of the formula *eis plogos mpnoute*, which is most often translated as "here you have the promise, by God", understood as invoking God as your witness to your promise in a similar way as you would when swearing an oath.[12] In a few cases, this religious underpinning of administrative communication is strengthened by an actual oath.[13] The documents, most often issued in the form of a letter by different types of village administrators, promise some type of protection for the addressee, generally after the latter has been instructed to come home:

9. Schiller, 1933; P.Schutzbriefe.
10. P.Schutzbriefe; Delattre, 2007; Boud'hors, 2019.
11. They can be dated to specific years or dates, because they were written by scribes known from other documents, mainly Aristophanes and Psate, both active in Djeme. In general, the documents have been dated to the 7th and 8th centuries, in one case to the 9th century. The link between the protection letters and pre-Islamic asylum documents has been explored in several publications, notably Böhlig, Böhlig, 1951, and Palme, 2003.
12. P.Schutzbriefe; Delattre, 2007. Cromwell, 2017, translates this as "assurance from God", e.g. p. 120.
13. E.g. SB Kopt. 5 2240, 2256, 2262, 2268.

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> + From Georgios and Aron, *meizones*, they write to Jeremias, son of Basileios and his children: here is the promise by God for you. Come to your house and appear, and we will not do any harm to you because you fled, nor will we prosecute you because of this (tax) instalment, nor your children, except for half a *holokottinos*. So you will not doubt, we drew up this promise and we sign it. Phaophi 6, indiction year 10. + Aristophanes, I wrote.[14]

The protection offered in these documents is expressed in negative phrasing, as in the example cited above: "We will not do you any harm"; "We will not prosecute you". In other protection letters, the issuing party promises to protect the addressee from detainment, or states that they will not ask anything of the addressee. The phrasing of these promises not only tells us from which danger the addressee is protected, but also where this danger would have come from; in other words, from whom the addressee is protected. In some cases, the source of the threat is left rather vague and general, and the issuing party explicitly takes on the role of protector in formulae of the type "we will not permit anyone to prosecute you; we will not permit any harm to reach you".[15] However, in most protection letters, as is the case in the example cited above, the threat comes from the issuing party themselves, as they seem to be effectively promising to protect the addressee from (punishing) actions which they would otherwise perform, were it not for the protection letter at hand.

Who issues the protection promises? Issued mostly by village officials and sometimes monastic authorities, the protection letters seem to be products of village and monastic administrations and predominantly connected to the village administration, as the examples will show. Only a couple of the hitherto published protection documents mention an administrative office ranking higher than village authorities. However, these higher officials did not issue the protection letters in question; rather, they seem to have been mentioned in them as a source of authority.[16] Second, who receives the protection letters? In the documents, the addressee most often only has a name, and this is almost invariably a male name.[17] In several cases, such as Jeremias' protection letter cited above, the children or family of the protection receiver are included as beneficiaries of the protection document. The protection letters themselves tell us very little about the occupation of the addressee, or the reason why they have fled or why they need a protection letter in the first place.

The letters cited and discussed below, however, provide more information on the situation of the addressees of the protection letters. They tell us about their representatives, the people whom they turn to in order to start the procedure. In some cases, in letters in which the sender is asking for a protection document for themselves, we can trace which benefits

14. SB Kopt. 3 1368; Calament, 2003; Djeme, 725.
15. E.g. SB Kopt. 5 2240: ϫⲛⲛⲉⲓⲕⲁⲩ ⲛⲉⲣ ⲡⲉⲑⲟⲟⲩ: "I will not let harm be done to you".
16. Namely, a *dux* in O.CrumVC 9 and a *pagarch* in SB Kopt. 5 2309.
17. In two cases, a protection letter seems to have been issued for women only: SB Kopt. 5 2244 and SB Kopt. 5 2304.

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to their lives these people expected from such a protection document. They seem to point to different reasons why someone would want or need a protection letter before they travelled back to their home.

