

16 | “Peace Be upon You”: Arabic Greetings in Greek and Coptic Letters Written by Christians in Early Islamic Egypt

LAJOS BERKES

The overwhelmingly Egyptian papyrological record provides us with a rich sample of both administrative and private letters in Greek and Coptic from late antiquity. At the time of the Arab invasion in 642, Greek was still the dominant language in the public sphere, but Coptic had already started to gain ground in this area as well, while being well on its way of becoming dominant in the private domain.¹ Even though Arab presence was mostly limited to garrisons and traveling officials in the early decades after the conquest, the new rulers’ epistolary culture started to influence the conventions of Greek and Coptic letters, as attested by formulaic phrases of Arabic origin which often appear in Greek and Coptic documents issued in the name of Muslim officials.²

In this paper, I discuss Arabic epistolary prescripts employed in Greek and Coptic administrative letters written by Christians in the seventh–eighth centuries as attested in papyri from Egypt and, to a lesser extent, from Palestine.

I thank Eugenio Garosi, Nikolaos Gonis, and Petra Sijpesteijn for their helpful comments on a draft of this paper. Eugenio Garosi also shared a relevant chapter of his dissertation “Projecting a New Empire: Formats, Social Meaning, and Mediality of Imperial Arabic in the Umayyad and Early Abbasid Periods” (PhD Dissertation, Universities of Basel and München, 2019), now published as Eugenio Garosi, *Projecting a New Empire: Formats, Social Meaning, and Mediality of Imperial Arabic in the Umayyad and Early Abbasid Periods* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), esp. 219–28, in which he has reached similar conclusions to those of this article studying the phenomenon across various provinces of the early Islamic empires. References to Greek and Coptic papyri are given according to the *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets* (<http://papyri.info/docs/checklist>, last accessed on 10 June 2020). Throughout this article, the provenance of a text is given by its Greek name, following the standards of Greek papyrology. An exception is made for the Fayyūm, which is commonly referred to as such.

¹ See Jean-Luc Fournet, *The Rise of Coptic. Egyptian versus Greek in Late Antiquity*. (The Rostovtzeff Lectures.) (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020).

² Even though all the conquerors were not necessarily Arabs and the concept of Arabness developed later on, I will refer in this paper for brevity’s sake to “Arab” conquerors, government, officials, etc. In a similar vein, I will assume that most of them were Muslims, even if we know that the conquering troops included Christians and Jews and it was probably not entirely clear either what it meant to be Muslim at that period. However, from the early eighth century on, documents provide more hints about religious differentiation and sensitivities, as is illustrated e.g. by the use of certain graphic symbols such as double slanting-strokes (see below).

After a general overview, I will focus on an unpublished Greek papyrus letter from the second part of the seventh century, which provides a new and interesting example for the spread of Arabic formulas in the written communication between Egyptians. Furthermore, I will argue that the writer of this letter employed these Arabic greetings to display his connection to the Arab administration and thus draw the attention of his addressee to his status.

Arab-Style Greek Letters Sent in the Name of Muslim Officials

In a recent study on "Cross-Cultural Parameters of Scribal Politesse in the Correspondence of Arab-Muslim Officials from Early Islamic Egypt,"³ Eugenio Garosi observes that the conquerors adapted in their top-down communication their own Arab epistolary formulas to the conventions of the local languages. Thus, in Egypt, Arab-style Greek (and later Coptic) letters were sent in the name of Muslim officials to Christian administrators. Although we cannot be absolutely sure, it is very likely that the Arab commanders/officials did not write these communications themselves but employed scribes who translated them from Arabic to Greek/Coptic. To understand the structure of these Greek documents we must first have a look at the standard template of Arabic letters issued by authorities in the seventh–eighth centuries:⁴

1. Invocation

bi-sm allāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm

"In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

2. Address

min fulān ilā fulān

"from NN to NN"

3. Salutation (omitted if addressed to Christians)

(al-)salām 'alayka/kum

"peace be upon you"

³ Eugenio Garosi, "Cross-Cultural Parameters of Scribal Politesse in the Correspondence of Arab-Muslim Officials from Early Islamic Egypt," in *Living the End of Antiquity: Individual Histories from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, eds. Sabine R. Huebner et al. (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 73–94. Cf. now also his discussion of Arab-style Greek and Coptic letters: Garosi, *Projecting a New Empire*, 219–28.

⁴ I follow the summary of Garosi, "Cross-Cultural Parameters," esp. 75–78 with slight changes. Cf. also Eva Mira Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus: Form and Function, Content and Context*. (Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete. Beiheft 29) (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 39–42. It is important to note that there are exceptions: some Arabic letters of the eighth century addressed to Christians contain hybrid formulas which do not entirely conform to this pattern, cf. e.g. CPR XVI 4 (Hermopolis, eighth century).

