

COPTIC AND ARABIC PAPYRI FROM DEIR AL-BALĀ'IZAH

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Introduction

When Paul Kahle published his two volumes of Greek and Coptic papyri from the well-known Upper-Egyptian monastery of Apa Apollo at Deir al-Balā'izah in 1954, he noted that amongst them there were also some Arabic texts. In fact only a few very small fragments of papyrus and paper written entirely in Arabic were found. One of these mentions the governor Qurra b. Sharīk (in office 90–96 / 709–714) and another the financial governor al-Qāsim b. 'Ubayd Allāh (in office 105–116 / 724–734), about whom more will be said later ; they are being published by Fred Donner. There are, however, also a number of Arabic texts that appear on the other side of some of the texts that were published by Paul Kahle and mentioned by him in his description of the papyri, but which have never been discussed in any detail. As we shall see, most of the Arabic texts belong to official letters from the Muslim bureaucracy which were re-used for texts within the internal administration of the monastery². After briefly discussing the contents of these texts, I will also address the question of how the monastery might have acquired these papyri and what their use tells us about the status of recycled papyrus in the Islamic period as well as questions about Muslim archival practice³.

Let us start with some background factual notes. The monastery of Apa Apollo at Deir al-Balā'izah is located some twenty kilometers south of Asyut on the west bank of the Nile on the edge of the desert. The Apa Apollo after whom the monastery was called cannot be identified with certainty, but might be the Apa Apollo who was expelled from a Pachomian monastery in the sixth century. The monastery seems to have been used from the late seventh to the mid-eighth century⁴.

The papyrological material was excavated in 1907 by Sir Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) for the British School of Archaeology in Egypt. He shipped all the manuscripts to England, where they were put under the care of W.E. Crum (1865–1944) at Oxford, and where they are still kept at the Bodleian Library. All in all there were some 3 000 Greek, Coptic and Arabic texts found, but many of those are very small fragments. Literary texts such as fragments of the Old and New Testament in Sahidic, a martyrology and an apocryphal gospel date as far back as the fourth and fifth centuries, but no literary manuscripts found at the monastery are later than the eighth century. The documentary texts from the monastery date from the late seventh to the mid-eighth century ; this is – as mentioned – the period when the monastery seems to have been active. The earlier literary manuscripts seem to have been imported there, while the later paper fragments would have been discarded on the site long after it was abandoned⁵.

Description of Arabic Texts

Turning to the texts, MSCopt b 7 (1) was first used for an Arabic official letter. As is the case in all the papyri discussed here, the text written first – in this case the main part of the

¹ I would like to thank Marie Legendre for her comments on this paper. Any remaining mistakes remain of course my own. This article was written as part of the ERC research project « The Formation of Islam : The View from Below » (2009–2013).

² Arabic text 8 definitely stems from a different scribal milieu, while the Coptic verso might originate from the monastery. Texts 6 and 7 are associated with an Arabic administrative context, while the Coptic consists of private letters possibly written to or in the monastery. For a full discussion, see below.

³ I am preparing a full edition of the Arabic texts on the papyri.

⁴ See P.Bal., p. 18–19.

⁵ See P.Bal., p. 16–17.

Arabic letter – is written across the papyrus fibres which was the common practice in the Arab – as in the late Byzantine – period⁶. On the other side, the address is written parallel to the fibres. This is the same side that was later re-used for P.Bal 309, an account listing food items and personal names in Coptic.

In the Arabic text, Khālīd b. Yazīd, pagarch of Ashmūnayn / Hermopolite, writes to the financial governor al-Qāsim b. ‘Ubayd Allāh. As mentioned above, this governor appears in another papyrus entirely in Arabic found in the monastery. Unfortunately nothing more than his name is preserved on that papyrus. Khālīd b. Yazīd is known as pagarch of the Fayyūm / Arsinoite in the early sixties of the eighth century⁷. Our papyrus shows that his position in this oasis was preceded by a position as pagarch in the smaller pagarchy of Ashmūnayn / Hermopolite. His career represents a pattern that the Arab authorities seem purposely to have imposed on Muslim pagarchs entering office at the beginning of the eighth century. Rotating through positions in the administration with increasing status, they were prevented from building up a local powerbase. This contrasts sharply with the pre- and early-Islamic Christian pagarchs who typically owned estates in the pagarchies they headed⁸.