The Coptic protection letters can be seen as products of "acts of protection": the authorities in question issue the protection letter and, hopefully, respect it afterwards. What could happen when authorities did not respect the protection letter, which they had issued themselves, is shown by a letter from a priest to two such promise-breaking administrators, banning them from religious service until they made things right with the addressee of their protection letter.[18] However, the documents also give us some indications that can help us understand the nature of the situation which caused them to be produced and caused these particular acts of protection to be carried out, and to be carried out repeatedly and in the same way, i.e. by issuing a recognizable type of document. They were recognizable already in the time in which they were produced, and that is shown by the uniform language in which people refer to them. The protection letters refer to themselves as *logos mpnoute* or promise by God in the initial formula and as *logos* or promise in other formulae, e.g. in the example cited above: "We drew up this promise and sign it". In documents referring to the protection letters, they are most often referred to as *logos* or promise, as will become clear from the examples below.

Looking still at the example cited above, we can understand several things about the situation in which the need arose for Jeremias, son of Basileios, to receive a protection letter. Apparently he had fled, and possibly had taken his children with him, as they are mentioned in the document as well. Moreover, he seems to have had some trouble paying his taxes, as the village administrators promise not to prosecute him for the instalment that was due at the time. However, they still ask him for a partial payment: half a gold coin. These partial exemptions are often found in the protection letters, in the form of a sum of money or the name of a certain tax, which still needed to be paid. These payments are different in every protection letter in which they occur, and seem to point to a negotiation between the issuing party and the addressee of the protection letter. It was in the interest of the village administrators, who were responsible for running the village and for collecting the taxes and sending them on to higher levels of the administration, that people were in the village, doing their work and paying their taxes—if not all, at least part of them. This negotiation would probably have taken place before the protection letter was drawn up, and I think it highly probable that the sum or tax agreed upon was not arbitrary, but rather a product of the negotiations between the issuing party and a representative of the addressee of the protection letter, an intermediary. I will return to this issue in the discussion of the examples below, in which I trace these negotiations.

It is precisely these types of actions and situations that I will illuminate with the examples below. The steps that were taken in order for a protection letter to be issued can be traced in several Coptic documents, but the scholarly literature has not paid much attention to them. These documents represent acts of protection in their own right. The acts I am looking at are the actions leading up to the production of a protection letter, through request letters written

18. SB Kopt. 5 2226.

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either by the person who needs a protection letter or by a third person acting as an intermediary between the issuing party and the addressee of the protection letter. Other letters show us that—and how—such a request for a protection letter could be followed up.

Careful reading of the examples I will discuss below can reveal the mechanisms through which village and monastic elites could perform protective interventions in the community through the particular institution of the protection letter. They reveal the relationships and acts, which underpinned and shaped the social institution of the protection letter within the village communities of early Islamic Egypt.[19] I use the word institution here in the same way as Krakowski & Rustow, namely as "a set of established and predictable practices that convey social meaning, are normative, and come to have such a seemingly objective reality that they govern future possibilities of social behavior".[20] Within this procedure of issuing the protection promises as a social institution in village life, I will pay special attention to the role of intermediaries and written vs oral steps in the procedure.

3. Procedures of Protection

The evidence suggests that when one needed a protection letter, an intermediary rather than the protectee would request the document from the issuing party. So far, only one letter has been published, in which someone in need of a protection letter directly requests one from the person who could issue it. It is a letter on papyrus from a monk of the Apa Apollo monastery in Deir el-Bala'izah. While the document is not complete, it is quite clear that this monk, named Shenoute, is writing to his superior at the monastery.[21] He had left or had been forced to leave the monastery, but at his departure, the addressee of this letter had told the exiled monk to return to the monastery at a certain point. With this letter, the monk announces that he wants to return, but cannot—or rather will not?—do so without a protection letter from the superior of the monastery.

