

JOHN BISHOP OF NIKIOU'S *CHRONICON* (SEVENTH CENTURY A.D.): AN INDISPENSABLE SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF THE ARAB CONQUEST OF EGYPT AND ITS AFTERMATH*

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ABSTRACT

John, Bishop of Nikiou's *Chronicon* is the oldest preserved work dealing with the Arab conquest of Egypt (639 A.D./H. 18–645 A.D./H. 25) and its initial aftermath. This little known author, who lived in Egypt in the seventh century, was a high official in the Coptic Church. His accurate depiction of all the relevant historical events, based mainly on his own remarkable observations, proves him to be a simple but well-balanced historian. My article focuses on three aspects of the *Chronicon*: (a) landholding under the early years of Arab dominion compared to the parallel information of the Greek papyri of Apollonopolis in a special appendix; (b) the attitude of the Arab conquerors of Egypt towards its population, and the reaction of the local people as perceived by John, Bishop of Nikiou; and (c) a short account on the elusive role of the Blues and Greens during the Arab conquest of Egypt as recorded by John of Nikiou.

Since Butler wrote his monumental work *The Arab conquest of Egypt and the last thirty years of the Roman dominion* (Oxford, 1902), which is still valid after more than 100 years, a number of problems concerning the Arab conquest of Egypt and the early dominion have not yet been satisfactorily resolved.¹ First and perhaps most significant is the need for a comprehensive, analytical study of the relevant sources. In this article I will undertake the daunting task of a thorough discussion of certain points of the

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¹ For the Arab conquest of Egypt see Butler (1902), edited with critical bibliography and additional documentation by Fraser (1978); Christides (1993); Kaegi (1998); Kennedy (1998); Beihammer (2000); Torrey, (2002); Sijpesteijn (2007a; 2009); Soto Chica (2011).

main source, i.e., in the *Chronicon* of John, Bishop of Nikiou, followed by a brief reference to the meagre information offered by other relevant sources.

John, Bishop of Nikiou's *Chronicon* is undoubtedly the oldest, most significant source for the study of the Arab conquest of Egypt and its initial aftermath although it has survived in a text which has been obscured by centuries of misreading and misinterpretations. Little is known about the author. It seems from his Ethiopic name, Yohannes Mädabbär, that sometime in the seventh century he served as a general overseer (Ar. *mudabbir*) of the monasteries, an important position in the Coptic ecclesiastical hierarchy (Weninger 2007:298; Robinson 1974:128).

The original text of the *Chronicon* was written either in Greek or in Coptic (Peeters 1950:173; Robinson 1974:131). From the original text an Arabic translation was made at an unknown date and from it an Ethiopian translation was produced in 1601 or 1602 by an anonymous Ethiopian translator (Booth 2011:557–558). The *Chronicon* was edited and translated into French by H. Zotenberg (1883) from which an English translation was produced by R. H. Charles (1916). John, Bishop of Nikiou's *Chronicon* is a long narration covering historical events from Adam and Eve to the author's day. It seems, as Jeffreys remarks, that the greatest part of his early chapters may have been drawn from the work of the Byzantine chronographer Malalas (Jeffreys 1990:254), even though John of Nikiou's work does not reveal any traces of Malalas's idiosyncratic style. Perhaps John's borrowings were drawn from earlier universal chronicles that Malalas had incorporated in his work.

John of Nikiou's last section, which describes the advance of the Arabs into Egypt and the early period of their dominance, is of unique value. In spite of a number of dislocations which have confused the sequence of events, we can draw key information from this part of his work which reflects a distant, but well-balanced perspective of a contemporary observer. He grasped, as no other historian, the spirit of the common people of Egypt in the turbulent period of the Arab conquest and its immediate aftermath. In a few laconic, direct remarks devoid of fanaticism, he criticises the harsh behaviour towards the Byzantine army by both the Arab invaders and the local people as he describes the historic events which took place just before

and during his lifetime. Writing in Egypt after the Arab conquest, he was free of pressure from Byzantine or any other authorities who might read and criticise his text. Of course, an improved edition and translation of the preserved text of the *Chronicon* would be a boon for its better understanding.²

John of Nikiou wrote his *Chronicon* at the time when the Monophysite patriarch Benjamin was reinstated and Monophysitism was firmly re-established in Egypt. This followed the vacuum created by the absence of the Chalcedonian Church in Alexandria (Christides 2016). Of the several significant aspects discernible in John of Nikiou's *Chronicon*, only three will be discussed in this article: (a) landholding in Egypt during 'Amr bn. al-Āṣ's expedition as described in John's *Chronicon* compared, in a supplementary appendix, to the situation in Apollonopolis during the early Arab dominion as it is described in the papyri of Apollo Ano (Apollonopolis); this section is closely related to section (b), the attitude of the local people of Egypt towards the Byzantine authorities and the Arabs as perceived by John of Nikiou; and (c) the role of Blues and Greens circus factions in the Arab conquest of Egypt as described in the *Chronicon*.

