

## Book Review

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Jennifer A. Cromwell, *Recording Village Life: A Coptic Scribe in Early Islamic Egypt. New Texts from Ancient Cultures 8* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), xxiv + 287 pp. ISBN 978-0-472-13048-1. Price: \$90.00 (cloth).

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This book makes use of the largest corpus of Egyptian documents dating to the early Islamic period. Written in Coptic and Greek on ostraca (pottery or limestone) or papyrus, these documents originate from the Theban village of Djeme, which was built in and around the ruins of the temple of Rameses III at Medinet Abu “with a population between fifteen hundred and two thousand” (p. 3). Dating from the late sixth to late eighth centuries CE, there are “1,877 texts from Djeme, out of a total of 3,559 texts from the wider Theban region... Almost 20 percent of published Coptic texts are from Djeme alone” (p. 2, n. 1). These texts have, however, attracted less interest from the wider research community concerned with the history of the early Islamic period than has the

early eighth-century corpus of Aphrodito. This is probably because unlike the latter corpus, the Djeme texts are mainly written in Coptic. There are no known Arabic documents preserved from the Theban region in this period, and the preserved communications involve exclusively local actors. The Djeme writings contain no texts written by the central administration in Fustāṭ in the name of the governor, like the famous letters of Qurra b. Sharīk to the village of Aphrodito. Nevertheless, the documentation of Djeme did not escape examination in Chris Wickham’s *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (2005),<sup>1</sup> and it has been the focus of rich research production by papyrologists, with a particular focus on village life and gender studies.<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Cromwell’s book aims to reconstruct the work and world of one of the scribes of

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1. Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2. Most notably, Terry G. Wilfong, *Women of Jeme: Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

the Djeme corpus and a member of the village elite: Aristophanes son of Johannes. He was active in the second quarter of the eighth century—that is, the late Umayyad period. The book places a spotlight on the use of Coptic documents in the administration of the later Marwanids. This lens allows us to drastically reconsider a certain understanding of language use in Umayyad administration that has been oversimplified by references to the so-called language reform under ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 65–86/685–705). Cromwell creates a link between papyrological studies, on the one hand, and the history of Late Antiquity and the early Islamic period, on the other, by concentrating on several hot topics in those fields, in relation to which the present review is structured: administration and taxation; scribal practices and literacy; and microhistory.

### Administration and Taxation

Chapter 1, entitled “A Scribe in His Time and Place,” introduces the geographical, political, and literary environment in which Aristophanes wrote: the Theban region, its documents, the village of Djeme as known through archaeological excavations, and its place in the administrative structure of early Islamic Egypt. Cromwell notes that the main feature of Islamic rule that is visible in the texts of Djeme is the payment of the poll tax in addition to less well documented taxes also characteristic of the new administration: forced labor and expense taxes for officials such as the governor or the *amīr al-mu’minīn*, all discussed in Chapter 4. Islamic rule

also appears in a few mentions of titles, names, and a handful of Arabic protocols that were not written locally (pp. 8–9). Most notably, an *amīr*, that is, an Umayyad administrator, was appointed over the local capitals of Luxor and Esna. He had a fiscal and legal role, as he was petitioned for travel permits and the settlement of village disputes (cf. Chapter 5). The first chapter also confirms that the use of Coptic for administrative texts was an innovation of the Umayyad period.

Chapter 4, “Recording Taxes,” shows that Aristophanes was first involved in drawing up fiscal documents in 724, when he wrote tax demand notes for the office of the *amīr* of Luxor and Esna, Sahl b. ‘Abd Allāh.<sup>3</sup> He then wrote 106 tax receipts on ostraca between 727 and 730. In those three years he drew up six other texts relating to tax payments (safe conducts and travel permits). Different writing supports were utilized for fiscal communications with the *amīr* (papyrus) and at the village level (ostraca).