Khālīd writes to the financial director concerning the inhabitants of the monastery of Abū Anūb located in Upper Ashmūn (*a‘lā ashmūn*)⁹. That such a monastery of Apa Anoub was located south of the town is confirmed by several Coptic papyri in which this monastery is shown to be closely associated in financial and administrative matters with the monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawīt, also located at a short distance south of the town of Ashmūn¹⁰. On the other hand, pseudo-Abū Šāliḥ, in his thirteenth-century account of Egyptian churches and monasteries, locates a monastery of Abū Anūb (known in later Arabic sources as Abū Nūb) as having been located north of the town of Ashmūnayn¹¹.

The inhabitants of the monastery have asked Khālīd, as the pagarch writes himself, to ask the *amīr* to order one of them to register himself. The registration (*yastajilu*) presumably referred to some recording with the Muslim authorities or to obtaining a *sijil*, a safe-conduct, from the same authorities. Arabic safe-conducts, dating from 99–101 / 717–720 into the Abbasid period to 133 / 751, have been preserved on papyrus. Nine date to the Umayyad and four to the first two years of the Abbasid period. Issued by the Muslim authorities to Christian subjects, they functioned to supervise the movements of the Egyptian population closely. The documents specified the period that the holder might spend in an area other than that in which he or she resided – often for several months at a time – and the purpose of the travel, most frequently to work and earn his living as well as poll-tax during this period¹². The Arabic permits that are preserved were issued in the name of a representative of Egypt’s finance director. Amongst those preserved, two were indeed issued by an agent of al-Qāsim b. ‘Ubayd Allāh¹³. Unfortunately, none of these agents have been identified with certainty, so that we cannot say at what level in the administration they were located. The Coptic documents that surround the safe-conducts, such as the letters requesting the documents and the guarantees issued to secure the safe and timely return of the holders, all stem from the level of the pagarch. Similarly, we can imagine a

⁶ See Luiselli (2008) 688 ; Turner (1968) 4–5 ; Grohmann (1967) 75. Arabic literary papyri written in codices and on rolls are also first written across the fibres ; see Abbott (1972) ; Khoury (1972) ; David–Weill (1939).

⁷ See CPR XXII 18, introduction ; Gonis (2004) 192–194.

⁸ For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Sijpesteijn (2012) chapter III.

⁹ See Timm (1984–1992) 2736 ; 1968–1969.

¹⁰ See P.Apa Apollo, p. 32.

¹¹ In the Coptic Abū Anūb’s name is Apa Anoub, as in our text. He was a martyr of Diocletian’s persecutions. His feast day is celebrated on 24 Abīb = July 18 ; see pseudo-Abū Šāliḥ, *Churches* 124, n. 1. On the location, see *Churches*, 252–253.

¹² See Rāḡib (1997) 146–147.

¹³ See Rāḡib (1997) 153–154 ; Diem (1984) 141–146.

letter (in Coptic) from the inhabitants of the monastery of Apa Anoup to the pagarch Khālīd b. Yazīd to have preceded his letter in Arabic to the financial director al-Qāsim. If our letter refers indeed to the issuing of a safe-conduct, we might wonder whether pagarchs such as Khālīd in fact forwarded to the capital the requests for *sijils* they received, where a representative of the financial director drew up the actual documents. It adds another bureaucratic layer to the procedure, already so cumbersome it has scholars wondering how it could not have had a very negative effect on the mobility of Egypt's population, as well as their commercial and social activities. We might here be dealing with a special case that for whatever reason (not explained in the letter) needed the special attention from the capital.

Another reference to a *sijil* can be found in MSCopt e 35 (2). The Arabic official letter which was written first refers to the pagarchy of Asyūt (*kūrat asyūt*), the ancient Lycopolis. This pagarchy was located very close to the monastery of Deir al-Balā'izah. Greek and Coptic documents, however, show Deir al-Balā'izah to have depended on the pagarchy « of the town of Sbeht » or of Antaeopolis and Apollonopolis, some 10 kilometers south of the monastery¹⁴. There are very few references in Arabic documents (none in contemporary Greek or Coptic, although references to the town of Asyut do appear) to the pagarchy of Asyut from the eighth and later centuries. As it is unlikely that there were two pagarchies in this region at a distance of only 10 kilometers, it seems that the pagarchy of Asyut replaced that of Sbeht / Apollonopolis Parva or Antaeopolis and Apollonopolis Parva some time in the eighth century.