LAND AND PROPERTY SECURED. DISSATISFACTION WITH 'AMR BN. AL- 'ĀṢ'S TAXATION AS REFLECTED IN JOHN OF NIKIOU'S CHRONICON

THE AMBIVALENT ATTITUDE OF THE EGYPTIAN PEOPLE TOWARDS THE ARAB INVADERS

THE UNINTERRUPTED CONTINUATION OF THE OIKOI (LARGE ESTATES ADMINISTERED BY TRADITIONAL ELITES) IN APOLLONOPOLIS (SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION FROM THE GREEK PAPYRI OF APOLLONOPOLIS IN APPENDIX)

Thanks to the benevolent seasonal flooding, the silt from the Nile River was deposited on the rich farm lands protecting them from depletion; this prompted demands by all the authorities to extract as many taxes as possible from the agrarian population of

² For the numerous ambiguities of the preserved text see Booth (2011:559, note 4).

Egypt. John of Nikiou is the only author who emphasises the importance of the initial taxes imposed by the Arabs in Egypt and the indignation of the people due to the burdensome Arab taxation. It is noteworthy that in the earlier period, shortly before Heraclius's reign, he writes that a supporter of the future emperor, the Byzantine general Niketas, as military leader of all Egypt, "lightened the taxes for three years and the Egyptians were much attached to him" (*Chronicon* cix.18, §17). John is one of the few authors who reports the levying of taxes in Egypt by General 'Amr bn. al-'Āṣ before the official tax arrangement according to the final treaty (*Chronicon* cxiii. 4).

John of Nikiou vividly describes the ruthless efforts of 'Amr to preserve law and order following the Arab conquest of Babylon and the whole province of Miṣr. True, Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam states that after the Arab victory in Umm Dunayn, near the fortress of Babylon, in July 640/Rabab H. 19, a tax of one dinar was imposed on every man in addition to a tax in kind which included "one *burnus*, one *jubba*, one *turban* and one pair of shoes".³ However, John of Nikiou offers a closer insight reporting that 'Amr not only "doubled the taxes of the peasants and forced them to carry fodder for the Arabs' horses, but also he committed some violent actions" (*Chronicon* cxiii. 4, p. 182). In order to suppress the unrest and reactions of the local leaders, he had some of the Roman [Byzantine] magistrates arrested and their hands and feet shackled in irons and wooden bonds and "forcibly despoiled [them] of much of [their] possessions" (*Chronicon* cxiii.4). John dispassionately describes 'Amr's unusual actions caused by his anxiety to re-establish order in a society which was on the verge of collapse. Few were the supporters of the Arabs at this stage and not one of the sources reports that the rebellious magistrates' possessions were distributed to any Arabs. No fiefs were given to Arab military leaders and there was limited destruction and/or confiscation of houses, which were acquired by the pro-Muslim Egyptians (*Chronicon* cxiv.1).

By carefully reading the text of John of Nikiou, we can deduce in general that, in spite of their religious differences with the Muslim Arabs, the Egyptian people, because of their internal religious conflicts, did not express any preference for either the Arab invaders or the Byzantine army, but were simply waiting to accept the

³ Torrey (1922:60); Hill (1971:42, no. 52).

victorious party. ‘Amr’s initial successes overran all the Byzantine fortresses from ‘Arīsh to the gates of Babylon (Christides forthcoming), but were not powerful enough to garner the support of the Egyptian population. In contrast, the defeat of the Byzantines in the battle of Umm Dunayn, followed by the Arab conquest of Babylon in 641 A.D./H. 20 (Balādhuri; ‘A. al-Tabbā’a 1987:306), caused great unrest which provoked the violent reaction of the Arab invaders and fuelled their cruelty towards the local leaders who were now divided between the pro-Muslim party and the pro-Byzantine party (*Chronicon* cxix. 1). No other source, save John’s *Chronicon*, describes the prevailing chaotic situation after the fall of Babylon, “then panic fell on all the cities of Egypt and all their inhabitants took to flight, abandoning their possessions and their cattle” (*Chronicon* cxiii. 6).