The tax documents are for the principal money taxes (poll tax, expense taxes) and for forced labor. *P.CLT* 6, dated 724, is of particular interest, as it records an unusual declaration of seventeen men on their contribution to naval duty, stating that they would provide a sum of money to the authorities if they were not able to contribute to the raids. Cromwell puts forward a convincing interpretation: the signatories were “great men” of the village “with the ability to buy their way out of the *cursus*” (p. 92). Less convincing is her categorization of this document as reflecting a communal burden. This claim

3. Cromwell gives him the title of pagarch, though to my knowledge this title never appears for administrators with Arab names.

is not discussed at length, but one wonders whether this unique document, the only one mentioning forced labor in the Theban region, really reflects a fiscal system that functioned regularly with both communal and personal liability at the village level. The document is so uncommon that the scribe utilized up to three different names for it in the text (*homologia n-koinônikon*, *symphônion n-koinônikon*, *koinê homologia* [p. 90]). It seems to have been an ad hoc initiative that does not necessarily reflect the functioning of the fiscal system of the 720s as a whole.

Most of the fiscal texts written by Aristophanes (p. 103) are concerned with the poll tax, called *diagraphon* in Theban documents. He wrote receipts for a total of sixty-seven men, issuing multiple receipts for nine of them. Payments were made in instalments (*katabole*) in the first part of the fiscal year (between May and September). The five travel permits written by Aristophanes were drawn up at the same time, after taxes had been paid. The fixed formulary of these receipts is presented in detail. All but two of the receipts for the poll tax were written in Coptic and those for the expense tax in Greek. Cromwell hypothesizes that the choice of languages depended on the destination of the receipt (p. 98), but she does not say what those different destinations could have been.

The chapter reveals that the drafting of tax documents was a closely regulated process in the twenty or so years in which they are attested at Djeme and that only one scribe at a time was involved in drawing up such texts. Aristophanes

was the last of five attested official scribes issuing tax receipts. After him there is no evidence of tax recording in Djeme. Receipts mentioned up to five men: Aristophanes as scribe, a fiscal official (*strategos*), two signatories, and sometimes a countersignatory. All of them except the *strategos* signed the receipts in their own hand. Cromwell suggests that Aristophanes might have gone around to different areas of the village to write up to sixteen receipts in one day, going from house to house, possibly with the signatories. Another possibility is that inhabitants would come to him (or them) each day from various parts of the village.<sup>4</sup> The latter arrangement would have saved Aristophanes the trouble of wandering around a village of two thousand souls carrying up to sixteen potsherds with him. Cromwell also convincingly shows that the tax receipts were kept by Aristophanes or the village administration as a record of tax collections, as they were the ones liable for this revenue vis-à-vis the higher administrative authorities (cf. Chapter 5, pp. 179–180). The ostraca were kept together, as is evident from their acquisition history. A good number of them were bought together, and today they are housed in a limited number of collections.

The research presented in Chapter 6 is the most innovative work on Umayyad administration to appear in the past decade. Cromwell provides a fascinating demonstration of the official training of Coptic and Greek scribes for the production of certain types of key

4. The spread of areas represented by the villagers can be inferred from the mention of different *strategoï* on receipts drawn up on the same day, as Cromwell offers a convincing hypothesis that *strategoï* were the fiscal officials for the different quarters of the village (pp. 107–108).

documents in the Umayyad fiscal system—namely, those concerned with “collection of taxes and requisitioning of goods and labour” (p. 176). Such training began in the last decade of the seventh century, and it was still in full force at the time of Aristophanes in the second quarter of the eighth century. Cromwell does acknowledge the increasing number of Arabic papyri in the same period, but, as she shows, this went hand in hand with an increase in the number of Greek and Coptic documents and with centralized training for scribes in these two languages. The new training is visible in the script and formulary of administrative documents. It can be initially observed in documents drawn up in the local district capitals of the Nile valley, and by the time of Aristophanes it had reached the village level. He was not the only scribe with this training who was active in Djeme, as texts written by Cyriacus son of Petros, who was active at the same time, show the same features. It is not known where the training took place, but the district capitals would have been a logical choice. Cromwell sets the time of the eventual replacement of Coptic by Arabic after the 730s, though the change is not documented in Thebes. She adds that Greek was still utilized for administrative documents, at least in some regions, into the Abbasid period. She infers from this shift in the 730s a change in the fiscal system, but the nature of the change remains murky. She connects the situation to the difficulties encountered by the caliphate of Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 105–125/724–743).