4. **The ḥamdala and the first segment of the shahāda**
fa-innī aḥmadu ilayka allāh alladhi lā ilāh illā huwa
(ilayka is omitted if addressed to Christians)
 “I praise God for your sake other than Whom there is no god.”
5. **Transition formula opening the body of the letter**
ammā ba‘d
 “as for after”
6. **Final valediction**
al-salām ‘alayka/‘alaykum wa-rahmat allāh (if addressed to Muslims)
 “peace and God’s compassion be upon you”
al-salām ‘alā man ittaba‘a al-hudā (if addressed to Christians)
 “peace be upon who follows the Guidance”

Greek letters issued in the name of Arab officials from seventh- and early eighth-century Egypt and Palestine are written according to templates similar to that of Arabic letters.

- (1) **Invocation**
*en onomati tou theou (pantokratoros)*⁵
 “in the name of God (Almighty)”
- (2) **Address**
para tou deinos pros ton deina or simply *ho deina tō deina*
 “From NN to NN” or “NN to NN”
- (3) **Salutation**
(occasionally) eirēnē soi/hymin
 “peace to you”
- (4) **Benediction** (only in letters of governors)
eucharistō/eucharistoumen tō theō
 “I/we give thanks to God”
- (5) **Transition element** opening the body of the letter
kai meta tauta (Egypt) or *epeita* (Palestine)
 “and thereafter”
- (6) **Final greeting**
eirēnē soi/hymin (apo tou theou)
 “peace upon you (from God)”

We do not understand the reasons behind all variations of the template because of our limited sample-size. The letters sent by the governor Qurra b. Sharīk (in office 709–715) to Basileios, pagarch of Aphrodito, constitute the majority of the corpus, while in the case of our other examples, the status of the sender and sometimes also the addressee, as well as the date of the

⁵ In some cases, especially in eighth-century Coptic letters, we find also *syn theō*, “with God,” as an invocation.

papyri, are less clear.⁶ I nevertheless wonder whether we can detect a chronological development. It is interesting that Arab-style Greek letters often contain the salutation "peace to you" (*eirēnē soi/hymin*), while Arabic letters usually omit it if they are addressed to Christians. The early Arab-style Greek letters written immediately after the conquest⁷ contain the formula as does a letter in the Papas-archive (PSI XV 1570 from 667 or 682), but the letters of the governor Qurra b. Sharik omit it. This could lead to the conclusion that the attitude towards the formula changed over the second part of the seventh century. While, in the first decades of the conquest, the greeting might have been less marked religiously, after the Marwānid reforms, the ruling elite could have used it as a distinctive Muslim formula.⁸

Whatever the case may be, this template must clearly have been perceived as something unusual and distinct by Egyptian administrators, since contemporary Greek letters did not contain a standard prescript but normally started directly with the body of the letter. However, the template described above seems to have been intentionally developed to be acceptable for Christians. As Garosi observes:

[T]he religious tone of Arab-style Greek letters is non-denominational. The anti-Trinitarian shahāda ... is omitted and the vocabulary is culturally neutralized. The dichotomy allāh and al-raḥmān ... which is only meaningful in an "Arabian" cultural background is eliminated from the Greek invocation and substituted with the biblical/Abrahamic terms theos and pantokrator.⁹

A connected question is the tone of messages sent in the name of Arab officials to their Christian administrators. The letters written in the very first years of the conquest are rather polite, which could be explained by the assumption that the Arabs did not perceive their rule as absolutely stable and thus made an effort not to provoke the local population.¹⁰ This would

⁶ For an overview and list of Qurra's Greek (and also Arabic) letters, see Tonio Sebastian Richter, "Language Choice in the Qurra Dossier," in *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the Abbasids*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 189–220, esp. 197–200. For a discussion of all published Arab-style Greek letters, see Garosi, *Projecting a New Empire*, 219–25.

⁷ See below, n. 29.

⁸ This could imply that the Greek threatening letter, SB XVI 12575, written in the name of a high-ranking Arab official to the bishop and other leaders of Arsinoiton polis, which omits the greeting, would date into the later seventh century, but it may be an exception as well; there might have been generally different attitudes about the usage of the formula.

⁹ Garosi, "Cross-Cultural Parameters," 78.