The oftentimes ambivalent attitude of the Egyptian population towards the Arab invaders is demonstrated throughout John’s *Chronicon*, in his description of all the historic events which followed the fall and evacuation of the fortress of Babylon (9 April 641/21 Rabī‘ II H. 20). He depicts the disorderly withdrawal of the Byzantine army, the people’s concentration in Alexandria and the desperate effort of Viceroy Cyrus to negotiate a surrender to the Arabs which was achieved after the death of the emperor Heraclius in 641 (Misiou 1985:232). On the one hand, John occasionally bursts into invective against the invaders: “and the yoke they [the Arabs] laid on the Egyptians was heavier than the yoke laid on Israel by Pharaoh...” (*Chronicon* cxx. 32). On the other hand, he fatalistically accepts the defeat of the Byzantines and relates the great joy of all the people over Cyrus’s surrender to the Arabs (*Chronicon* cxx. 10). He analytically reports all the conditions of the final treaty with the “Muslims who took possession of all the land of Egypt” (*Chronicon* cxx. 18–21), and only complains about the heavy taxes imposed on the people (*Chronicon* cxx. 28).

It should be noted, nevertheless, that John of Nikiou took great care to objectively narrate the struggle between the Byzantine army of Egypt and ‘Amr’s invading army. The most striking example of this effort at neutrality appears in the description of ‘Amr’s two expeditions against Fayūm. As described by John of Nikiou, these two battles of Fayūm, sometimes confused in the Arabic sources, are of extreme

importance (Butler 1978:223–224). The first was impulsively undertaken by ‘Amr while he was waiting for reinforcements from Caliph ‘Umar outside the gates of Babylon. It was a rare case of an independent action by ‘Amr who is usually portrayed in the Arabic sources as blindly following Caliph ‘Umar’s strategy. Ṭabari reports that ‘Amr declared “above me there is a commander without whose consent I cannot do anything” (Ṭabari; Juynboll 1989:164). It is not known whether ‘Amr followed a pre-conceived strategic plan by ‘Umar during his Egyptian expedition at the expense of his own autonomy (North 1971; McGraw Donner 1995:350–354). In any case, a good commander on the battlefield, no matter what instructions he has received from his superior officer, usually adjusts the order to his own practical military strategy (Christides forthcoming). Thus, ‘Amr undertook the first unsuccessful Fayūm expedition without asking the permission of Caliph ‘Umar, which was his only unnecessary blunder.

John of Nikiou, recording ‘Amr’s unauthorised expedition to Fayūm, describes how the well-organised Byzantine defence of this area confronted ‘Amr’s attack bravely and forced him to withdraw into the desert.⁴ Writing simply for the general audience, John avoided any elaborate praise concerning the Byzantines’ brave defence, which included light cavalry in addition to the infantry troops stationed there (Christides forthcoming).

The second battle in Fayūm, which took place after the fall of Babylon in H. 20/641 A.D. (Balādhuri; ‘A. al-Tabbā’a 1987:306), changed the ambivalent attitude of the local population who, after the dramatic defeat of the Byzantines, sided with the Arabs and started assisting them by “repairing roads, building bridges and opening markets”.⁵ John of Nikiou reports that the Egyptians not only sided with the Muslims who slaughtered the garrison at Fayūm but also “they put to the sword all the Roman soldiers whom they encountered” (*Chronicon* cxv. 11). It should be noted that at this period, the protection of captives by Muslims and Byzantines, which was secured in the Arab-Byzantine wars of the later period, had not yet been applied (Odetallah 1983:48–50; Patoura 1994:117–118; Campagnolo-Pothitou 1995:2). John impartially

⁴ *Chronicon* cxi. 7: “And subsequently the Muslims directed their march to the desert”.

⁵ Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam (Torrey 1922:213); Hill (1971:44).

states that the local people of Fayūm were brutal towards the Byzantine army (he might have drawn this information directly from the people of Fayūm).