> …] Petre. I know—I, this sinner and disobedient one—that I transgressed all the commandments which you commanded me and I am guilty in every sin. I [wrote?] therefore, because you told me as I was going away from you, saying: Come South at (the fixed) time and prostrate yourself upon our (deceased) fathers. The cares of the *ousia* did not let me come; and, what is more, if I come again, I shall be seized for even some care of the monastery as they are advising me here. And if you will give me a promise by God, and I am permitted (to come) into (my) dwelling place like everyone, I shall come South; if not, it is not possible for me to dwell within the boundaries of

19. Whether, on a larger scale, the protection letters would have been recognized and accepted as valid or binding by the Arab-Muslim government or by higher officials of the administration is a question, which I address in my dissertation.

20. Krakowski, Rustow, 2014, p. 114 (after Nathan Hofer). In my dissertation, I examine more closely the protection letter as a social institution of village life.

21. SB Kopt. V 2300, Deir el-Bala'izah, late 7th, early 8th century. The same monk addresses his superiors in other letters: P.Bal. 2 189, 190, 191. We know the monk's name thanks to these letters.

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> the monastery. Now, whether North or South, I adjure you by God, that you do not cast me out from you in your prayers. And if you need anything at all in the need of the body, tell us; and if the monastery needs anything within our power, tell us concerning it; we will not be disobedient. And through you we greet Papa Kostantine and Papa Theutose and Apa Ammone. These (things) I am writing; we shall fare well by your holy prayers.

In terms of steps within the procedure of the production of the protection letter, this situation seems to be straightforward: 1. the sender of this letter, monk Shenoute, writes a request for a protection letter to the receiver of this letter, his superior at the monastery; 2. the superior sends a protection letter back to Shenoute (or not).[22]

On the other hand, this document is quite unique, as it gives us a considerable amount of information on Shenoute's situation as a person in need of a protection letter; information which is unfortunately generally lacking from the other documents related to protection letters. The monk has been expelled from his monastery and clearly wants to return, but he is not isolated from society, as he has inserted himself into another socio-economic community. Apparently, Shenoute is working on land belonging to a village (*ousia*), where he has found people to advise him about his situation and about his return. They have told Shenoute that if he were to return to the monastery, he would be forced to perform certain duties ("cares of the monastery"), which he clearly does not feel to be fair. Therefore, Shenoute stipulates a condition for his return. He will return if the superior issues him a protection letter ("promise by God"), promising Shenoute that he will not be treated differently than the other monks. Shenoute frames his request with expressions of contrition at the beginning of his letter and expressions of goodwill and obedience at the end.

The next example is a testimony of the procedure, which can be traced in several cases in these documents: there is one intermediary between the people who need the protection letter and the people who (are asked to) issue it. It is a letter from a man named Petronius to Apa Koukle. However, Apa Koukle is not asked to issue the protection letter, as in the previous example, but is asked—or ordered—to get one from the village administrators.

> Be so brotherly and get the promise for me in the name of the *lashanes* and in the name of the whole village; but get it for Pkamoul also, and for all my men and all my goods. You know that I am wont to get a promise each year. Moreover, Pkamoul said: "I will not go South unless you get the promise for me". Send it to me tomorrow, quickly. Give it to Apa Koukle from Petronius.[23]

We can trace the following procedural steps in the letter: 1. Pkamoul communicates to Petronius that he needs a protection letter (too); 2. Petronius writes this letter to Apa Koukle; 3. Apa Koukle communicates the request to the *lashanes* of the village, orally or in a letter;

22. From the other letters Shenoute sent to the monastery, we understand that the superior did in fact *not* grant his request.

23. O.Medin.HabuCopt. 136, Djeme, 7th or 8th century.

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4. the *lashanes* issue a protection letter for Petronius, Pkamoul etc.; 5. Apa Koukle gets the protection letter from the *lashanes*; 6. Apa Koukle sends the protection letter(s) to Petronius.

