Introduction

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The generally held and often-repeated generalisation that there are no documentary sources for the history of the first four centuries of Islamic history is slowly being undermined as new discoveries are made and old texts revisited. It is interesting to reflect that a decade ago no one had any knowledge of the existence or possible existence of the Arabic documents from Tukharistan recently published by Geoffrey Khan.¹ From Iran itself we have the Pahlavi economic documents from the late seventh and early eighth centuries, now in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley, whose publication is just beginning.² Greek papyri from Petra in Jordan, containing Arab names and Arabic phrases, are also in the process of being published.³ But despite this, it is Egypt that provides by far the most important body of documentary evidence,⁴ and this volume is essentially concerned with material from Egypt and southern Palestine. The database of Coptic documents from the late antique and early Islamic periods suggests that there are over 7,000 preserved items, while the Arabic papyri are at least as numerous if not more so. The number of Greek documents from the Islamic period continues to increase with the redating of material and a steady broadening of focus among Greek papyrologists to include the Islamic period.⁵ This is a vast amount of material for any early medieval society, even if the fact that they are not sorted or archived makes them difficult, and in some cases frustrating, to use.

¹ Khan, *Arabic documents*.

² These are presently being catalogued by Philippe Gignoux and Rika Gyselen. See also on the Pahlavi collection from Berlin, mostly from Egypt: Weber, *Papyri* and Weber, *Berliner*.

³ Frösén, Arjava, and Lectinen, *The Petra papyri 1*.

⁴ Small numbers of documents have been found outside Egypt, most notably in Sāmarrā' in Iraq, in Nessana and Khirbet al-Mird in Palestine (See *P.Ness.* 111 and *P.Mird*). For an overview of papyri found outside Egypt, see Sijpesteijn, *Arabic papyri* 453.

⁵ Most of the papyri edited at the beginning of the twentieth century by Carl Wesely in *SPP* 111 were dated to the Islamic period in their reeditions by Claudia Kreuzsaler (*Pap.Vind.* 6), Fritz Mitthof (*Pap.Vind.* 3) and Sven Tost (*Pap.Vind.* 2). See also the two volumes of Greek papyri published by Federico Morelli which contain exclusively texts from the Islamic period (*CPR* XXII and XXX). For the inclusion of the Islamic Egypt in the grander Greek papyrology enterprise, see for example the panel on papyri from Islamic Egypt planned

It would be easy to imagine that the papyrus record is essentially concerned with administrative records, demands and receipts for tax payments, leases on properties, etc., and to be sure all these things can be found in this collection. But the volume also demonstrates the contribution that documentary evidence can make to wider social history, to intellectual history and to our understanding of political events, where the documents can fill in gaps left by the well-known narrative sources.

Many documents show the early Islamic administration of Egypt as ruthlessly efficient and oppressive, but Mostafa El-Abbadi's paper reveals a rather different side. On the one hand, the administration is shown maintaining a strict control over freedom of movement. The Arab administration brought in new restrictions: no one could go anywhere without the vital *sigillion* (Arabic *sijill*) and perhaps the passport is one of the Islamic world's gifts (if that is the right word) to humanity. This system is already well known but here we learn how meticulous this could be, with the example of a permit granted to a man to move to another village for work which was only allowed because it would enable him to pay his taxes. Anna Selander in her paper, looking at the short texts requesting safe-conducts for travelers through particular roadblocks or checkpoints in the Theban region and later reused by the monk Frange for his bookbindings, shows how far down the administrative line this supervision of movement went. Selander also discusses the effects of the system of passports required of the subject population for their travelling compared to the pre-Islamic period.

The Arab administration is, on the other hand, shown to be anxious about discontent among the tax-payers and a desire to be fair and just, if only to avoid violent protests. El-Abbadi also shows how groups of Christian tax-payers could nevertheless co-ordinate their opposition. Rather than a top-down managerial state in which the subjects can only accept their lot and pay up, we see an administrative environment in which there was considerable room for negotiation and in which the state and its employees had to take notice if they were going to achieve anything at all.

If taxes were inevitable so too was the other of Benjamin Franklin's famous dyad of inevitable discomforts, death. In this volume the material dealing with death is not on papyrus but on paper. It dates from the early thirteenth century and comes from the Red Sea port of Quṣayr, already well known for

at the next International Papyrological Congress in Warsaw in 2013. See also the chapter on Arabic Papyrology included in *The Oxford Handbook for Papyrology* (Sijpesteijn, Arabic papyri).

the collection of commercial documents found there.⁶ Anne Regourd shows how such death certificates were issued to protect the interests of the heirs and, more importantly perhaps, to secure the interests of the state in any parts of the deceased's property on which it might have a claim. Taxes again. Interestingly, there do not seem to be any early Islamic records of such a procedure, and it is likely that it was introduced in the Fatimid period. It also has implications for Islamic burial practices as the *mawārith* (inheritance) authorities decreed that the burial of the dead could only take place after their officials had been informed. If this was the case, it must often have held up burial beyond the day prescribed by Islamic law. Perhaps the ultimate indignity was the fact that the document was later recycled, like many administrative documents, and reused for writing a letter about something completely different on the other side.

