Title: Aspects of Early Islamic Egypt

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Short description: This panel is made up of a number of contributions on early Islamic Egypt, from the earliest years after the conquest to the Abbasid period, by scholars working in different areas and taking a variety of approaches. The importance of combining textual sources in Greek, Coptic and Arabic in order to shed a proper and more illuminating light on Egyptian society at that time is now widely recognised. At the same time, new advances are made in the study of material and archaeological evidence. However, the two movements are still insufficiently integrated, largely because of the high level of specialisation each of those fields requires. It is thus essential to bring together scholars who normally work in those separate domains and to foster collaboration between them in order to open new perspectives in the study of the period. This is what this panel aims to do by presenting and discussing the results of some exciting recent research on early Islamic Egypt.

Programme

Session 1

Old and new: administration and society

Jennifer Cromwell (Maquarie), The role of Coptic scribes in the early Islamic bureaucracy

Lucian Reinfandt (University of Vienna), Bilingual environments and scribal training in early Islamic chanceries

Jelle Bruning (Leiden), The administrative relationship between Fustat and Alexandria, ca. A.D. 640-800

Sobhi Bouderbala (Tunis/IFAO), The introduction of Copts into the Islamic society of Fustat: legal status and social struggle

Session 2

Law, economy and environment

Mathieu Tillier (IFPO, Damascus), Between the Dux and the Amīr: evolution of judicial procedure in Upper Egypt under the Umayyads

Arietta Papaconstantinou (Reading), Assessing the economic and social significance of forced labour under the Umayyads

Peter Sheehan (Abu Dhabi), ‘Between the Nile and the Mountain’: An Archaeological Guide to the Metropolis of Fustat-Babylon

Tim Power (University College London-Qatar), The Arabs and Beja in the Early Islamic Eastern Desert of Egypt

Session 3

Writing the past

Philip Booth (Cambridge), John of Nikiou and the Politics of the Past

Edward Coghill (Oxford), Islamising the Pharonic Past: an Egyptian Muslim retelling of the ancient heritage of Egypt

General discussion
Abstracts

Philip Booth (Cambridge), *John of Nikiou and the Politics of the Past*

This paper concerns the impact of the seventh-century Arab conquest upon the historiographical vision of John of Nikiou. It explores his Chronicle's presentation of the past as a vehicle through which to investigate his own cultural politics, both in terms of the distant past (the status of Pharaonic Egypt and imperial Rome, for example) and the more recent (in particular, the persecution under Cyrus of Alexandria, and the reported rapprochement between Benjamin I and 'Amr). At the same time, it places John's text in conversation with other works produced within his same circle - Mena of Nikiou's Life of Isaac and the contemporary biographies embedded in the History of the Patriarchs - to ask how that circle negotiated both its past and its present in order to explain its new-found position within the world, detached from Rome and now subject to the ascendant caliphate.

Sobhi Bouderbala (Tunis/IFAO), *The introduction of Copts into the Islamic society of Fustāṭ: legal status and social struggle*

The society of Fustāṭ was, in the first decades of the Islamic rule, mainly composed of Arabs. Few Coptic people, due to their high social and administrative rank, were integrated rapidly in the dīwān al-ğund (the military administration) as officials. The massive recruitment of Copts in the army dated from the end of the 1st/beginning of the 8th century: this is very clear in the historical literature of Fustāṭ where we can see for the first time a juridical debate on the status of the newcomers after their conversion (mawāļ). In the end of the 2nd/8th century, when the Arabs lost their political power in Fustāṭ, the texts (especially poetry) show us a new social (ethnic?) struggle within the Islamic community of Fustāṭ between Arabs and Copts.

