P.Cair.Arab III 167: A Discussion of the Akhmīm Declaration*

Mostafa El-Abbadi

Arab Administration: Control and Responsibility

Multilingual documents usually are of special historical interest. Their value for the study of the linguistic situation—multilingualism, linguistic inference and the process of arabicisation—in early Islamic Egypt has recently been considered in a number of studies.¹ *P.Cair.Arab* III 167, a trilingual declaration, written in Coptic, Greek and Arabic, is an exceptionally rich example of such documents. In the present paper, I shall be mainly concerned with its administrative contents and what it reveals about how the new Arab administration reacted to complaints presented against certain irregularities committed in connection with the tax collection in Akhmīm and its surrounding area.

Early Arab rule tended to be practical and keen to avoid any interruption in the smooth running of the administration. It was therefore consistent with the framework of their polity to allow—for at least a century—the perpetuation of two earlier practices: the Byzantine taxation system, and the use of the Greek and Coptic languages in local administration. With regard to taxation, Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam states that “Amr agreed to levy the same amount of taxes as the Rūm (i.e. Byzantines).”² Consequently, the new Arab administration in Egypt had to deal with the same causes of discontent that had troubled the Romans and the Byzantines before them.

Although fiscal pressure had often caused Egypt’s tax-payers to rise in revolt already in the pre-Islamic period, the end of the first/seventh and first half of the second/eighth centuries especially saw tension rising, with more conflicts

* I would like to thank Petra Sijpesteijn for making available her unpublished paper on the relation between Coptic, Greek and Arabic in the early Arabic administration where this document is also extensively discussed.

- 1 See especially Clackson and Sijpesteijn, A mid-eighth-century, Richter, Greek, Coptic, Richter, Language choice, Sijpesteijn, Arabic-Greek archives and Cromwell, Aristophanes.
- 2 For a study of the changes and continuities in the Egyptian Arab administration, see Sijpesteijn, The Arab conquest and *CPR* XXX, introduction.

appearing in the papyri. One of the problems that continued to worry the Arabs was the custom of peasants and small farmers of taking flight and abandoning their land, due to their inability to pay the taxes or for other reasons. Evidence of this phenomenon is reflected in the instructions dispatched by the governor Qurra ibn Sharīk (in office 90–96/709–714) concerning the tracking-down of such run-away villagers and their treatment in their new place of residence.³

A principal cause of this phenomenon of fugitive peasants was the continued use by the Arabs of the former Byzantine practice of imposing a fixed corporate tax (*capitatio*) on each village.⁴ In the words of Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, it was “a collective tax (*jizya*) on each village to be paid by the villagers [together].”⁵ As a consequence, runaways created difficulties for the tax-payers and tax-collectors. On the one hand the authorities wanted to ensure that the same amount of taxes continued to be levied collectively on the villages, while on the other hand less hands were available to produce these taxes. In dealing with such a situation, the Arab administration imposed restrictions on the free movement or travel of villagers out of their villages. In practice, however, a villager in need could apply for a permit to make his living elsewhere in order to pay off his poll-tax (*jizya*) or other dues. In such cases, the villager would be required to provide someone to stand surety for him during his absence.

In a Coptic document, we find such an act of surety in which three men (two of them village scribes) acknowledge in a note addressed to the public treasury (Gr. *demosios logos*) that they stand surety (*enguē*) for a certain Shenūda in case of any enquiry concerning him.⁶ Once provided with such an act of surety, the villager could apply for a travel permit, indicating his destination, reason for travel, and the duration of his stay. The local ‘pagarch’ then issued the requested permit, which would guarantee safe-conduct for its bearer at the hands of the authorities. The translation of one such safe-conduct⁷ reads as follows:

In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate. This is a certificate from ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd Allāh, the official in Upper Ashmūn for the governor ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn al-Ḥabḥāb, for Constantine Papostoulos, a

3 *P.Cair.Arab.* III 151–153, dating to 90/709 and 91/710; *P.Lond.* IV 1332.4; 1333.5, provenance of all is Ishquh/Aphrodito. See also the discussion in Morimoto, *The fiscal Administration*, Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* chapter 2 and Swanson, *The popes of Egypt*.

