CHAPTER 6

Travel in Coptic Documentary Texts

Anna Selander

Introduction

This article seeks to provide a brief overview of the evidence for travel in Coptic documentary texts in late antique and early Islamic Egypt.\(^1\) To be able to form a representative source base for research on travelling it was necessary to read across all the published material, which amounted to over 7,800 texts.\(^2\) Of the 486 texts that I was able to collect from the sources that contain information about different aspects of travel, the earliest date is from the fourth century C.E., the latest from the ninth century.\(^3\) As is usual with the surviving Coptic material, most documents belong to the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. From the beginning it was clear that letters would be the best source to find out about the journeys people made. In fact, without these letters we would not—to a very significant degree—know that these journeys had been undertaken at all. Various reasons existed why one would mention a journey in a letter, including letting the addressee know that someone was on his or her way, or bidding the addressee pray for the traveler, etc. Often the addressee was asked to come or to send somebody. Problems encountered en route were also reported in letters, and in quite a number of them the writer announces that he has to cancel the planned journey.

In all, 88\% of the data was drawn from letters, and the rest from other kinds of documents. The relative lack of documents dealing with journeys is due to the loss of relevant material (shipping contracts, etc.). What does

1 This article is based upon my master’s thesis: Reisetätigkeit nach den koptischen dokumentarischen Texten, University of Vienna, 2006.

2 Since October 2005 there exists an online database of Coptic documentary texts, from which this estimate has been drawn (currently the number of documents is given to be more than 8,000). See http://dev.ulb.ac.be/philo/bad/copte/base.php?page=rechercher.php (25-08-2014).

3 Taken into account were all texts about private journeys written in Coptic. Since the range of dates runs to the ninth century, a few texts are included which are written in Coptic presumably by Muslims and/or people with Arabic names. E.g. CPR II 228 (8th century) where a certain Jazīd writes to someone called Abū ‘Alī.
survive tends to deal principally—and this is the case with most of them—with some other subject. Sometimes, however, we can learn from the signatures of witnesses why a particular person signed the document including the reasons for making a journey. In the case of letters, certain information that can tell us about travelling has not been transmitted or has been lost altogether. This includes, in particular, the address. Place names for the addressee are also rarely mentioned in the body of the text since this was information both the addressee and recipient would have known anyway. The duration of a journey is also hardly ever given. Similarly, the mode of transport is seldom thought worthy of mention. Nevertheless, even if some details are missing, these texts offer a broad view across time of the nature of—and changes in—the experience of the Coptic-speaking part of Egypt’s population as seen through their access to resources and freedom of movement.

The most common motives for travel in this period were, not surprisingly, trade and the dispatch of goods. However, I have excluded texts that treat mainly these subjects from the text corpus and have concentrated instead on private journeys, since these bring us closer to the personal priorities, motivations and day-to-day experience of Copts at this time. Also, we find a mass of texts among the Coptic documentary material, mainly letters, which deal with the transportation of goods, mostly requests for goods to be sent. But these texts hardly ever tell us anything about travel routes taken or the distances covered, so they have been excluded because of their low informational value. The large quantity of these (mostly short) texts, which number some thousand, was another reason for their exclusion. Of course, there are also texts in which a person travels and takes a small amount of goods with him. In these cases the text was taken into account because it documented the journey of a specific person, and therefore does not have the impersonality that one dealing with an unidentified messenger would have. For Coptic documentary texts dealing with trade and the dispatch of goods, a separate study is necessary, which would illustrate the economic aspects of trade in Egypt.

Besides the strictly private motivations for travel (journeys made on one’s own initiative), I have also taken into account texts that document trips by agents on behalf of officials, clerics, estate owners or other employers.

---

4 E.g. *p.kru* 65 (second half of the 7th century), in which Pekosch writes that he had just come to the monastery to visit the father Jacob.

5 Texts that treat the transportation of wheat and corn in general have not been taken into account.