Jelle Bruning (Leiden), *The administrative relationship between Fustat and Alexandria, ca. A.D. 640-800*

This paper will concentrate on the influence of the creation of Fustat in the early 640s on the administrative role of Alexandria in Egypt. Before the Arab conquest, Alexandria was located at the centre of the administrative and military system of Egypt’s four eparchies. When the Arabs had successfully conquered most of Egypt in the early 640s, they administered the country from their main place of settlement, Fustat, located around the Byzantine fortress of Babylon. The role Alexandria played in Egypt’s administration after the Arabs created their capital Fustat remains obscure. Modern scholarship is divided: some scholars argue that the city was reduced to a frontier town, others hold that it continued to be a strong administrative centre. In this paper, I will present research on the relationship between Egypt’s Arab governor (seated in Fustat) and the top of the administration in Alexandria. I will focus on the so-called “governor of Alexandria” and on the city’s Arab garrison. My main contention will be that Alexandria was subjected to the power of the governors seated in Fustat through a change in the administrative system and the appointment of persons loyal to the Arab governorate.

Edward Coghill (Oxford), *The Copts as seen by Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam. Islamising the Pharonic Past: an Egyptian Muslim retelling of the ancient heritage of Egypt*

This paper will examine how the earliest surviving history of Egypt in Arabic, Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam’s *Futūḥ Miṣr*, employs and emplots ancient Egyptian history. The focus will be on how the history and physical remains of an ancient and imposing past are appropriated and formed into an Islamic,
monotheist historical scheme. Particular foci will be the strategies which are used to make Pharonic monuments themselves prophecies of monotheistic triumph in Egypt, and how elements of the Egyptian past which Muslims were invested in continuing (particularly the irrigation system) were given monotheistic origins acceptable to Islam. This was largely achieved though a selective exegesis of the lives of ‘biblical’ prophets who came to Egypt. I will inspect which aspects of these lives were deemed relevant to a history ostensibly about the Arab conquest, and argue that these aspects are used to establish paradigms about Egyptian history which were of particular relevance in the ninth-century when the author compiled the work. Other concerns touched upon will be the narratological function of this section within its text and the rhetorical tools used in the text to establish Muslim ownership of this common monotheistic past.

Jennifer Cromwell (Maquarie), *Role of Coptic scribes in the early Islamic bureaucracy. The role of Coptic scribes in the early Islamic bureaucracy*

Aphrodito and Thebes are two of the main sites of Coptic non-literary text production in the early Islamic period (the 7th and 8th centuries). While contemporaneous, the bulk of the texts from Aphrodito are dated to the first decades of the 8th century and many involve the governor of Egypt, Qurra ibn Sharik, whereas in Thebes the c.500 texts connected with taxation date mainly from 710-730 but its private documents cover a much larger timeframe, ending in the 780s. There are no connections between these sites: Aphrodito is not mentioned in any Theban text, and no significant references to any Theban toponyms occur in the Aphrodito corpus. However, analysis of the original documents shows strong similarities in textual production between certain scribes. In particular, the work of the Aphrodito scribe Theodore and several Theban scribes including Aristophanes son of Johannes, David son of Psate, and Kyriakos son of Petros. This paper will explore the paleographic and linguistic similarities between these two groups of documents. In so doing, it will address what this reveals about the training of Coptic scribes in the early 8th century, and the role of such scribes throughout Egypt during the first century of Islamic rule.

Arietta Papaconstantinou (Reading), *Assessing the economic and social significance of forced labour under the Umayyads*

Late seventh- and early eighth-century papyri are famous for the information they contain on the early administrative reforms introduced by the Arabs, and especially on the way they adapted the existing taxation system to their needs. Seen from a wider perspective, however, direct taxation is but a part of a wider system of extraction of resources and labour that any new imperial power puts into place on arrival. This combination of several modes of extraction is particularly well-attested in the case of early Islamic Egypt because of the fortuitous preservation of the archives of several administrators. These show very clearly that goods and labour were essential elements in the extractive apparatus. This paper will concentrate on labour, attempting to define its nature, to assess its relative weight within the system, and to analyse its social and economic consequences. Forces labourers were regularly recruited for various projects of the new rulers, from building and manning the Arab fleet to contributing to the large-scale public architecture of Fusṭāṭ, Jerusalem, and even Damascus. Although this phenomenon has often been noted, it has not been systematically analysed, nor inserted in the wider regional context. Combined with sources from other areas, the information yielded by the papyri allows a more general appreciation of the role of forced labour in the economy of the earliest years of the Caliphate.