Describing the historic events following the Byzantines' defeat in Fayūm and the panicked flight of the residents and soldiers to Alexandria where the Byzantines received the final mortal blow, John cannot hide his own anguish caused at the discord among the Byzantine leaders who were constantly at variance with each other. He writes, "Satan stirred up the continuous discord and Egypt had become enslaved to Satan" (*Chronicon* cxix. 1). It is only at the end of his description of the Arab conquest of Egypt that John openly censures the Muslim Arabs for conquering a Christian country (*Chronicon* cxx. 32).

Meanwhile he provides us with valuable information concerning the "day after". He meticulously describes the conditions of the final treaty of the Byzantines' surrender to the Arabs (*Chronicon* cxx. 18–21). He further describes the local Egyptians' adjustment to the new situation following the Arab conquest. The Egyptians not only agreed to pay the taxes imposed on them but they also offered a large amount of gold as a special gift (*Chronicon* cxx. 28). Above all, the dislocated inhabitants of Egypt who had found refuge in Alexandria requested and secured their return to their homes. John further reports that Christian leaders were appointed by the Arabs as the first administrators (*Chronicon* cxx. 29).

John of Nikiou is a historian of unique value. Without his *Chronicon*, the historic events concerning the Arab conquest of Egypt and its immediate aftermath could not be fully understood. The strength of his work lies in the fact that it yields much needed insightful information. In contrast to other historians who prefer painstaking interpretations, he writes for the general Egyptian reader without overburdening his narration with unnecessarily critical comments. He wrote his work a few years after the final treaty between the Byzantines and the Arabs that concluded a short but fierce struggle. After the Byzantine civil and religious authorities had been withdrawn from Alexandria, the Coptic patriarch Benjamin returned and the Coptic Church was reinstated. Leaving aside his personal feelings, John clearly describes the ambivalent position of the local Egyptian population which, taken by surprise after 'Amr's

invasion of Egypt, passed a period of uncertainty, waiting to see who they would be inclined to support. After ‘Amr’s victory in Umm Dunayn and the fall of Babylon in 641/20, not only did the local people side with the Arabs by helping them in the construction of bridges and repairing of roads, but also, as John of Nikiou explicitly reports, they guided the Arabs to the places where Byzantine soldiers had found refuge and helped them to annihilate the soldiers. This was the case of the slaughtering of the Byzantine soldiers in the second battle of Fayūm (*Chronicon* cxv.11). It is noteworthy that in the Arabic romance epic known as *Futūḥ al-Bahnasā*, one meets a similar attitude of the local people who betrayed the hideouts of Byzantine soldiers who were unscrupulously slaughtered.⁶

John of Nikiou’s most significant contribution is his realistic description of the attitude of the Arab conquerors towards the estate workers and land holders of Egypt. It reaffirms Sijpesteijn’s important conclusion that landholding patterns continued in the Byzantine tradition uninterrupted in the early period of the post Arab conquest Egypt (Sijpesteijn 2007a; 2007b; 2009). Sijpesteijn’s quantitative study, based on the testimony of a large number of seventh-century documentary papyri, has indisputably shown that the land of Egypt was cultivated by local farmers within the structure of the same Byzantine Christian agrarian elite (Sijpesteijn 2009). Likewise, through the whole of John of Nikiou’s work there is no indication that the local agrarian elite, whether Monophysite or Dyophysite, was deprived of their land or of the management of their estates. The major request of the refugees who in their panic, following the fall of Babylon, fled to Alexandria abandoning their homes and estates was to be helped to return and regain their property; this request was easily accepted by the Arab leaders since no Muslims had taken them (*Chronicon* cxx. 28).

To repeat, the very valuable information in John of Nikiou’s work reveals that during the early Arab dominance, the peaceful continuation of the Byzantine agrarian tradition was applied to secure stability (Christides 2016:8). His narration reports neither expulsion of natives from their houses or landed estates nor replacement of their indigenous elite, whether Monophysite or Dyophysites, by any Muslim leaders.

⁶ *Futūḥ al-Bahnasā* (Galtier 1909:208). For the reliability of this source see the excellent unpublished dissertation by Tahīr (1994).