4 Jones, *The later Roman empire* 455.

5 Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr* 154; *P.Cair.Arab* III 160–163, dating to 91–93/709–711; *P.Ness.* 60–67, dating to 54/681.

6 *P.Cair.Arab.* III 164, dating to the end of 1st /7th century. See also Schiller, *Ten Coptic legal texts*.

7 *P.Cair.Arab.* III 175.

youth with a scar on his cheek, two marks on his neck, straight hair, from the village of Baskalon Baha in Upper Ashmūn. I hereby permit him to work in Lower Ashmūn in order to pay off his tax (*jizya*) and earn his living. I therefore grant him two months respite from the 1st of the month of Dhū l-ḥijja to the end of the month of Muḥarram of the year 116. Should whosoever of the governor's men or others encounter him, let them not interfere with him during that period, except for his good. Greetings ... Written by Ṭaliq. 1st of Dhū l-ḥijja end of year 112.⁸ [Appended to the document is 'Abd Allāh's seal and signature.]

It is worth noting that the reason given for issuing the travel permit was to enable its bearer to earn enough to be able to pay his tax and cover his living expenses; the permit—as is stated—was also a warrant to protect him from being bothered by officials and security men. This is why Gladys Frantz-Murphy has made a connection between the disappearance of these kinds of safe-conducts in the course of the second/eighth century and the appearance of similar statements in tax receipts protecting the holder of the document against interference by the authorities.⁹ As regard the payment of the poll-tax, this had to be done in the place of origin and not in the place of temporary residence, as can be concluded from a document dated 113/732.¹⁰ In this document a tax-collector from Ashmūn demands that a certain Girgis son of Longinos, a native of Ashmūn but temporary resident in Fuṣṭāṭ, pay his poll-tax of two *dīnārs* to him.

Taxation was often a cause of discontent among Egypt's population in Roman and Byzantine times, and it continued to be so under the Arabs. Several documents indicate how sensitive the early Arab administration was to complaints about taxes. In a letter that has survived in Greek, the governor Qurra ibn Sharīk admonishes Basileios, his subordinate in Ishqūh, not to torture tax-payers and to instruct the village headmen not to do so either.¹¹ That the governor was seriously concerned with such matters is reflected in another

8 As already noted by Frank Trombley (Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa' n. 32) one of the dates in the document should probably be corrected because of the unusual four year gap between the date of issuing and the date of effectiveness. One other safe-conduct issued under 'Ubayd Allāh is dated 112/731 (Diem, *Einige frühe* no. 9) and another one 116/734 (Rāgib, *Sauf-conduits* no. 3). Unfortunately the publication does not contain a photograph of the document to check the reading.

9 *CPR* XXI, introduction.

10 *P.Cair.Arab.* III 180.

11 *P.Ross.Georg.* IV 16, dating from 710.

letter, a year earlier, in 91/710, also addressed to the same Basileios and from which we learn that Qurra did not only depend on what reached him of personal or communal complaints, but that he had his own sources of information, namely, *ṣāhib al-barīd*, the postmaster who was also head of the secret police. In that letter, Qurra declares that he learnt from the postmaster that an additional fine had illegally been imposed upon villages that were in arrears in paying their taxes.¹² Qurra peremptorily ordered the fine to be stopped immediately.

A final letter might be added to illustrate the governor's concern that his subordinates treat the tax-paying population fairly. It is a letter in which Qurra warns Basileios to punish those tax-collectors showing fraudulent behaviour at the expense of the Egyptians. Any collector found to have used a wrong measure or to have taken anything more than imposed by Qurra at the collection of the wheat taxes is to be whipped with 100 lashes, to have their beard and hair shaved off and to be fined thirty *dīnārs*.¹³

Of special interest also in this respect is a Greek document from Nessana dating to a little earlier, namely the last quarter of the first/seventh century. It shows how dangerous it was not to address communal discontent in matters related to taxes and public duties. It is a letter sent by a group of individuals to a church official inviting him to join their protest in an attempt to alleviate public duties on the inhabitants. A translation reads as follows:

We wish to inform your Noble Magnificence, beloved of God, that we have received a letter from his Magnificence, Lord Samuel, that he personally invites both you and us at one and the same time to appeal to our most esteemed Governor to grant us (a relief). For they caused us and you serious distress and we are unable to bear the burden of such taxation. Note therefore that tomorrow, Monday, we shall be in Gaza. There are twenty of us. Will you please come (?) immediately so that all of us may be of one mind and of one accord? After you have read the present letter, send it to Nessana. We wrote to Sobata. Good luck and good health to you.¹⁴

We have here a highly organised attempt to round up delegations from various districts in Southern Palestine in order to descend in a body upon Gaza and appeal to the governor. It reveals a long-practiced method of communication

12 Becker, Arabische Papyri 13 [= Becker, Neue arabische 6; *P.Cair.Arab.* III 153; Abū Safiyya, *Bardiyāt* no. 8].

13 *P.Heid.Arab.* I 3, 91/709.

14 *P.Ness.* 75.

among the chiefs of towns or districts as represented by their head churchmen. We can count five of them by reading our letter carefully. First there is the prime motivator, Samuel, who communicated with the second identified participant, the writer of the present letter, who also wrote to Sobata; the final two are the recipient of our letter and the one to whom he forwarded it in Nessana where the papyrus was found.

Possibly, as the editor has suggested, others were also approached by Samuel. The size of each delegation seems to have been quite considerable, if the 20 men mentioned by the writer of our letter were the representatives of his own town or village. Should 20 be the number of the average size of each delegation, it might well be feasible that the total number of the representatives of the five districts could be around a 100 men. This total figure might have been much more, if the total of taxable villages in Palestina Tertia were nine, according to the register preserved in *P.Ness.* 39. These representatives were undoubtedly the landowners upon whom the taxes fell. This type of concerted protest, undoubtedly, had its force as it could have led to communal commotion or even revolt.

Civil Unrest in Upper Egypt

Thus, as we have shown above, the administration was quick to redress any irregularities or acts of embezzlement in the collection of taxes and to avoid any possibly alarming escalations. The Akhmīm trilingual declaration which is the subject of this article is yet another, more detailed document that illustrates a similar situation of communal discontent in Upper Egypt and the measures taken by the Arab authorities in response. It consists of 101 lines: 80 in Coptic, followed by a summary of 12 lines in Greek and at the end, another summary of 9 lines in Arabic. Unfortunately, no surely interpretable date is preserved, but the text should probably be placed between 749 and 756 C.E.¹⁵

15 For the reconstruction of this date and the following discussion, I am grateful to Jelle Bruining who discusses this document in his 2014 Leiden University dissertation *The rise of a capital: Studies into the political, economic, and judicial relation between al-Fuṣṭāṭ and its hinterland*, c. 20/640–200/815. I would also like to thank Lajos Berkes for his comments on the issue of the dating. Palaeographically the text should be dated around 750. The number “3” following the name of the month Choiak both in the Greek and Coptic most probably refers to the indication date. There are also two individuals mentioned in the text who can be used to date it. Yazīd ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥaḍramī became depute *qāḍī* in Fuṣṭāṭ in Jumādā 11 140/October–November 757, a position he would keep until his death in Dhū

The events that led to this document can be summed up as follows: complaints reached the governor in Fustāt (l. 5) concerning unspecified irregularities committed by the local tax-collector 'Amr ibn Attas and his staff. The governor instructed Yazīd ibn 'Abd Allāh,¹⁶ head of the public treasury (l. 2) *demosios logos* and the governor of Akhmīm and Ṭaḥṭā (ll. 3, 96) to investigate the matter. Yazīd accordingly convened the local headmen (ll. 10, 82, 96) who made their investigations and asked for a formal declaration (l. 9 *homologia*), to the effect that neither 'Amr ibn Attas nor any of his assistants had oppressed them and that they were liable to a fine (l. 12 *prostimon*) should one of them make a complaint to the contrary (ll. 11–12, 98).