The sender says that he was asked to issue someone a *sijil* so that he could work. In the last line the *amīr* related to a toponym, presumably the Delta, « the Lower land » (*asfal [al-ard]*), is mentioned. It is not yet clear, however, whether this is the area to which the recipient of the safe-conduct was planning to travel, or whether this was a reference to another topic in the letter. The other side was used for a Coptic account listing individuals delivering wheat and another agricultural product (Copt. ⲬⲢⲕⲈ) (P.Bal. 319).

The next fragmentary text (MSCopt f 23) (3) is interesting because it shows a practice known from Greek, but not so far from Arabic papyri¹⁵. The end of an official letter is followed by an account of agricultural products and their prices. It is written in a smaller script which reminds one of the Greek minuscule that was used for this purpose. On the other side, we find a Coptic wheat account with personal names and amounts (P.Bal. 318).

The next two papyri contain only fragments of Arabic texts, but enough can be made out that these too should be given an official Arabic administrative origin. MSCopt d 31 (4) contains part of an official letter or petition to an *amīr* concerning someone who has to pay the *jizya*-tax. The *jizya* could refer in general to the money tax, but was also used for the more specific poll-tax levied on all adult non-Muslim males. The other side was re-used for a Coptic account listing items related to agriculture (P.Bal. 339). On another very fragmentary papyrus (MSCopt d 47) (5) only the formula, « may God make him prosper » (*aṣlahahu allāh*), generally used after mentioning the governor or financial director (*amīr*), can be read. The other side was re-used for a Coptic food account, listing items such as chickpeas, wheat, dates and beans and amounts of artabas (P.Bal. 310).

¹⁴ « *Nomos* of the town (*polis*) of Sbeht » : P.Bal., p. 15. For the identification of this town with Apollo-nopolis Parva, the modern Kom Esfāht, see P.Bal., p. 15, n. 4. For παγαρχ(ία) Ἀντ(αίου) (καὶ) Ἀπόλλων(ος), see Gonis (2004) 219 (correction of P.Bal. 182).

¹⁵ For another example, see Sijpesteijn (2012) no. 23.

The next two Arabic documents that were re-used for Coptic documents, found in the monastery, can also be considered to have originated in an official Arabic administrative milieu. Indeed these Arabic documents are very similar to the kind of texts described above and seem to belong to the same group. The Coptic texts that were written on these papyri do not, however, seem to belong to the monastery's internal administration. They are rather letters, possibly sent to the monastery. The first papyrus contains another official letter (MSCopt f 15) (6) seemingly addressed to an *amīr* who is mentioned in the third person in the opening greetings¹⁶. The other side contains a letter in Coptic (P.Bal. 262). Based on the opening of the letter « With God. Peace unto you », Paul Kahle suggested that this was probably an official letter written by a Muslim (P.Bal., p. 691). While such a conclusion would place the composition of the letter definitely outside the monastery's walls, the expression is not explicitly Muslim and could have easily been used by a Christian as well. It is essential, however, for our reconstruction of the origins and itinerary of the papyrus (see below).

The last papyrus (MSCopt d 23) (7) consists of different fragments containing several lines of Arabic. Dealing with private and commercial matters, the Arabic text ends with greetings from third persons to the addressee, amongst whom is a *dux*, which lifts the text to an official level in the administration. The other side was re-used for a private Coptic letter to a certain Euphemia and her children (P.Bal. 246). Not part of the monastery's internal documentation, the letter might have been sent to the monastic community of which Euphemia and her children were a part. We can thus imagine that these two Coptic letters written on the back of Arabic official letters were sent to the monastery.

Another option is to consider the letters as drafts or copies of letters produced inside the monastery. Euphemia and her children, the addressees of the second letter, would then have resided outside the monastery, while the sender of their letter was an inhabitant of the monastery. If we consider that the expression « peace unto you » which the sender of the first letter used is not an indication of his Muslim identity, there is no problem in having him reside also in the monastery and composing this letter. A final possibility is of course that these two papyrus letters were discarded on the same rubbish dump used both by the monastery and by individuals not residing in the monastery.