¹⁰ Cf. below n. 29.

have changed later, when the Byzantine attempts to reconquer the province failed. This is in line with the general impression of the “defensive character of the Arab rule during the first two or three generations.”¹¹ Interestingly, some other messages from Arab officials to their Egyptian subjects from the later seventh century and early eighth century are characterized by a harsh and violent style which, for instance, often includes death threats. This tone is remarkably different from that of Byzantine official communications. I do not intend to discuss it here in detail, but I believe that this has to be taken as a serious reflection of the new realities after the stabilization of the Arab rule and not only as rhetoric displaying the helplessness of the government.¹²

The employment of graphic symbols is a further aspect to be considered when discussing the character of “Arab-style Greek letters”. It was customary in Greek and Coptic letters to start and end the text with a cross or a staurogram. It is important to note that crosses are also common in Greek letters written in the name of Arab officials in the seventh century: It seems that their use did not represent a religious or ideological problem for the conquerors in the early decades of their rule. The employment of crosses in Greek and Coptic documents written in the name of or by Muslims is, however, not universal and – especially from the early eighth century on – there is a clear tendency to avoid them, most commonly by replacing them with double slanting strokes (/).¹³ Even though Arab-style Greek letters had their own distinctive

¹¹ See Lucian Reinfandt, “Petosiris the Scribe,” in *Living the End of Antiquity: Individual Histories from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, eds. Sabine R. Huebner et al. (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 144. Cf. also Petra M. Sijpesteijn, “New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest,” in *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt: From Sargon of Agade to the Seljuks*, ed. Harriet Crawford (London: British Academy Publications, 2007), 183–202 and Petra M. Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State. The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 58–60.

¹² As suggested recently by Arietta Papaconstantinou, “The Rhetoric of Power and the Voice of Reason: Tensions between Central and Local in the Correspondence of Qurra ibn Sharik,” in *Official Epistolography and the Language(s) of Power. Proceedings of the 1st International Conference of the Research Network Imperium and Officium: Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom. University of Vienna, 10–12 November 2010*, eds. Stephan Procházka, Lucian Reinfandt, and Sven Tost (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 267–81. On the emotive content of administrative letters sent by Arab officials and especially in the messages of Qurra b. Sharik, see Karen Bauer’s paper which appears as chapter 11 in this volume. Furthermore, we need to consider whether the violent threats at least partially derive from legal language, since corporal punishment was common in this period. Naïm Vanthieghem and I will elaborate on this in a forthcoming study on Qurra’s letters.

¹³ See the summary of Garosi, “Cross-Cultural Parameters,” 79 and the detailed study of Tonio Sebastian Richter, “Spätkoptische Rechtsurkunden neu bearbeitet (III): P. Lond. Copt. I 487. Arabische Pacht in koptischem Gewand,” *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 33 (2003): 213–30, esp. 223–30.

flavor because of their template, they still very much conformed to the Byzantine epistolographic tradition in their physical format, style, and vocabulary.¹⁴ Thus, they are, for instance, often written in the usual transversa charta format and employ phrases typical of contemporary Greek letters.¹⁵ This implies, of course, that they were most likely not direct translations of Arab originals but their adaptations in Greek.¹⁶

Arab-Style Greek Letters in Communication between Christians: New Evidence

In what follows, I would like to add a hitherto unpublished papyrus document to the discussion which sheds new light on Arab-style Greek letters. The papyrus of the Berlin papyrus collection, P.Berol. 2791, is written on both sides with two Greek texts, but only one of them has been published. The published one was edited as a “theological text with quotations from the psalms” and was dated to the fourth or fifth century.¹⁷ The text on the other side was only briefly described by the editor, who did not identify its genre. Based on the original, I was able to establish this other document as a letter from the early Islamic period.¹⁸ It seems that the letter was written first: its body was written on the recto against the fibers (transversa charta) with the address on the verso parallel to them. This document was later

¹⁴ A comprehensive study of Byzantine Greek papyrus letters is still a desideratum; see for now Jean-Luc Fournet, “Esquisse d’une anatomie de la lettre antique tardive d’après les papyrus,” in *Correspondance. Documents pour l’histoire de l’Antiquité tardive*, ed. Roland Delmaire, Janine Desmulliez, and Pierre-Louis Gatier (Paris: Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée – Jean Pouilloux, 2009), 23–66.

¹⁵ An exception to the transversa charta format are the letters sent in the name of the governor Qurra b. Sharik. On the one hand, these are in line with the format of the Arabic letters drafted by his chancery; on the other hand, they constitute a genre sui generis, because they were sent from a very high administrative echelon and are thus not very comparable with messages sent by city- or village-level administrators. For typical Byzantine phrases in Arab-style Greek letters, see e.g. below, n. 29.

¹⁶ It needs to be noted, however, that some of these documents contain certain phrases which do not seem to have a clear origin in Byzantine epistolography. A systematic comparison of the phraseology of Greek and Coptic Arab-style Greek letters with that of contemporary Arabic documents could offer interesting results.

¹⁷ Kurt Treu, “Varia Christiana,” *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 24/25 (1976): esp. 117–19 (no. 2).