The documents also reveal at least something about travel in Egypt in the Islamic period, the sort of everyday travel of ordinary people which goes unremarked in narrative account. Anna Selander's paper gives a useful introduction to the exhaustive research she carried out for her Master's. Most of the material comes not from official records but from informal letters, including an encouragingly high number of invitations to feasts or other celebrations. But, as can easily be imagined, there were gloomier reasons for undertaking the strains and stresses of the road, confronting opponents in legal dispute, for example, and there are many journeys we only know about when the intending traveler sent apologies to explain how illness had obliged him to stay at home. We also learn something of modes of transport and interestingly that water transport was mostly used for moving goods, while individuals usually went by land, on donkeys and, probably most commonly, on foot.

More light is shed on transport and travel by the early fifteenth-century Arabic paper retrieved by Frédéric Bauden from the Venetian archives. This is in effect a contract for shipping and, as such, is unusual and even unique. In it a soldier from the garrison at Alexandria, accompanied by a substantial collection of textiles, arranges to be taken by boat to the port of Cairo at Būlāq. Bauden compares the document with near-contemporary legal formularies and arrives at some important terminological precisions and with other, mostly Italian, accounts of similar journeys in the late Middle Ages. Students of maritime history will be interested to find mention of what is, in effect, a plimsoll line, showing how far the boat could be safely loaded, a device which did not appear in the West until the nineteenth century.

6 On which see Guo, *Commerce*.

All manner of interactions between tax-payers and the state are illustrated in these documents. In his discussion of some of the material recovered from the site of the monastery of Bawit, Alain Delattre draws attention to the evidence of small amounts of produce paid by the Christians to people with Arab names. Delattre argues that these are too small to represent tax payments but are more likely goods to be handed over for the subsistence of travelling officials. This is typical of the insights that the papyrological and other documentary evidence can give into the day to day running of the administration, but perhaps the most remarkable feature is the way in which these transactions, no matter how small they were, were meticulously recorded and the receipts kept for posterity.

Alia Hanafi presents editions of two new texts. The first is a paper document from the first half of the fourth/tenth century detailing the *kharāj* due from the estate (*day'a*) of Drinja near Ihnās, reminding us yet again of the extraordinary details that can be found in such documents. Not just the amount of tax to be paid but the various different crops which were produced on one estate are mentioned in the text. The second is a papyrus from the second/eighth century, recording traditions about behaviour at funerals.

Shaun O'Sullivan's paper is the most ambitious attempt to use papyrological data to examine the wider economic and social history of Palestine under the Umayyad period. His important conclusion is that taxation in Nessana under Umayyad rule was significantly higher than it had been under late Roman government and that a heavy burden of taxation was a major factor in the effective abandonment of the settlement in the early eighth century. O'Sullivan's methodology may be refined in future scholarship, and some of his conclusions disputed, but the paper shows how the documentary evidence can be used to shed light on macro-economic questions.

This brings us on to the question of language itself. There are, of course, three different languages in use in these documents, Coptic, Greek and Arabic. How then are we to understand their different roles? How far does the use of language reflect ethnic or cultural difference within the wider population. Or are they, by contrast, more a reflection of the different sorts of subject matter in the texts themselves? In Rachel Stroumsa's paper, she suggests some approaches to these problems. Her material is taken from the Nessana papyri from southern Palestine, so there is no Coptic but Nabataean, Syriac and even a little Latin are added to the linguistic cocktail. In his edition of the Nessana papyri, on which we all continue to depend, Casper J. Kraemer Jr. saw much of the Greek used in the documents as "barbarous" and the product of a declining education system in seventh-century Palestine. Stroumsa, by refreshing contrast, sees this as a natural evolution of the language, much as Latin evolved in seventh-century Gaul. Instead of following a paradigm of declining Hellenism among a

Semitic speaking people, she argues for a bilingual population using Greek for official business, and to convey power, status and culture but naturally slipping into Arabic for such agricultural matters as the names of fields. It was not until late Umayyad and early Abbasid times that Arabic had acquired the prestige to replace Greek as the language of authority. Multilingualism is also touched upon by El-Abbadi who wonders how the three languages (Coptic, Greek and Arabic) functioned in a mid-eighth-century trilingual document recording a settlement between the Egyptian population and some Arab administrators.