In addition to the evidence of the sixth to seventh century papyri accumulated by Sijpesteijn revealing the undisturbed continuation of the power of the local Christian elite in early Arab Egypt, the present author has produced supplementary evidence drawn from 105 papyri of Apollonopolis which were published by Rémondon (1953), dated largely to the first decade of the eighth century. This new evidence provides more details about the safeguarding of old practices on the large Byzantine estates which, although diminished, continued to exist, refuting Dennett (1959:90) and Sijpesteijn (2009:125) who believe that the great estates no longer existed (see Appendix).

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE CIRCUS FACTIONS BLUES AND GREENS DURING THE ARAB INVASION OF EGYPT AS RECORDED IN JOHN, BISHOP OF NIKIOU'S *CHRONICON*

Numerous works have been written about two rival hippodrome factions, the Blues and Greens in Constantinople, which from sporting clubs developed into political parties, deriving their titles from the colours used by the charioteers (Pareti 1912; Cameron 1973; 1976). Recently Booth illuminated some obscure passages of John's *Chronicon* in an excellent study (Booth 2011), but his mainly lexicographical remarks are restricted to the period before the Arab invasion of Egypt while the present work focuses on the Arab invasion of Egypt and its aftermath.

Unfortunately, less attention has been paid to the corresponding factions in Byzantine Egypt and especially to their activities at the time of the Arab invasion of Egypt. Nonetheless, Roberto has extensively discussed the role of the Green faction in the struggle between the bloodthirsty emperor Phocas (602–610) and Heraclius the Elder and his son, concluding that without the support of the Green party the latter could not have been able to win.⁷ Roberto did not proceed further in discussing the role of the factions in Egypt and their role during the Arab invasion. It should also be noted that Booth's remark that "the political preferences of the

⁷ Roberto (2010:77). It should be noted that Roberto's remarks (2010:59) that the Green faction represented the humblest part of the population is not substantiated by any evidence.

Egyptian factions mirrored those of their colleagues elsewhere in the eastern empire” (Booth 2011:600) can be solely applied to the attitude of the Egyptian factions at the time of the reign of Phocas and his rivalry with Heraclius the Elder and his son. However, Booth did not take into consideration the drastic change in the attitude of the factions during the Arab invasion of Egypt as revealed in the *Chronicon*.

A number of standard references to the races appear in the inscriptions found in the Alexandrian hippodrome (Borkowski 1981). Thus, we read in inv. no. 25, “Long live Kalotychos” (Borkowski 1981:81), obviously a blessing for the charioteer named Kalotychos. Some of the inscriptions are rude, praising the winners and mocking the losers as in inv. no. 39, in which the “brave” Greens are exalted for their victory and the Blues are mocked for their humiliating defeat (Borkowski 1981:82). There is no reason to try to discover in this inscription any hidden symbolic reference to the struggle between Phocas and Heraclius as suggested by Borkowski (1981:85–86), based on the enthusiastic phrase “brave Greens”. Booth suggests that this expression could simply be “an exuberant metaphor” (Booth 2011:595, n. 135). In general, the inscriptions carved on the walls of the hippodrome of Alexandria illustrate the activities of the Blues and Greens as sporting clubs. The causes for their transformation to armed military forces involved in internal politics have not yet been investigated.

Even more complicated is the tracing and explanation of the activities of the Blues and Greens during the advance of the Arab conquerors in Egypt. The most important reference to their behavior is found in an obscure passage of John of Nikiou’s *Chronicon*, reporting the skirmishes between ‘Amr bn. al-‘Āṣ and the Byzantine army during the siege of Babylon, which started in September 640 A.D./Ramadan H. 19 (Hill 1971:45). The *Chronicon*’s reference states explicitly, “And Menas, who was chief of the Green faction, and Cosmas the son of Samuel, the leader of the Blues, besieged the city of Miṣr and harassed the Romans [Byzantines] during the days of the Muslims” (*Chronicon* cxviii.3). A careful reading of this obscure passage might possibly lead to the following interpretation. The Greens and Blues, two rival parties, appeared in front of the gates of Babylon at the time of the

continuous skirmishes between the Byzantine defence forces and the Arab besiegers. According to the text, the two rival parties, taking advantage of the chaotic situation, engaged in plundering. Apparently, as Borkowski remarks, there is need of a lexicographical correction of the text of this passage for a better interpretation (Borkowski 1981:69, n. 63).