¹⁸ I thank Marius Gerhardt, the curator of the Greek and Latin Papyri of the Papyrus Collection of the National Museums in Berlin, for permission to present a description of the papyrus here. A full publication will follow in a future volume of the series “Berliner Griechische Urkunden”. For the relevant entry of the collection, see <http://berlpap.smb.museum/16347/> (last accessed on 10 June 2020).

reused for the theological text parallel to the fibers, upside down in comparison to the address on the verso.¹⁹

The Greek letter, although fragmentary, provides us with evidence on the use of formularies typical in Arab-style Greek letters written in the name of Arab officials, but here employed in the communication between Christians. The address on the back – which the addressee would have first seen before opening the letter – informs us about the persons involved: “To be given to the God-protected lady, Mannou – from Sisinnios”.²⁰ After this standard address, the letter proper surprises with its opening: “In the name of God. From me, Sisinnios. I write, I greet²¹ my God-protected sister, the lady Mannou. Peace to you and thereafter.”²² Continuing, the sender reminds lady Mannou about a presumably administrative matter, and she is asked to send something (money or goods) – but the details remain obscure due to the fragmentary state of the papyrus.

It is, however, not the content but the formulary that is remarkable in this text. The sender, Sisinnios, employs the typical prescript of letters sent in the name of Muslim officials discussed above.²³ This template together with the characteristic cursive handwriting allows us to date the document confidently to the post-conquest period, that is, the middle or second part of the seventh century. A dating to the early eighth century seems to be less likely, even if it cannot be entirely excluded, since Greek letters are not to be found in the papyrological material after the late seventh century with the notable exception of the Greek letters of the governor Qurra b. Sharik (in office 709–15) which are in fact our last securely dateable Greek letters from Egypt.

It is nevertheless possible that some of the Greek letters dated at present to the seventh century were in fact written in the eighth century. For instance, the region of Herakleopolis seems to have been a stronghold of Greek documentary culture, as illustrated by the fact that the last dateable Greek legal documents were written there in the late 710s and perhaps even

¹⁹ This obviously implies that the *terminus post quem* for the Christian literary document is the seventh–early eighth century.

²⁰ † ἀποδ(ο)θ(ήτω) τῇ θεοφυλά(κτω) δεσπο(ίνη) vac. κύρξ Μάννου vac. † πα(ρά) Σισιννίου.

²¹ Sisinnios' Greek is faulty at some points. We would expect here, “I write greeting” (γράφω προσκυνῶν instead of γράφω προσκυνῶ).

²² † ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ Θεοῦ. παρ' ἐμοῦ Σισιννίου. γράφω προσκυνῶ τὴν θεοφύλακτόν μου ἀδελφήν τὴν κύραν Μάννου. εἰρήνη σοι | καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα.

²³ It is impossible to stay whether the letter was written by Sisinnios himself or a scribe. However, this question does not seriously affect the interpretation of the document: even if it was written by a scribe, it must have conformed to his expectations and milieu of Sisinnios – the letter might even have been dictated.

in the 720s.²⁴ However, these possible exceptions do not seem to drastically alter our general impression that Greek was swiftly losing its role in written culture apart from in the church and as a language of bookkeeping in the early Islamic period.²⁵ The linguistic situation might have been different in the Delta, for example in Alexandria, but the regions known from the papyrological record show a clear decline in the employment of Greek for domains other than accounting.

The content of the document on its own does not clearly evidence the context of the message. Sisinnios addresses the lady Mannou as his "sister," which points to a more or less similar social standing.²⁶ The fact that a woman is the addressee of the letter implies that she must have been a landowner, as a member of a wealthy family, who was also involved in administering the landholdings. It is, however, not conceivable that she was an official in the city administration, since women are not known to have held such positions. What remains of the message itself could also corroborate this assumption: sending goods or money is a standard request in contemporary estate correspondence.

The position of Sisinnios is more elusive. He might have been an official connected to the pagarchy, the administrative district of the city, or an employee of the estate of the family of Mannou or another one which had dealings with her. These two positions do not necessarily mutually exclude each other, since "public" and "private" spheres were not clearly separated in Byzantine and post-Byzantine Egypt. Local aristocrats often held important administrative positions such as that of the pagarch, and, thus, the employees of their estates were involved not only in the tax-collection of their own territories but of others as well.

The estate milieu from which this document seems to stem is typical for Byzantine and "post-Byzantine" Egypt and quickly disappears from our documentation in the late seventh–early eighth century, corroborating thus the above proposed dating. The general impression our document provides recalls the letters found in the archive of Papas, the pagarch of Apollonopolis Magna dating from ca. 660–80 (P.Apoll.). Since the document was bought in the Fayyūm around 1877–81, it was likely discovered in

²⁴ On these documents, see Sophie Kovarik, "Der herakleopolitische Notar Paulos: Ein Kompromiss aus dem umayyadischen Ägypten – der bisher späteste griechische Vertrag." *Tyche* 40 (2020): 55–70.

