ARMY ECONOMICS: AN EARLY PAPYRUS LETTER RELATED TO ‘ĀṬĀ’ PAYMENTS

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Introduction

Armies are complex social and economic machines, serving ends far beyond the limited goals of winning wars. Soldiers march on their stomachs, as Napoleon famously observed; they rarely fight for idealism or ideology alone, and this was clearly true also in the early Muslim armies. The papyrus letter presented in this paper allows us a rare first-hand glimpse of this in practice. Despite its fragmentary state and the lack of context, this letter contains unique information about the running of the early Muslim army and state in Egypt,
showing us those behind the generals and how their stomachs were filled in war and in peace.

The Muslim army has left us a surprisingly meager paper trail, at least in the papyri that have come to light so far. This is not merely in comparison to the extensive papyrus records related to the Roman army in Egypt, but in comparison to what we would expect, based on the voluminous quantities of command notes, requisition orders, payment notices, salary stubs, supply receipts, and all the other documentation the army must have generated, and not least the significant amounts of paperwork that must have come from the administration of the annual stipend, whose extensive central registers and payment processes we know from narrative sources. The dearth of documents is doubtlessly partially because the Muslim garrisons in Egypt were located and organized in other places (Fustat, Alexandria, Aswan) than the main finding places of most papyrus from the Islamic period (Fayyum, limited number of places in Upper Egypt). The papyri we do have, moreover (less than a dozen in total), all originate from the governors and their retinues, showing us very little of the experience of the rank-and-file soldiery, their maintenance, the organization of their camps, and conditions of service. It is because this papyrus does, in fact, give us such a rare and privileged glimpse into the milieu that produced it that it is so valuable.

P.Michaelides Q16

Summary

The sender of our letter, replying to a request for news, begins by telling the addressee that the amīr has been to see the caliph, the

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2 For which, see, for example, R. Alston, Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt: A Social History (London/New York: Routledge, 1995) and R.O. Fink, Roman Military Records on Papyrus (Philological Monographs of the American Philological Association 26) (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971).

3 There are equally very few personal letters written by and to soldiers published.

4 For the few texts that do exist, see for example the Greek papyri SB VII/VIII 9748-60, and K. Morimoto, “The Diwans as Registers of the Arab Stipendiaries in Early Islamic Egypt,” in Itinéraires d’Orient hommages à Claude Cahen, Res Orientalis 6 [1994], eds. R. Curiel and R. Gyselen: 353–66.

5 I would like to thank the Syndics of Cambridge University Library permitting me to publish this text and the staff of the Near and Middle Eastern Department of the Library for their friendly help in accessing the document. I would also like to