The second more important reference to the Blues and Greens is reported in a passage of the *Chronicon* which describes the discord that prevailed among the Byzantine leaders when the Arabs were at the gates of Alexandria. Instead of uniting their forces, Dometianus, the prefect, and Menas, the general, prepared to fight against each other and for this purpose “Dometianus mustered a large force of the Blues ... and Menas mustered a large force of Greens” (*Chronicon* cxix. 9).⁸ It is obvious from this passage that the Greens and Blues at this time were simply mercenary forces ready to serve anybody who needed their military support. We can glean the same impression from another reference in the *Chronicon*, in which the Green faction is reported to be an auxiliary force of the Byzantine general Niketas, temporarily recruited along with sailors, barbarians and others (*Chronicon* cvii.46, p. 172).

CONCLUSION

Many inscriptions carved in the hippodrome of Alexandria, mainly dated to the sixth to seventh century A.D., indicate the sporting activities of the Blues and Greens on the eve of the Arab invasion of Egypt.⁹ It should be noted that the perennial feud between the two rival parties, the Blues and the Greens, which had appeared in Constantinople, is also repeatedly mentioned in the Alexandrian inscriptions (Borkowski 1981:82 inv. no. 39). The evidence is scanty but it seems that their purpose was reduced to military operations devoid of ideological motivation. They were transformed into mercenaries ready to serve any of the constantly embattled Byzantine leaders. At the time that

⁸ It is worth mentioning, as Leontsini remarks, that Dometianus quarrelled with the general Theodore who finally deposed him and expelled him from Alexandria (Leontsini 2009:65).

⁹ See the inscriptions collected by Borkowski (1981:75 ff.). For the artistic representation of the charioteers of Alexandria see Kiss (1999).

‘Amr bn. al-‘Āṣ was at the gates of Alexandria, one faction was recruited by the prefect Dometianus and the other by the general Menas, to fight against each other and not against the invading Arabs. The two factions ended up as a sort of roaming *bucellarii*, the armed guards of the wealthy landlords, acting as private armies. Above every other consideration, they persisted in their perennial enmity towards each other.

Additional note

It should be noted that John, Bishop of Nikiou’s excellent account of the Arab conquest of Egypt should be completed with a number of other sources, especially the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria (S. Mark to Benjamin I)*, wrongly attributed to Severus (Sawīrus) bn. al-Muqaffa‘ (Evetts 1907). As Den Heijer has shown, the greatest of the above work, originally written in Coptic, was actually translated into Arabic by Mawhūb bn. Maṣūr bn. Mufarrij and was produced in two versions, a primitive and a vulgate (Den Heijer 1984; 1985; 1989; 1991; 2000; Johnston 1977). Inevitably, there is a certain amount of subjectivity in this work whose aim was to praise the Coptic patriarch Benjamin (622–661). But certain parts, especially those describing the wandering of Patriarch Benjamin among the Coptic monasteries of Southern Egypt, faithfully reflect real historical events (Evetts 1907:493).

From the Byzantine sources, the most important is the *Chronography* of Theophanes, the Confessor (d. 818).¹⁰ It is composed of numerous passages borrowed indiscriminately from earlier sources. Nevertheless, occasionally certain parts of Theophanes’ work demonstrate a critical approach to the historical events (Karpozelos 2002:145). It is not known from which source(s) Theophanes drew his information concerning the Arab conquest of Egypt since he was not familiar with any of the historical affairs of the Near East. Mango’s theory that Theophanes simply reproduced

¹⁰ For Theophanes’ work in general see the extensive bibliography in the comprehensive study by Karpozelos (2002:137–141); see also the bibliography in Yannopoulos (2013:311–326).

material from the Byzantine chronographer Syngelos is plausible (Mango 1978), but there is not enough evidence to verify his theory.¹¹

The most important information we may draw from Theophanes' *Chronography* is his report on a preliminary Arab raid before 'Amr bn. al-Āṣ' final invasion of Egypt. It was followed by a temporary treatise which was concluded by the Byzantine Patriarch and viceroy, Cyrus, who promised to provide the Arabs 120.000 dinars per year to keep them out of Egypt.¹² Similar information also appears in the Syrian chronicles of Dionysius of Tel Maḥrē (Dionysius Reconstituted) (ninth century A.D.) (Palmer 1993:158–159), and Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) (Chabot 1901:425). A cross examination of the above two Syrian sources may shed some light on the trustworthiness of this information.

APPENDIX

In the following appendix an attempt has been made to show how for more than half a century after the Arab conquest of Egypt, the town of Apollonopolis continued the traditional landholding patterns.

