New Governors Identified in Arabic Papyri

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Historical accounts record ninety-eight governors who ruled Egypt successively under the caliphs of Medina, Damascus and Baghdad up to the time of Ibn Ṭūlūn who established an independent dynasty in 254 AH/868 CE.¹ The large number of appointments suggests a complicated administrative machinery in early Islamic Egypt. This is particularly evident when we compare the literary accounts with early documentary evidence. The narrative accounts describe that the caliph appointed the governor simultaneously over al-ṣalāh wa-l-kharāj, i.e. the religious management of the Muslim community and the financial administration of the province. In other words, he stood at the head of the administrative hierarchy. His residence was in Fustāṭ and his jurisdiction extended over the whole province. The governor (Ar. wālī or amīr; Gr. symboulos) was in charge of maintaining law and order and of leading the prayers on Fridays in the great mosque in Fustāṭ, a duty he was fulfilling in the absence of the caliph.² However, according to al-Kindī’s Book of the Governors, ‘Anbasāb Isḥāq (in office 238–242/852–856) was the last governor to lead the prayer in the great mosque personally.³ The governor was also directly responsible for the fiscal administration of the province. From late Umayyad times, however, a separate ṣāḥib al-kharāj was appointed by the caliph.⁴ This separate fiscal administration inevitably weakened the position of the governor since an important part of the province’s administration was removed from his control.⁵ Although the governor was again fulfilling both roles in the early

¹ Stanley Lane-Poole, History of Egypt in the Middle Ages (London: Methuen, 1925), 24.
⁵ Kennedy, 35.
'Abbasid period, in 141/759 the governor Muḥammad b. al-Ash'ath (in office 141–142/759–760) refused to give a guarantee for the required sum of taxes that was to be sent to the caliphal administration in Baghdad. The caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 136–158/754–775) then appointed Nawfal b. al-Furāt (in office 141–143/758–761) in charge of the fiscal administration. Thereafter the financial affairs of the province were run by separate officials again. This, in turn, leads us to important questions about the division of authorities and duties between the two positions. Who was responsible for the actual management of the province and the appointment of officials at lower levels of the administration, the head of the treasury or the governor? Who was in charge of the security and stability of the province? We should bear in mind that, until the rise of the Tulunids, most of the rebellions and disturbances in the province were partly if not all tax-related. These questions can only be answered by comparing the available narrative sources with documentary evidence. This paper studies the authority of a number of persons attested in papyri whom the literary sources call financial directors. The discussed documents shed light on various aspects of the separation of power between the financial director and the governor. As we will see, some so-called financial directors may actually have been governors in practice.

The oldest and most reliable historian dealing with the administrative history of early Islamic Egypt is al-Kindī (d. 350/961), who listed all the governors of Egypt from the arrival of the Muslims in the province up to his own death date. Al-Kindī produced exact dates of appointment and dismissal, and also of entry and departure from Egypt for almost every single governor. He usually mentions whether the governor fulfilled both roles, i.e. including the fiscal administration, or was only appointed ʿalā al-ṣalāh. Later historians such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922), al-Jahshiyārī (d. 331/942), Ibn Taghrī Birdī (d. 874/1470) and al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) relied mainly on al-Kindī’s accounts, in addition to some other sources including archival materials. Nevertheless, considerable discrepancies in dates and names are recorded when comparing the various types of literary and documentary sources, especially in the Abbasid era. A large reservoir of documentary sources including papyri, but also weights and measures mention governors who lack from al-Kindī’s account. In what follows I shall present three papyri, which mention two such unknown governors: Ḥuwayy b. Ḥuwayy (in office 181–182/797–798) and Muḥammad b. Saʿīd (in office 152–157/769–773).

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6 Kennedy, 33.