²⁵ See Lajos Berkes, "Greek as an Administrative Language in Islamic Egypt and the Caliphate," in *From Oriens Christianus to the Islamic Near East. Theological, Historical and Cultural Cross-Pollination in Late Antiquity*, ed. Manolis Ulbricht and Adam Walker (Gorgias Press: forthcoming).

²⁶ It seems unlikely that the term would refer to actual kinship in this context.

this region. Although this find contains sometimes documents from other regions too, the content does not contradict this in our case, since we know of a larger number of estate documents from the early decades of Islamic Fayyūm – even if many of them are still unpublished.²⁷ In sum, Sisinnios was likely an employee of an estate in the Fayyūm dealing with administrative matters.²⁸

But let us return to the formulary of the letter. As already said, Greek letters of this period do not contain a prescript but start in medias res. The prescript of our letter is paralleled by two orders written probably in the early years of the conquest. In those, Arab commanders order local officials to provide money and goods.²⁹ The only difference between those letters and our fragment is the way the addressee is described. While the letters written in the name of Arab commanders contain the Greek preposition *pros* translating the Arabic *ilā*, Sisinnios employs a more polite Greek epistolary cliché of the period: “I write, I greet my God-protected sister, the lady Mannou.”³⁰ However, he finishes the prescript with the formula modelled on the Arabic: “peace to you and thereafter.”

This letter is the first to evidence the typical prescript of Greek letters written in the name of Muslim officials in the communication between Christians.³¹ How shall we interpret it? In my view, Sisinnios intends to

²⁷ Some of these documents provide precious information on the contact of the Arab troops and administration with the local landowners. It is, however, difficult to say from which estate(s) in the Fayyūm these papyri stem. One of them must have been that of Flavius Petterios and his wife Flavia Marous; see Clive Foss, “Egypt under Mu‘āwīya Part II: Middle Egypt, Fustāt and Alexandria,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72 (2009): 259–65.

²⁸ It is worth mentioning that we find another Greek letter from an estate context which stems from early Islamic Fayyūm and was reused for writing a Christian text (an amulet); see Lajos Berkes, “A Christian Amulet and Estate Administrators in Seventh Century Fayum,” *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 64 (2018): 88–97. Whether this is a coincidence or an emerging pattern is unclear at present.

²⁹ SB VIII 9752 (Fayyūm, ca. 643), 1: † ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ Θεοῦ. παρ’ ἐμοῦ [†] αἰμῖρᾱ πρό[ς] εἰρήνη σο[ι] καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα; ‘In the name of God. From me, Yazīd, amir to . . . peace to you and thereafter.’ SB VIII 9748 (Fayyūm, mid-seventh century), 1: † ἐν ὀνόματι τ[οῦ] Θεοῦ. παρ’ ἐμοῦ Οὐβηίτ αἰμῖρᾱ πρός Καλομηνάν· εἰρήνη σο[ι] καὶ μετὰ ταῦ[τ]α; ‘In the name of God. From me, Ubayd, *amir* to Kalomenas. Peace to you and thereafter.’ It is worth mentioning that both letters include the same polite phrase for introducing a request as the letter written by Sisinnios: καλῶς ποιεῖς “you do well,” after which the actual request is introduced by a participle: “if . . .” This has been a standard phrase in Greek epistolography for centuries and shows thus that this letter must have been an adaptation from Arabic rather than a translation. Alternatively, these letters could have been composed exclusively in Greek as well.

³⁰ Cf. e.g. P.Grenf. II 91 (Thebaid, sixth–seventh century), 1 or SB VI 9138 (Arsinoite, late sixth century), 1–2.

³¹ The use of crosses in the document leaves no doubt about the religion of Sisinnios. A suggestion made during the conference that Sisinnios might have been a “Muslim at work” and a “Christian at home” appears to me anachronistic. In my view, this would have been unlikely to happen in

display his status and close contact to the Arab administration by employing their epistolary style. Addressing a letter to a lady at a local estate, he may well have utilized "Byzantine" conventions but he chose instead the new, more prestigious template. As has already been discussed, even though the Arab-style Greek letters show formulas unambiguously connected to the conquerors, they were slightly modified to be acceptable to Christians too. Sisinnios could show his connection to the new masters of the country without having to make a commitment to their faith, however Islam was exactly defined at that time.