The town of Apollonopolis

Organisation of the landholdings

Continuation of the power of the elite

Conservation and/or renewal of the function of the ancient agents

Apollonopolis, also called Edfu, modern Quṣ, was located at 25° 56'N, 32° 46'E according to Burstein (1989:58, n. 6). Although a small town in Southern Egypt, it acquired great importance, along with the nearby town Coptos, as the chief terminus on the Nile of the caravan routes through the Eastern Desert from and to the Red Sea.

In the late Hellenistic and Byzantine times, the heavy-laden ships traveling the silk route coming from India or beyond entered the Red Sea. At this point they could either

¹¹ Karpozelos (2002:147). A recent study by Jankowiak and Montinaro (2015) was inaccessible to me.

¹² Theophanes (de Boor 1883/1980:338, 10–15).

head directly to Klyasma (near modern Suez), the last port very close to Babylon of Egypt, near present day Cairo, or they could interrupt their trip at the Red Sea ports of Bereniki (modern Madīnat al-Ḥaras) or Myos Hormos (modern Quṣayr al-Qadīm), thus avoiding the last and most dangerous part of the turbulent Red Sea. From any of the above two Red Sea ports after unloading their merchandise on camels, the passengers could reach Apollonopolis in about twelve days. As Desanges reports, the overland passage during the twelve-day trip in the Eastern Desert was not difficult and the travellers enjoyed short breaks in the *hydreumata*, stations with water facilities (Desanges 1978:268; de Romanis 2003:118). From the rich river port of Apollonopolis they could easily complete their trip sailing down the Nile to Babylon.

The privileged geographical position of Apollonopolis (Edfu), located on crossroads of the trade routes (see map at end of article), probably explains the extensive proper use of the Greek language by its inhabitants in their private correspondence. They also most likely used the Coptic language although no Coptic documents have been preserved. It should be noted that after the Arab conquest of Egypt, the international silk trade was drastically curtailed and no documents report on any trade activities in Apollonopolis.

Rémondon published a valuable collection of 105 Greek papyri from Apollonopolis, dated to the turn of the eighth century A.D., with a French translation and short commentaries.¹³ In these papyri we can get a glimpse of a small former Byzantine town that continued to prosper as an agricultural community, almost uninterruptedly following its previous way of life even after the Arab conquest (until the early eighth century).

Landed estates, landholders, agricultural workers and their associations

At first glance the reader is impressed with the wide use of old Byzantine terms in a large number of the papyri of Apollonopolis, indicating that the Arab conquest did not immediately disrupt the administrative machinery and social life of this province. The

¹³ Rémondon (1953) classified the discovered Greek papyri in three categories: official documents (1–56), letters and private documents (57–72), lists of accounts (73–104).

function of some of these terms remained almost the same while others were substantially modified.¹⁴ Of particular importance are the references to the terms used for the wealthy land owners and the various categories of workers.

Among the explicit references to the wealthy landlords of Apollonopolis, called *ktētores* (possessors) and/or *despotai* (lords) (Pap. 76B, 42), who continued to dominate, Papas the *pagarch* of Apollonopolis, stands out. He is the owner of five landed estates (Pap. 98 ca 703–715). On a good part of them the products are kept for the expenses. The list for the expenses of his estates, which is recorded in Pap. 76B, is impressive. They include salaries for farmers, workers, and carters, expenses for two bakeries, one for barley and one for wheat, food for camels, horses, and various other items. The wealthy landlord Papas bears not only the title of the *pagarch* but also that of *comis* (Pap. 37, 39, 40), a rather honorary title. Papas as the *pagarch* of Apollonopolis, part of Thebaid, represented the central government. However, he did not communicate directly with the governor-general of Apollonopolis but only with the emir of his area who resided in Antinoe or with his lieutenant who lived in Apollonopolis (Rémondon 1953:VII). He possessed an almost exclusive power as overseer of the residents of Apollonopolis, the farmers and workers as well as his fellow *ktētores*, and the ecclesiastical authorities (Pap. 97).