The relationship between the evidence of the papyri and material culture is the subject of Tasha Vorderstrasse. She is interested in trying to link the names of pottery vessels found in documents with the different types of plates and containers which have been recovered from archaeological contexts. The relationship between textual and material evidence, whether in architecture, ceramics or any other field, is often very problematic, and there is always the temptation to make connections that have no basis in reality. Vorderstrasse is very careful not to make rash or unfounded claims while at the same time inviting us to consider exactly what the various containers mentioned might have looked like. The terms *jarra*, *qist* and *qulla* are all considered as well as less common terms like *iqniz*. This paper shows just how difficult it is to make firm connections. Some words, like *qist*, can mean units of measurement as well as containers; others have clearly changed their meaning through the centuries. In the end, as Vorderstrasse remarks, we need more Arabic references to containers and only further publication will supply these.

Papyri seldom shed much light on the history of political events but on some occasions the material they contain may help to clear up long-standing puzzles. Such a case is presented in Jairus Banaji's paper on the identity of Shahrālān-yōzān. This figure was a Persian official, active in the Persian administration of Egypt in the 620s and attested in a number of papyri. Banaji uses a wide variety of evidence to identify this figure with Shahrvaraz, the well-known general of Khusrō II (r. 590–628) and eventual short-lived usurper of the Sasanian throne. The paper also gives us an interesting insight to the little known Persian occupation of Egypt, showing an important member of the Persian elite establishing himself as a major landowner in the Fayyūm as the Apions had in the previous century. He definitely expected that he and his family were there to stay. Banaji finishes by reflecting that this new identification does, in a minor but significant detail, support the testimony of the early Arabic historian, Sayf ibn 'Umar (d. ca. 180/796), often suspected of fabricating his narratives.

One of the most important features of the papyrological evidence is the light it can shed on the textual history of the Quran. Matt Malczycki presents a Quranic fragment with some orthographic and verbal differences from the

canonical version ascribed to the caliph ‘Umar (r. 634–644) including the omission of two verses. He dates it to the late third/ninth century on the basis of the letter forms. The question then arises as to whether this fragment represents a genuinely alternative version of the text or simply a number of scribal mistakes. Malczycki, almost certainly, takes a cautious point of view, suggesting that this is a poor or careless copy, not “something more exciting.” He shows convincingly that the four suras copied were chosen because they were traditionally recited at the burial of the dead and can be seen forming a sort of prayer book for such occasions.

Intellectual history is also expanded and developed by the use of papyrological and other documentary sources, as can be seen from Sebastian Richter’s paper. This addresses the important question as to whether there was a native Coptic alchemical tradition, which might plausibly be a continuation of ancient Egyptian practice that fed into and influenced the emerging Arabic one. After a detailed description of a small but important collection of alchemical manuscripts, including some important textual clarifications and emendations, Richter goes on to describe the place of these manuscripts in the alchemical tradition. He shows that they are not derived from the Greek tradition but, on the contrary, show many more similarities with the earliest surviving Arabic alchemical writing which date from the early tenth century. These Coptic writings are older than the earliest Arabic ones but, through careful linguistic analysis, Richter demonstrates clearly that they are, in fact, translations or paraphrases of Arabic originals, that is to say that the Coptic alchemical tradition is ultimately derived from the Arabic, not the other way round. The chapter by Nicole Hansen similarly shows how ancient Egyptian alchemical and medicinal practices continued in later periods in Egypt in the realm of food culture. Her study on two wine recipes shows the cultural and linguistic interaction in medieval Egypt. The inclusion, incidentally, of these recipes in al-Warrāq’s cookbook also show how far Egyptian practices spread throughout the caliphate.

R.G. Khoury, the doyen of Arabic papyrologists, discusses aspects of the collection at Heidelberg where he has spent so much of his long and productive scholarly life. He discusses the history of the Schott-Reinhardt collection, revealing that Reinhardt was an Orientalist who had worked as a dragoman in the German consulate in Cairo while Schott was an industrialist who used some of the money he made from his cement business to collect the papyri which were then lodged at the university. Most of the documents are of types well known from other collections but a few are distinctive and important, including some of the letters of the Egyptian governor Qurra ibn Sharīk (in office 709–715) and the famous scroll of Ibn Lahī’a (d. 174/790), already edited and

translated by Khoury (*ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Lahīʿa*). He also draws attention to some 159 pieces recorded by Adolf Grohmann which have mysteriously disappeared from the collection and speculates as to their contents, finding most of them to have been administrative texts of well-known forms.

The essays in this volume show once again the immense variety of information which can be gleaned from the Egyptian and Palestinian documentary material. They also show much interesting new work is appearing, greatly encouraged by the International Society for Arabic Papyrology and its meetings, but also, of course, how much more needs to be done. We can only imagine how much this will affect our understanding of pre-modern Islamic society.

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