Even though there are other examples in fragmentary Greek papyrus letters which may show the same formula in the correspondence between Christians,³² the case of Sisinnios still remains the only clear evidence and is thus a unique exception. The few indirect clues we find in our sources suggest that many Egyptians still considered themselves to be part of the Byzantine world.³³ A clear example for this is the habit of Coptic legal documents to avoid mentioning the Arab rulers by the formula "those who rule upon us."³⁴ The letter discussed above shows a different attitude: Sisinnios seems to have associated prestige with employing the conventions of the new elite.³⁵

the seventh century, when Muslim presence was limited mainly to garrisons in Egypt, even if the phenomenon might have occurred later, when there was more contact between the two religious groups.

³² See the greetings of the fragmentary P.Lond. V 1892 (Fayyūm, seventh–eighth century): καὶ εἰρήνη ὑμῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ; 'and peace to you from God.' The previous line of this letter – as far as it is preserved – contained a greeting referring to kissing (vel sim.) of the feet of the addressee – a cliché of contemporary Byzantine epistolography which is hardly to be expected in a letter written in the name of a Muslim official. The same greeting is to be found in P.Apoll. 5 (Apollonopolis Magna, ca. 660–80) and P.Ross.Georg. V 45 (I read σοι from a digital image at the end of line 4; Fayyūm, the letter dates to the second part of the seventh century or perhaps the early eighth century *pace* the edition), but the fragmentary preservation prevents us in both instances from telling whether the sender was Muslim or Christian. However, only the greeting may not be committing, since it appears in contemporary administrative messages written by Christians without the Arab-style prescript in Nessana (Palestine), cf. e.g. P.Nessana III 70 and 74 (both ca. 685).

³³ Arietta Papaconstantinou, "What Remains Behind': Hellenism and Romanitas in Christian Egypt after the Arab Conquest," in *From Hellenism to Islam. Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, ed. Hannah M. Cotton *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 447–66.

³⁴ ΝΕΤΑΡΧΕΙ ΕΞΩΠΙ, cf. e.g. P.Lond. IV 1518 (Aphrodito, 708/709), 18. See also Jean Gascou, "L'Égypte byzantine," in *Le Monde byzantin I. L'Empire romain d'Orient 330–641*, ed. Cécile Morrisson (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), 435–36.

³⁵ One could also assume that he took the formula over from private letters written in Arabic. It seems to be unlikely, however, that Sisinnios knew Arabic and that there would have been a large number of Arabic letters circulating in the Fayyūm to influence him.

The Influence of Arab Formulas on Coptic Epistolography

Although this template is rare in the seventh century, it recurs in later Coptic official and private letters.³⁶ Coptic scripts are notoriously difficult to date, but most of the preserved (or at least published) letters seem to come from the seventh–eighth century. The invocation formula “in the name of God” (ⲉⲙ ⲡⲣⲁⲛ ⲙⲡⲛⲟⲩⲩⲧⲉ) might have been used before the Arab conquest, but its increasing frequency is certainly to be connected to the influence of the new rulers of the country.³⁷ Similarly, it is, I believe, not too far-fetched to claim that the formula “peace be upon you and thereafter” (ⲧⲉⲣⲓⲛⲛⲏ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲙⲛⲛⲥⲁ ⲛⲁⲓ) is also likely a development of the Islamic period, probably the eighth century, even if we may find its two parts – that is, “peace be upon you” and “and thereafter” – separately in earlier documents.

When the Arabs conquered Egypt, they needed to communicate with the local population in Greek, the administrative language of the country. The templates they employed (as they did in other Byzantine provinces)³⁸ are modified translations of Arabic documentary formulas. The modifications removed those elements that made the templates unambiguously Muslim and rendered them simply monotheistic and thus acceptable for Christians. These templates could not only be received by Christians but could also be incorporated by them into existing Byzantine conventions, as the example of Sisinnios shows.³⁹ In the first decades of Arab rule, probably only a few beneficiaries of the new regime employed the Arab-style prescript in their letters written to other Christians to display their close connection to the new government and thus their social standing.

³⁶ See e.g. P.Lond.Copt. 1165 (Hermopolite, seventh–eighth century). For an overview of Arab-style Coptic letters, see Garosi, *Projecting a New Empire*, 225–28.

³⁷ Tonio Sebastian Richter and Georg Schmelz, “Der spätägyptische Arbeitsvertrag P.Heid. inv. Kopt. 541,” *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 40 (2010): 190.

³⁸ It is important to note that the Greek documentary formulas which the Arabs employed in the first years of the conquest had almost certainly been developed before, i.e. at latest during the conquest of the Near East.