We may never be able to find out whether this declaration of acquittal of the accused officials was justified by evidence or was written under duress. Yet, according to the words of the headmen, it seems that they did not sign the declaration until 'Amr and his assistants had refunded them their dues (l. 7 *dikaion*). This would imply that 'Amr had indeed overtaxed them and that he was forced to return the unjustly taken money.

This document is significant in illustrating the situation in the Akhmīm region after the passage of almost a century of Arab rule. Worthy of note are the following points. Firstly, the predominantly Egyptian Christian character of the declaration is indicated by the fact that the Coptic text comes first and occupies 80% of the whole document. The Christian invocation "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost" is used even though the shorter "In the name of God" version inspired by the Islamic *basmala* is widely attested in Greek and Coptic documents at this time, issued by the offices of the governor in Fustāt and the dukes.¹⁷ The predominance of Coptic is obviously explained

l-Qa'da 140/March 758. The governor's name is only partially preserved as 'Abd which can only refer to 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān whose rule started in Jumādā 11 132/January 750. The information from the papyrus, however, does not fit that of the narrative sources. We either have to adjust 'Abd al-Malik's governorship to start in Rabī' 11 132/December 749, taking us to the most likely date of Rabī' 11 132/December 749 or to discard the indiction year 3 (reducing it to an indication of the day of the month) and date this document to between 17 Jumādā 11/27 November and 17 Rajab/26 December of the year 138/755 or between 28 Jumādā 11/27 November and 28 Rajab/26 December of the year 139/756. Adolf Grohmann dated the text to the first half of the eighth century in *P.Cair.Arab.* III, and to 137/754–140/757 at a later occasion (*Beamtenstab* 132).

16 Yazīd ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥaḍramī (d. 140/758). See for him, the previous note 15.

17 The invocation *en onomati tou theou* is attested only in documents issued by the chancery in Fustāt or from the offices of the *dukes* (*CPR* XXII, pp. 53–54). Cf. Bagnall and Worp,

by the fact that this would have been the local language of communication amongst the largest number of the people mentioned in the document.

The signatories to the declaration represent a fairly wide cross-section of the population. The Coptic text includes the names of some 54 witnesses of whom two bear Arabic names (l. 37, the two sons of Abdella). Amongst the witnesses whose names appear in the Coptic part, we can identify 22 villagers, ten townsmen of Akhmīm and nine church officials, namely one bishop (ll. 14, 87), one archimandrite (ll. 20 and 88), four deacons (ll. 58, 62, 63 and 84) and three priors (ll. 21, 43 and 88).

We may also notice that of the 50 witnesses in the Greek section, 40 names are repeated from the Coptic, prominent amongst which are that of the bishop, the archimandrite and the other churchmen. The reason for the presence of the Greek part, including the repetition of a large number of the witnesses' names, may be the greater familiarity with Greek than Coptic at the central administration.

The ten witnesses mentioned in the Arabic section all carry Arab names and tribal affiliations, suggesting they were in fact Arabs having arrived with the conquerors or Egyptians having been integrated into the Arab system. Judging by their names, they belong to influential Arab tribes, two of whom (l. 95) were the Umayyads. The Arabs signing this declaration might be personally involved, as we can imagine that they owned land or had land assigned to them in the district of Akhmīm and Ṭaḥṭā. It might explain their anxiety to allay causes of discontent. The Arabic summary was intended presumably for the Arab administration, both for practical and ideological reasons, as well as for the Arab witnesses who were in some way involved in the agreement.