The imperative and the addition of "quickly" suggest an authoritative tone, which is borne out by Petronius' remark that he receives a protection letter each year. To Petronius, the procedure to get a protection letter is clear: he writes a request to Apa Koukle, who should receive the document issued in the name of the village heads and of the whole village.[24]

After the *lashanes* write the protection letter, Apa Koukle should get it from them and send it back to Petronius. What is interesting about this situation is that apparently, this procedure could move very quickly. Petronius orders Apa Koukle to send him the protection letter the very next day! This also points to the local nature of these protection letters and the procedures surrounding them. Petronius and Pkamoul cannot have been far away from either Apa Koukle or the village if the procedure—from requesting the document to sending the signed document—would take only two days.

The editors of this document argue that the sender of the letter is not requesting a *logos mpnoute* or protection letter but rather a travel permit. Petronius mentions that he gets a protection letter "every year", and that he needs it for his men and his goods as well, leading the editor to argue that Petronius must have been a merchant or artisan needing a travel permit—usually called *sigillion* in the Greek and Coptic documents—for an annual work trip, rather than a protection letter.[25] I believe that there is another way of looking at this situation, one in which Petronius does use the right term (*logos*) for the document he wants to obtain. Not all protection letters explicitly mention that they were issued for fugitives. Shenoute the monk was not a fugitive, but wanted to negotiate his position in the monastery if he were to return from exile. In the case of Sabinus the camel herder discussed below, there is nothing in the text that suggests that he is a fugitive, but still the text reads like a protection letter, with a promise that no evil will befall the protectee. In Petronius' (and Pkamoul's) case, a protection letter could have included similar promises. Petronius' comment on getting a protection letter every year could also be related to taxation, as we see many partial exemptions "for this year" in the protection letters. If this was the case, if Petronius could count on (partial) tax exemption or some other amnesty every year, this would point to the embeddedness of the protection letters as a social institution in the villages. Unfortunately, until now no protection letters have been published which were issued repeatedly for the same person.

24. While most often village officials are issuing protection letters by themselves, there are examples of protection letters, which mention the village community as an issuing party, e.g. O.CrumVC 8; SB Kopt. 5 2261; Boud'hors, 2019, pp. 56–58 (= O. Gurna Górecki 69). In these cases, this whole village community is understood as the group of village elite members, from among which the village officials were chosen and who were responsible for running the village, Berkes, 2017, pp. 168–200.

25. O.Medin.HabuCopt. 136. On *sigillia*, Arabic and Greek travel permits, see Rāġib, 1997; Pilette, Vanthieghem, 2016; Vanthieghem, 2014; Delattre, 2019.

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My next example concerns, as I mentioned above, a camel herder named Sabinus. The letter is excellent testimony to how a request for a protection letter could be followed up. The addressee of this letter is Apa Moyses, a monastic authority. He receives this letter from Johannes, who styles himself "your son", which is probably an expression of reverence. The editor of the letter assumes that Johannes is a village official.

> Forgive me that I have not found papyrus. Before all things I greet Your pious Paternity. You have written to me concerning Sabinus the camel herder to give a promise for him and for his camel, so that he comes to his house. So here is the promise by God for him and his camel that he comes to his house and works with his camel. I will not let any evil reach him nor will I allow evil to reach him. So that you do not doubt, I sign. Written Pharmouti 13, indiction year 14. Give it to the pious holy Paternity Apa Moyses, priest, from Johannes, your son. Johannes, I sign.[26]

We can trace the following procedural steps from this letter: 1. Apa Moyses requests via a letter that Johannes write a protection letter for Sabinus (and his camel); 2. Johannes issues the protection letter for Sabinus within his response to Apa Moyses; 3. (Presumably) Apa Moyses gives Johannes' letter, which includes the protection letter, to Sabinus.