Lucian Reinfandt (Vienna), *Bilingual environments and scribal training in early Islamic chanceries*

Arabic scribal exercises on papyrus have not been systematically analysed so far, and those dating from the first two centuries of Muslim rule not yet published. There is plenty of material to work on, though. It seems that the disciplines of Arabic and Islamic Studies have suffered a lack of appropriate questions that can be addressed to this specific text genre. And yet these texts shed
bright light on officials working on middle and low levels of Muslim bureaucracy, that remain mostly anonymous and otherwise unattested. In the same way, these are key texts for a better understanding of the processes of Arabisation in Egypt. Who were those scribes that practised formulaic phrases or even basic features of the Arabic language itself, scribes that formed the backbone of Muslim bureaucracy and at the same time helped to transform Egypt into an Islamic (not Muslim!) land? In my paper I will analyse scribal exercises that contain both elements of Arabic and Coptic (as well as Greek) and seem to be from bilingual social milieus in the 7th and 8th c AD that became part of Muslim rule.

Timothy Power (UCL-Qatar), *The Arabs and Beja in the Early Islamic Eastern Desert of Egypt*

The Beja constitute the autochthonic population of that stretch of territory lying between the Nile and Red Sea, from the Wādī Ḥammamāt in Egypt as far south as the Gash-Barka in Eritrea. Their ancestors, known to the Byzantines as Blemmyes, have attracted the attention of a growing number of Classicists in recent years. However, these studies have taken the Arab conquest of Egypt as a convenient cut-off point and the Early Islamic period remains rather neglected. The present paper aims to go some way towards redressing this situation. It builds upon the notion of a ‘long’ Late Antiquity to consider the fourth through ninth centuries AD as an internally coherent unit of study. The paper focuses particularly on the unfolding process of Arabisation and Islamisation amongst the Beja. It provides an overview of the political history of the Arabs and Beja in the Eastern Desert, examining the changing dynamics driving Arab expansion and the Beja response, with particular reference to the growth of the local economy in the Early Islamic period.

Peter Sheehan (Abu Dhabi), ‘Between the Nile and the Mountain’: An Archaeological Guide to the Metropolis of Fustat-Babylon

What can information derived from recent archaeological work tell us about Early Islamic Egypt, and in particular the workings of its new capital at al-Fustat, that we don’t already know from textual sources?

Primarily, archaeology provides information on the layout and topography of the city, creating a visual backdrop that helps us to navigate the city, delineate its salient features and identify the locations and settings mentioned in later histories and contemporary textual sources. Recent work has given new insights into the size and layout of the Roman fortress of Babylon and the extent to which key elements of its topography – its streets, buildings and riverside installations - influenced the foundation and development of the ‘centre-ville’ of al-Fustat. The paper will briefly consider earlier observations, but will focus on recent work in Old Cairo, where the history and archaeology of the churches are of major significance in placing the metropolis within the ‘sacred geography’ of Coptic Christian Egypt. Consideration of the demographic evolution of al-Fustat will also focus on what a review of the location and date of church building ‘episodes’ tells us about the role and status of the Christian population of the metropolis.

Mathieu Tillier (IFPO, Damascus), *Between the Dux and the Amīr: evolution of judicial procedure in Upper Egypt under the Umayyads.*

The judicial organisation of early Islam is still a matter of conjectures. Biographical sources such as al-Kindī and Wakī’s books on qāḍī-s can be suspected of reconstructing an a-historical image of the judiciary in accordance with later developments. Their highlighting of the qāḍī as the main representative of the legal order may have applied to Fusṭāṭ – although no documentary evidences have been found until now –, but certainly not outside provincial capitals and main cities (amṣār) where Muslim Arabs were mainly settled. Egyptian papyri offer a unique documentation which allows us to reconstruct part of the daily judicial practice in the province. In this paper, I will draw on a series of Greek and Arabic papyri dating from the late seventh and early eighth century CE, in
order to show some of the main developments of judicial procedures in Umayyad Egypt. I shall show how, between the Sufyanid and the Marwanid period, Egypt witnessed a process of judicial centralisation. I shall argue that this centralisation is significant of the increasingly important role that the governor of Fustāṭ intended to play in administering his province.