The following papyrus does not seem to belong to the same group of official documents discussed above. It was found in the monastery, but the Arabic text which was first written on the papyrus does not seem to have originated there. MSCopt e 52 (8) contains an Arabic legal document concerning payments. It mentions Arabic names and is dated Jumādā I 94 / February 713. The back of the papyrus was re-used for a Coptic list of skins (P.Bal. 332).

Trade in second hand papyrus

The debate about the price of papyrus in Antiquity has reached no firm conclusion. From (very) costly to (very) cheap, the use and re-use of papyrus suggests that availability and prices fluctuated based on the location of the sender, economic circumstances and trade activity¹⁷. While papyrus was more readily available in the Delta and the Nile Valley close to the production centres, it was generally scarce in the oases. Paul Kahle explained the fact that Deir al-Balā'izah's yielded hardly any ostraca by noticing that papyrus had

¹⁶ On the meaning of *amīr*, see Sijpesteijn (2012) chapter II.

¹⁷ Advocates of a high price are : Lewis (1974) 129–130 ; in the Islamic period : Grohmann (1954) 69–70 ; Grob (2010) 183. Skeat has argued for a very low price of papyrus in Antiquity (1995, and in a letter quoted in Lewis [1989] 41). Bagnall (2009) 55 and 58 gives prices for the fourth century, arguing for a lower cost of papyrus as opposed to parchment, but against its cost being insignificant.

become more readily available after the Arab conquest and the resulting diminished export of papyrus from Alexandria¹⁸.

On the other hand, opinion and fashion in the way papyrus was used by document and letter writers changed over time. While the earliest Arabic chancery documents and private letters show a very spacious set-up both in script and layout covering only one side of a papyrus, resulting in a very generous use of papyrus, in later, ninth-century documents, the margins are often filled up with writing as well¹⁹. While letters continuing on the back side are uncommon, they do occur in the first two centuries of Arab Egypt, while later scribes would rather consider writing in the margins than continue on the other side²⁰. As mentioned above, early letters never show writing in the margins.

Papyri were often used a second time, written on the other side and even in between the lines of texts produced earlier²¹. In some cases, the answer to a letter on the one side was written on the other side of the same papyrus²². In other cases, the recipient of the letter used the same papyrus sheet to write another letter to a third person. Sometimes the senders apologised for the fact they had written on a re-used papyrus (« excuse me, may God strengthen you, for the papyrus » *'dhir a 'azzaka allāh fī l-qirṭās*)²³.

The many cases in which no reference was made to the second-hand use of papyrus suggest, however, that this was a very common practice. In many cases the papyri were re-used for more personal notes or accounts. Scribal exercises and pen trials also often appear on previously used papyri. We can assume that many of the letters and other documents that were re-used by the scribes had been received by them and used as scrap paper once the letters had become outdated. One other papyrus found in the monastery of Deir al-Balā'izah demonstrates this very nicely (P.Bal. 256). This Coptic letter reprimanding a local tax-official was most probably sent by a higher official in the Arab administration. It was written on the back of a list of workers' overseers, drawn up in the administration's office and torn up to be re-used for the office's correspondence.

There are, on the other hand, also some indications that used papyrus was purposely acquired by individuals and government offices to be given a second life. As mentioned above, many papyri that contain texts on both sides show no connection, in topic, addressee(s) and sender(s), or individuals mentioned in the letter, between the texts written on either side of the papyrus. Another example consists of the many tax-receipts which were cut from previously used papyri. These receipts were issued by Arab government officials, but the documents which they used to write their receipts on were often legal documents, (private) letters and other documents that did not originate in nor were typically sent to or deposited with the administrative offices.

The Arabic letters and documents discussed above do not seem to have been sent to the monastery to be re-used subsequently by the inhabitants of the monastery for internal and external administration. Dealing with official, internal Arab administrative matters, they were rather part of official administrative communication between Arab officials. If they were not sent to the monastery, they must have been acquired in some other way. I suggest that the monastery of Apa Apollo had purchased the documents on the second-hand papyrus market.

¹⁸ See P.Bal. 17–18.

¹⁹ See Grob (2010) 179 and 188.

²⁰ On the aversion of third / ninth-century letter-writers to continuing their writing on the back, see Grob (2010) 179.

²¹ Grob (2010) 182–183, has shown that the majority of letters are opisthograph.