As in our previous example, only one person is an intermediary—in this case Apa Moyses, the receiver of this letter. It is notable that Johannes sent his answer and the protection letter as one document. Because he is addressing the letter as a whole to Apa Moyses, he writes the formulae of the protection letter in the third person rather than in the second person, which was customary, as in Jeremias' protection letter cited above. However, given that this "internal" message contains the standard formulae of protection letters and that it is even dated and signed by Johannes, we must assume that this document would have functioned as a protection letter for Sabinus and his camel, although it is contained in a letter to Apa Moyses. In the previous example, Petronius did not expect the *lashanes* to give him the protection letter after having issued it for him, but he expected his intermediary Apa Koukle to receive it and pass it on to him. The same is happening here: Johannes does not give or even address the protection letter directly to Sabinus, but instead sends it to Apa Moyses. Lacking in this letter is any information on the role of Sabinus in this process: did he ask Apa Moyses, in conversation or by letter, to intercede for him with Johannes? Or was there yet another intermediary involved? In any case, someone must have informed Apa Moyses about Sabinus' need for a protection letter.

The examples discussed so far highlight the importance of written documents and the sending of letters in the procedure of obtaining a protection letter. However, I believe we should take into account steps in the procedure, which left very little trace: oral conversations that would lead to written documents.[27] Two documents explicitly mention these oral steps in the procedure of requesting and issuing a protection letter.

26. O.CrumVC 64, Theban region, undated.

27. In a number of protection letters, the addressee is asked by the issuing party to come and talk in order to settle an issue, and is promised that he can leave again, even if an agreement was not reached. These

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The first document is a fragment of a letter written on a potsherd, which has been broken off, only preserving a few words and word groups. However, it provides invaluable information on protection letter procedure. The sender of the letter wrote as a group or as the representative of a group. They want the *lashane* to write a protection letter for themselves ("to our home"), and indicate how this should come about. They mention a conversation to be had by the receiver's "brother", which could indicate familial, spiritual or collegial ties, with the *lashane*. The legible text on the ostracon reads: "… and send to us […] your brother, so that they talk [with the la]shane and he gives a promise […] to our home".[28]

We can individuate the following steps: 1. the sender, in need of a protection letter, contacts an intermediary, i.e. the receiver, by letter; 2. the receiver of this letter communicates with his "brother" about the issue via written or oral communication; 3. the receiver's brother speaks with a *lashane* about the issue; 4. the *lashane* writes a protection letter for the sender (or not).

Instead of one intermediary, this procedure involved two: the receiver of the letter and his brother. The protectee apparently believes that the brother of the receiver is the best person to intercede for them with the *lashane*. With respect to the receiver, his brother was possibly closer to the *lashane*, geographically or socially. With this letter, the protectee attempts to direct the procedure of the protection letter by indicating the steps to be taken and, what is more, who should take them. The protectee uses their relationship with the receiver—although we are left in the dark about the nature of that relationship—and what they know about the relationships between the receiver and his brother to attempt to better their situation by receiving a protection letter.

The letter explicitly states that the receiver's brother should speak with the *lashane*, and that from this conversation the issuance of a protection letter should follow. I think it is probable that during this conversation, the details of the protection letter that was to be issued were discussed, e.g. whether the protectee would be exempted from taxes for the year, or whether the *lashane* would not ask anything of them except a certain sum, as I discussed in the introduction.

In the last case I will discuss, three extra people are involved in the protection letter procedure, aside from the protectee and the issuing party. This is partly because there was some confusion about who was responsible for dealing with the situation. As in the previous example, this case shows the importance of both written and oral communication within the procedure, as well as the importance of having the right person for the job. In certain places in the translation below, I added the names of the various actors in parentheses for reasons of clarity.

instances show how oral conversation was part of the social institutions of protection in village life. Examples include SB Kopt. 2271–2275; SB Kopt. 5 2302; SB Kopt. 5 2310; SB Kopt. 3 1365; Boud'hors, 2019, pp. 59–62 (= O. Gurna Górecki 70).