In general the document contains several elements suggesting the importance placed by the authorities on coming to some kind of solution and bringing about some lasting reconciliation. The inclusion of such a large number of witnesses from the different constituencies in Akhmīm and Ṭaḥṭā would have promoted a feeling of communal responsibility among the diverse elements of the population. The largest number of names appears in the Coptic part of the document and this list presumably comes closest to including all those involved in the protest, both the more prominent members of society and those less influential. By having them all sign, they were all personally beholden to keep to the agreements stated in the document. The inclusion of a substantial number of prominent members of this society, such as the Arab tribesmen as

Chronological systems 99; Cromwell, Variation and specificity. I would like to thank Marie Legendre and Jennifer Cromwell for these references.

well as the bishop and archimandrite, was no doubt intended to add weight to the declaration. Legally these large lists of witnesses were not necessary and their function is explainable rather from a social point of view.¹⁸

The predominantly Coptic character of the document in language and persons makes us question the validity of statements about developments in the Arab administration as recorded in the literary sources. Al-Kindī (d. 350/961), for example, states that in 88/707, the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid (r. 86–96/705–715), implementing the policy started by his father ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 65–86/685–705), appointed his brother ‘Abd Allāh, the then governor of Egypt (in office 86–90/705–709), over the *dīwāns* ordering “to have them written in Arabic as they had been noted in Coptic before.”¹⁹ Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, however, stated the change was from *‘ajamī*.²⁰ However, it is remarkable that in our document, almost 50 years after the start of the apparent Arabicisation policy in Egypt, Arabic was far from being the first language in Akhmīm. While Greek continued to be used as an important language in the Arab administration as well, the use of Coptic in this context and in this document confirms the observation that under Arab rule, Coptic advanced at the expense of Greek.²¹

As for the background of the personnel in the administration, al-Kindī reports that the Umayyad Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 99–101/718–720) decreed that “the Coptic heads (*mawāzīt*, i.e. Gr. *meizoteroi*, village-heads) were to be removed from the pagarchies and to be replaced by Muslims.”²² Daniel Dennett took this statement at its face value and concluded that it led to widespread conversion among Copts who wanted to maintain their position as heads of their villages.²³ But the Akhmīm declaration, written down a full generation later, disapproves such a conclusion, since out of 54 witnesses only two bear Muslim names while the rest are Copts, 22 of whom were village-heads. Indeed, this and other documents from Egypt do not reflect widespread conversion amongst the local population at this time.

Finally, we may observe a point of special interest for the survival of Egyptian place names. The name of Akhmīm is used in the Coptic (l. 3 et saepe) and

18 For a similar use of large lists of witnesses in Coptic Arabic marriage contracts, see Abbott, Arabic marriage.

19 *Kitāb al-Wulāt* 58–59.

20 *Futūḥ* 122.

21 I would like to thank Petra Sijpesteijn for this suggestion as discussed in her unpublished paper (see above, n. 1)

22 *Kitāb al-Wulāt* 69. See for a discussion of the apparent disjuncture between these terms, Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim state* chapter two.

23 *Conversion and the Poll-tax*.

Arabic sections, whereas the Greek uses the corresponding Greek appellation Panopolis (l. 81). Ever since the establishment of Greek administration in Egypt, practically every town and village of any significance was given a Greek name. Examples are numerous and well known to specialists. Similarly, in Syria Greek names were given to ancient sites. For almost a millennium, the new Greek names were universally used in administration and Greek literature. The native population, however, continued to use the Egyptian names. When the Arabs visited these towns in the Byzantine realm, they apparently took over the names for the towns from the indigenous population. This was already the case in the pre-Islamic period as evidenced in pre-Islamic verse. Thus, 'Amr ibn Kulthūm (d. 584) recalls with nostalgia the beakers of wine he drank in Ba'lbak, Dimashq, al-Andarīn and Qaşrīn! The Arabic papyri show that the Arabs in Egypt similarly indeed used the Egyptian names.²⁴

No sooner, therefore, did the Arabs set up their rule in the seventh century than the Greek names disappeared and the native ones came to the fore, as illustrated in the Akhmīm declaration. The interesting aspect of this is that it seems to have been a spontaneous action and not the result of an administrative decision. Perhaps a reasonable explanation of this phenomenon is that it was due to the cultural affinity between the Arabs and the peoples of their neighbouring countries long before the conquest began.

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24 See for example the earliest dated Arabic papyrus which uses Ihnās as opposed to the Greek half of the text which uses Heracleopolis (discussed in Sijpesteijn, *The Arab conquest*).

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