Papas was also involved in private legal affairs, although he had limited official judicial power. In Pap. 61, he was asked by his father Liberios to interfere in a dispute between a mother and a son, to contact the judge (δικαστής), explaining to him the reliability of the mother in contrast to the son. In another case (Pap. 18), Papas was again asked to interfere with justice, although the final power lay with the emir. Thus, it is clear that the old Byzantine elite in the former Thebaid province continued to remain the dominant power even in the early Islamic period; they possessed large estates, acquired important administrative positions and guided their people in every day social activities.¹⁵ Simultaneously, a number of the farmers of Apollonopolis, the

¹⁴ For a number of old terms and their actual function throughout Egypt after the Arab dominance see Christides (1991).

¹⁵ For an important article dealing with the role of the elites in the Byzantine Empire see Haldon (2009); see also Cheynet (2003); Dagron (2002); Bagnall (2005); Wickham (2005:137–138, 251).

γεωργοί μίσθιοι (hired farmers), were free and could choose to work either for themselves or for the owners from whom they would receive regular wages. The farmers were also incorporated into their own associations (Pap. 48, 75). It should be noted that recent research has shown that the social elite of the Byzantine *oikoi* did not wield governmental power, rather they facilitated its administration (Palmer 2007:264). Even after the Arab conquest, the owners (*ktētores*) of the large estates continued to coordinate relations with their farmers and the Arab administration.

The involvement of Muslim agents in Apollonopolis. *Moagaritai* (*muhadjirūn*): letter carriers and tax collectors

While there is no mention of any Muslim “possessors” and/or farmers in the papyri during the early eighth century, which is the approximate dating of the papyri according to Rémondon, the activities of Muslim agents serving in the province of Apollonopolis are clearly attested. They are mainly engaged in the transportation of valuables, collection and transferring of taxes and other trusted functions.

***Grammatēphoroi* (letter carriers)**

Regular postal service was secured in Apollonopolis by a number of Christian agents called *grammatēphoroi* (letter carriers) (Pap. 55, 32). They circulated on the Nile in special boats around Apollonopolis and beyond (Abbadi 1991).

***Grammatēphoroi moagaritai* (letter carrying *muhādjirūn*)**

Following the Arab conquest, new postal services were created, of which the most important was that of *grammatēphoroi moagaritai* (letter carriers of the *muhādjirūn*). The term *moagaritai* was used for the word *muhādjirūn* (the Emigrants and their descendants of those who followed the Prophet Muḥammad in his migration from Mecca to Medina).

Tax collectors *moagaritai*

In addition to the *moagaritai*, the simple letter carriers, a number of other *moagaritai* had undertaken the task of tax collection, replacing the Byzantine agents *boucellarii*, who were the agents entrusted by the Byzantine landlords.¹⁶

An exceptional autocratic interference of the Muslim authorities caused by the mass flight of Egyptian artisans from the shipyards of Babylon

While in Apollonopolis a traditional peaceful coexistence prevailed in the society, an abrupt intrusion of the Arab higher authorities overturned it, showing an unusual interference by the new Arab administration. Three papyri (Pap. 9, 13, 14) report on the mass flight of local artisans, who were sent to work in the shipyards of Babylon as public workers (Pap. 53: *demosioi ergatai*), and their escape to their villages. The *pagarch* of Apollonopolis was ordered by the emir of the region of Thebaid to search for and arrest the fugitives and send them back to Babylon. Heavy fines would be imposed and even the life of the *pagarch* would be threatened if he failed to arrest them. There are several references to such fugitives throughout Egypt, revealing a mass flight of skilled and unskilled workers (Christides 1993:159). The Arab authorities, in order to cope with the problem of fugitives, introduced an impressive innovation by creating a special service for finding and arresting them. This problem of the fugitives reveals a serious pattern of socio-economic change as pointed out by Morimoto (1981:120), since these special agents, cutting through the hierarchy, bypassed the power of the *pagarch* and reported directly to the governor (Christides 1993:159).

The causes of the constant flight of the local workers of Apollonopolis who worked in the shipyards of Babylon remain unknown. Usually the creation of new capital cities causes a great movement from the countryside to the towns but the reverse movement cannot be easily explained.¹⁷ In any case, the impact of the flight of the local workers from Babylon to their homes did not disturb the cooperation

¹⁶ For the *boucellarii* see Gascou (1976); Schmitt (1994).

¹⁷ For a short discussion of this problem see Legendre (2015:245–246).

between the great landlords and the Arab administration during this period. It is only after the eighth century that we notice a disruption of the Byzantine tradition caused by oppressive taxation and gradual Islamisation (Lev 2012).

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