28. Boud'hors, 2019, pp. 69–70 (= O. Gurna Górecki 72), ll. 2–5, Theban region, Hermitage MMA 1152.

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> Your Paternity asked me: go to Apadios on account of the matter of Petros. Now, I went and I spoke with him (Apadios). He said: the matter does not concern me, but Taammonikos. Now, please, write and bring Taammonikos to you so that he issues a promise for him (Petros) that he (Petros) should go to his (Petros'/Taammonikos') residence, since he (Taammonikos) imposed taxes on him (Petros).[29]

From this letter, the following steps in this particular protection letter procedure can be traced: 1. the receiver of this letter communicated to the sender a request to go to Apadios about Petros; 2. the sender talked to Apadios and Apadios told the sender that Taammonikos should be involved; 3. the receiver summons Taammonikos, they have a conversation; 4. Taammonikos writes a protection letter for Petros (or not).

The three people involved in this process who would not have been part of the final outcome, i.e. the protection letter for Petros, are the sender of the letter, the receiver of the letter, and Apadios. The receiver of the letter is a clerical or monastic authority, as he is addressed by the sender as "Your Paternity", but the context of the other actors is unclear.

Again, as in the letter about Sabinus and his camel, we do not know what the role of Petros is here, but somehow his case was brought to the receiver of the letter, who sends the sender to Apadios to resolve the matter. However, he turns out to be the wrong person; it is Taammonikos who should deal with it by writing a protection letter for Petros. The sender provides a reason for this: Taammonikos imposed taxes on Petros. This gave Taammonikos the authority to, for example, grant Petros a (partial) tax exemption included in a protection letter.

This letter reports not only on the communications necessary in the procedure, but also on movement. The sender went to Apadios to have a conversation with him, and also suggests that the receiver summons Taammonikos by letter ("write and bring Taammonikos to you so that he issues a promise for him"). While it is not stated explicitly here, I believe the sender envisages a conversation between the receiver of the letter and Taammonikos, which would lead to a protection letter. This would be a similar mechanism as the one imagined by the sender of the letter discussed above: a conversation between an intermediary (in that case the brother of the receiver of the letter) and the person who could issue the protection letter. This conversation would possibly deal not only with the decision whether a protection letter would be issued, but if so, also with its contents.

29. SB Kopt. 5 2286, Theban region, undated. Krueger, 2018, p. 30 and O.Lips.Copt. II Add. 3 assigns this document to the dossier of the monastery of Apa Hesekiel in Hermonthis (Armant), which would place it in the 6th, early 7th century. It is not clear whether it is meant that Petros should go to his own residence or to Taammonikos' residence, and on the basis of the phrasing of other protection letters and related documents, a case could be made for either solution.

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4. Conclusion

On the preceding pages, I have attempted to illuminate aspects of Coptic document production in the context of village life in late antique and early Islamic Egypt, which have hitherto been understudied. How to obtain a protection letter was an issue that many 7th- and 8th-century villagers must have dealt with. The evidence indicates that people needing a protection letter seemed to know how to obtain one, as in their letters they point out the measures to be taken and the people who should take them. They used their knowledge of the relationships and competencies of their co-villagers in order to try and get what they wanted. One thing that becomes clear from the examples I discussed is that one to two or even three people could be involved whose names would not appear in the final document. The protective interventions of these intermediaries played an important role. Not only did they pass requests and documents back and forth, but they probably also, as I argued in several instances, negotiated the contents of the protection letters. By taking into account the letters documenting the protection letter procedure, rather than only the protection letters themselves, networks and mechanisms of protection are illuminated which would otherwise be left in the dark. E.g., the cooperation between village officials and monastic authorities in these procedures is a recurring aspect of the extant evidence of protection letter procedure, and these relationships deserve further study. The focus on procedure I adopted in this article also allowed me to trace the oral aspect of document production, which seems paradoxical, but as the case studies show, oral interactions could be important steps in the protection letter procedure.

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