³⁹ No Greek letter written by a Christian official to a Muslim superior has been published yet, but we may assume that these official letters would have utilized the Arab-style prescript as evidenced by eighth-century Coptic letters written to Arab officials which do exist. For instance, a certain Zacharias addressed the *amīr* Rāshid (b. Khālid) using the Arab-style prescript but modifying it slightly – similarly to Sisinnios – according to Byzantine conventions: “In the name of God. It is Zacharias who writes to his true friend to the most glorious Rāshid. Peace to you and thereafter.” P.Ryl.Copt. 285 (Hermopolite), 1: ⲉⲙ ⲡⲣⲁⲛ ⲉⲡⲓⲛⲟⲩⲩⲧⲉ ⲛⲁⲕⲁⲣⲓⲁⲕ ⲡⲓⲕⲓⲁⲓ ⲛⲡⲓⲕⲓⲛⲥⲓⲟⲥ ⲡⲓⲁⲟⲥ ⲡⲉⲛⲁⲓ (ⲟⲩⲟⲩⲁⲧⲟⲥ) ⲧⲓⲣⲓⲛⲛⲏ ⲛⲁⲕ ⲙⲉⲛⲛⲥⲁ ⲛⲁⲓ. For a similar inclusion of Arabic elements into Bactrian documents, see Said Reza Huseini’s paper which appears as chapter 10 in this volume.

However, in the eighth century, the Arab-style prescript became commonplace in the communication between Christians too.⁴⁰ This was likely reinforced by Arabic private letters, which started to circulate more widely in the eighth century and were more often than before addressed to Christians. Greek letters were barely written at that time anymore, but clerks of Muslim officials employed essentially the same prescript as in Arab-style Greek letters in their Coptic messages too.⁴¹ Thus, the template that was created to facilitate communication between Christians and Muslims in public life became a normal and accepted standard in communication between Christians and Muslims in daily life and also between Christians only in private or even monastic correspondence.⁴² The choice of the religiously neutral formula for official top-down communication by the conquerors thus became a mechanism for facilitating not only the smooth working of administrative structures but, in the long term, the social cohesion of Christians and Muslims.⁴³

Postscript: More New Evidence for Arab-Style Greek Letters in Communication between Christians

After the manuscript of this article was submitted for publication, two other Greek papyrus fragments were published which support the conclusions presented here. CPR XXXVI 12 is a fragment of a letter written by a certain Ioannakios to the *amīr* ‘Abd ar-Raḥman. The document probably belongs to the so-called Senouthios archive, and thus dates from the early years or decades of the Arab rule. Apart from the address on the back, only a few words of the first lines of the letter have survived. These suggest that Ioannakios, who was certainly a local Christian administrator, used an Arab-style prescript. He styles himself as “your servant” and continues with

⁴⁰ See e.g. P.Lond.Copt. 1165 (Hermopolite, seventh–eighth century), 1–2: † 2M ΠΡΑΝ ΠΠΟΥΤΕ ΔΗΟΚ ΙΟ[ΥC]ΤΕ ΠΑΜΙΓΔΟΛ ΕΙCΘΔΙ ΠΑΦΙΛΟC | ΧΟΕΙC ΙΩΤ [Δ]ΠΑ CΕΥΗΡΟC ΤΕΡΗΝΕ ΝΑΚ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΙΤΗ ΠΠΟΥΤΕ ΜΕCΕ ΝΔΙ. “In the name of God. I Iouste from Migdol write to my dear lord-father Apa Severos. Peace to you from God. Thereafter.”

⁴¹ It is possible that the Arab-style Coptic template was taken over from Greek and not directly from Arabic documents; see Garosi, *Projecting a New Empire*, 227–28.

⁴² P.Lond.Copt. 1165, cited in n. 36 and 40, seems to stem from a monastic context (perhaps from the monastery of Apa Apollon in Bāwīt).

⁴³ The analysis I have provided above is based on seventh–eighth-century letters. It would be very interesting to compare this with the later developments of Coptic epistolography, but I do not venture to do so here since this is a barely researched and known field of papyrology and would require a detailed study in its own right.

“peace to you from God.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, CPR XXXVI 13, a similar scrap from around the same time, is addressed by a Ioannakios, who may be the same person as the sender of CPR XXXVI 12, to an *illustris*, a high-ranking (no doubt Christian) person, whose name is only partially preserved (ending in -on). This letter contains a similar combination of traditional Byzantine letter-opening formulas and the Arab-style prescripts as P.Berol. 2791 discussed above. The fragmentary first line preserves words of a Byzantine formula: “before all I make obeisance.” The second contains remnants of the Arab-style prescript: “peace to you and thereafter.”⁴⁵

These two documents have been contextualized by their editor Federico Morelli in a similar way to the discussion above. In my opinion, these new findings confirm the conclusions of this article: the Arab-style prescript was used from the early years of the Arab period not only in letters written in the name of Arab officials but also by Christians addressing them. CPR XXXVI 12 is so far the only Greek letter addressed to an Arab official, but considering how consequently the Arab-style prescript was employed in top-down Greek communications by Muslims, we may expect that the same was expected of their subjects. CPR XXXVI 13 shows that, similar to P.Berol. 2791, some local Christian officials used the prescript associated with the new regime even when writing to non-Arabs. However, if we take into account the large number of Greek letters between Christian officials from this period which simply continue to use Byzantine formulas, it remains clear that the use of the Arab-style prescript was in this context the exception rather than the rule.