²² E.g. Sijpesteijn (2011) no. 38 and 39.

²³ See P.Hamb.Arab. II 2, 5–6 (ca. 205–206 / 820–822. Further examples are listed in Grob (2010) 43, n. 52 and 183, n. 78.

As I have shown elsewhere, there is clear evidence that the Arab administration maintained an accurate and up-to-date administration, including copies of official correspondence, lists of inhabitants, taxable properties, tax-payers, taxes paid and claimed, etc.²⁴ References in documentary and narrative sources, as well as traces on the documents themselves, show that they were consulted regularly to check claims and accusations, update fiscal and other administrative information, and formed an important back-up for administrative decisions and actions. Another feature of such an extensive and well-ordered administrative system was the regular purging of outdated documents. From a much later period we have a nice reference to this practice. The fifteenth-century Egyptian author al-Maqrīzī, who himself worked in the *dīwān* in Cairo, wrote that when the Mamluk administration had decided to clean up its archives, it sold outdated documents and other papers on the second-hand paper market²⁵. Al-Maqrīzī himself acquired some of these papers, using them to write one of his own works, where the original official Mamluk documents can still be reconstructed²⁶.

While there are no explicit references to such a practice in the earlier medieval period, the documents themselves suggest that this was a regular practice also of earlier regimes. The *geniza* of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Fuṣṭāṭ contained also a number of Arabic documents, partially re-used for Judaeo-Arabic documents, letters, notes and legal documents. Ranging from fragments of books to official letters sent to the Cairene Jewish community, there are also a number of petitions directed at Arab officials and other documents that had belonged to the central Arab administration. While some of the petitions might have been drafts of copies sent by the Jewish community to the Arab authorities, many show no relation to the Jewish community that subsequently re-used these papers for their own administration and communication. We can assume that such papers came into circulation when the Fatimid administration decided to discard part of its chancery's papers which were subsequently sold as second-hand paper. And we can assume that this practice was in place from the moment the Arabs started to keep archives on their arrival in Egypt (and probably before that as well, under the pre-Muslim rulers).

Just as the central chancery in Fuṣṭāṭ incidentally sold off its documents as old paper, local chanceries probably did the same. The two place-names that are mentioned in the Arabic documents are a monastery in Upper Ashmūn (**1**) and the pagarchy of Asyūṭ (**2**), both located very near the monastery of Apa Apollo. While used papyrus was an important commodity, it was probably sold on a local market, rather than being transported over a long distance. Whether this material was bought all at the same time or on different occasions, the local chanceries were obviously a source for the second-hand papyrus market which the monastery tapped. In this case, text **1**, although addressed to the financial director residing in Fuṣṭāṭ, should not be considered to have been actually sent there. Rather this papyrus was a copy or a draft kept at the local chancery for record-keeping.

Similarly, documents that were sent by the pagarch of the Fayyūm / Arsinoite have been found together with internal administrative papers of the pagarchy on the depositories of Madīnat al-Fayyūm / Arsinoe, the place of residence of the pagarch²⁷. In the case of texts **6** and **7**, depending on whether we see the re-users operating in the same monastic milieu or in a different realm, we might consider that individuals also bought from the same source. Document **8** on the other hand, did not originate in the Arab administrative context, but was used for internal monastic administrative purposes. The Arabic legal document might have arrived at the monastery because it or one of its members had a legal stake in the

²⁴ See Sijpesteijn (2007) and (2011).

²⁵ See Sijpesteijn (2007).

²⁶ This was shown by Bauden (2000) 59–78.

²⁷ This was suggested by Federico Morelli in CPR XXII, p. 14–15.

transaction recorded. It might, on the other hand, have been purchased or acquired as scrap paper as well, but from a different source.

Conclusion

Although much more work needs to be done on the deciphering and understanding of the contents of the Arabic texts found in the monastery of Deir al-Balā'izah, we can already point to some interesting issues. Firstly, the documents give us new insights into some Arab administrative practices and policy, especially in the realm of the administration of Christian Egyptians via the so-called safe-conducts, as well as into the ways in which Christian Egyptians communicated with the Arab administration. Secondly, a study of these re-used Arabic papyri that seem to have been written and used outside the monastery, and arrived there after their immediate use had run out, gives us interesting insights about the maintenance of Arab archives and the market in used papyrus that existed in medieval Arab Egypt.

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