Bibliography

- Berkes, Lajos. “A Christian Amulet and Estate Administrators in Seventh Century Fayum.” *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 64 (2018): 88–97.
- Berkes, Lajos. “Greek as an Administrative Language in Islamic Egypt and the Caliphate.” In *From Oriens Christianus to the Islamic Near East: Theological, Historical and Cultural Cross-Pollination in Late Antiquity*, edited by Manolis Ulbricht and Adam Walker (Gorgias Press: forthcoming).
- Foss, Clive. “Egypt under Mu‘āwiya Part II: Middle Egypt, Fustāt and Alexandria.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72 (2009): 259–78.
- Fournet, Jean-Luc. “Esquisse d’une anatomie de la lettre antique tardive d’après les papyrus.” In *Correspondance. Documents pour l’histoire de l’Antiquité tardive*.

⁴⁴ Line 2: ὑμέτερος δ[οῦλος εἰρήνη ὑμῶν] ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ τ[.

⁴⁵ Line 1: πρὸς] μὲν πάντων πρ[οσκυνῶ; line 2: εἰρήνη] σοι καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα.

- Collection de la Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée 40, Série littéraire et philosophique 13, edited by Roland Delmaire, Janine Desmulliez, and Pierre-Louis Gatier, 23–66. Paris: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée – Jean Pouilloux, 2009.
- Fournet, Jean-Luc. *The Rise of Coptic. Egyptian versus Greek in Late Antiquity*. (The Rostovtzeff Lectures). Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Garosi, Eugenio. "Cross-Cultural Parameters of Scribal Politesse in the Correspondence of Arab-Muslim Officials from Early Islamic Egypt." In *Living the End of Antiquity Individual Histories from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, edited by Sabine R. Huebner et al., 73–94. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Garosi, Eugenio. *Projecting a New Empire: Formats, Social Meaning, and Mediality of Imperial Arabic in the Umayyad and Early Abbasid Periods* (Studies in the History and Culture of the Middle East 42). Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022.
- Gascou, Jean. "L'Égypte byzantine." In *Le Monde byzantin I. L'Empire romain d'Orient 330–641*, edited by Cécile Morrisson, 403–36. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012.
- Grob, Eva Mira. *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus: Form and Function, Content and Context*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter 2010.
- Kovarik, Sophie. "Der herakleopolitische Notar Paulos: Ein Kompromiss aus dem umayyadischen Ägypten — der bisher späteste griechische Vertrag." *Tyche* 40 (2020): 55–70.
- Papaconstantinou, Arietta. "The Rhetoric of Power and the Voice of Reason: Tensions between Central and Local in the Correspondence of Qurra ibn Sharik." In *Official Epistolography and the Language(s) of Power. Proceedings of the 1st International Conference of the Research Network Imperium and Officium: Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom. University of Vienna, 10–12 November 2010*, edited by Stephan Procházka, Lucian Reinfandt, and Sven Tost, 267–81. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015.
- Papaconstantinou, Arietta. "'What Remains Behind': Hellenism and Romanitas in Christian Egypt after the Arab Conquest." In *From Hellenism to Islam. Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, edited by Hannah M. Cotton et al., 447–66. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Reinfandt, Lucian. "Petosiris the Scribe." In *Living the End of Antiquity: Individual Histories from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, edited by Sabine R. Huebner et al., 141–52. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Richter, Tonio Sebastian. "Language Choice in the Qurra Dossier." In *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the Abbasids*, edited by Arietta Papaconstantinou, 189–220. Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2010.
- Richter, Tonio Sebastian. "Spätkoptische Rechtsurkunden neu bearbeitet (III): P. Lond. Copt. I 487. Arabische Pacht in koptischem Gewand." *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 33 (2003): 213–30.

- Richter, Tonio Sebastian and Georg Schmelz. "Der spätökoptische Arbeitsvertrag P.Heid. inv. Kopt. 541." *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 40 (2010): 185–203.
- Sijpesteijn, Petra M. "New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest." In *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt: From Sargon of Agade to the Seljuks* (Proceedings of the British Academy 136), edited by Harriet Crawford, 183–202. London: British Academy Publications, 2007.
- Sijpesteijn, Petra M. *Shaping a Muslim State. The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford Studies in Byzantium). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Treu, Kurt. "Varia Christiana." *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 24/25 (1976): 113–27.