### Scribal Practices and Literacy

The first three chapters will be of interest to anyone interested in late antique scribal practices and literacy. They reveal the fascinating mechanisms through which the literate and the illiterate functioned at the level of the village community. In a village context in which we would expect literacy levels to be the lowest, we find an impressive range of literate practices: forty-one different writers can be discerned in this dossier alone, in texts written over approximately thirty-five years, with evidence of younger scribes helping older ones, individuals developing scribal skills,<sup>5</sup> and simple crosses used as signatures. Cromwell paints a picture of literate groups in which professional scribes “stand in contrast to a greater abundance of writers who were less proficient. Such writers—to set them apart from scribes as a professional category—range in ability from those barely able to sign their own names to proficient writers who could write short texts, including letters, and who occur frequently as witnesses to legal documents or amanuenses signing on behalf of others” (pp. 20–21). These nonprofessional writers included two women.

Chapter 1 ends with an overview of the identification of scribes in Theban texts. It reveals that professional scribes were not identified by specific titles, though such titles appear for other individuals (Greek: *grammateus*, *logographos*, *nomikos*, *notarios*; Coptic: *sach*, *sacho*). The most technical portions of the book are chapter 2, “Building Aristophanes’ Dossier,” and chapter 3, “Putting Pen on

5. Isaac son of Constantine went “from barely able to write his name to being able to write longer statements for others as well and for himself” (p. 48).

Papyrus: Scribal Practices and Processes.” They show how texts from Djeme can be assigned to Aristophanes and conclude that 142 texts were written in his hand, some of them featuring his name as witness or amanuensis. He acted as both an official and a private scribe: of his writings, 115 documents are connected to taxation (106 tax receipts, a few tax demands, protection passes, a travel permit, and a tax agreement), while others are private documents (deeds of sale, dispute settlements, donations of children, property parcels, lists, and a few texts harder to characterize). A total of 120 texts are straightforwardly signed by Aristophanes, and 22 others are assigned to his hand. Cromwell provides a careful demonstration for this last group, stressing that texts cannot be connected to Aristophanes based on a single criterion, such as the context of the document or linguistic features and paleography, and she notes that paleographical similarities can be highly subjective, sometimes present only in the eyes of the papyrologist. This is why she presents the 22 texts without signature—or where the signature is lost in fragmentary documents—together. The text is here punctuated by several illustrations showing Aristophanes’s hand. The evidence indicates that individuals and families in Djeme requested the expertise of various scribes. Aristophanes did not hold a monopoly on literacy for certain parts of the village or for certain types of document (see p. 36: four scribes writing for a single family).

The dating of the corpus and of the individual texts is also addressed in Chapter 2. Cromwell utilizes three dating

systems. The most common is the indiction system, as is usual for fiscal documents; otherwise, the Era of the Martyrs and Hijri systems each appear once. Here, again, Cromwell is careful in assigning dates to problematic documents, which are presented consecutively. She establishes a new chronology for the dossier with absolute dates between 724 and 758, correcting a good number of previous datings established largely by Walter Till.<sup>6</sup>

The most innovative part of Cromwell’s approach is tracking the effect of old age on Aristophanes’s writing in the 750s: the tracing of letters becomes clumsy, the ink pressure varies, and he displays difficulties in maintaining a straight line. Some of his late documents are even corrected by another scribe. These texts can nonetheless be attributed to Aristophanes either because he signed them or because his hand is still recognizable in the form of individual letters and especially of ligatures. Cromwell identifies a document that was written by another scribe, possibly under Aristophanes’s guidance, and only the signature is in Aristophanes’s hand. Information on old age and the ensuing need for corrections is scattered across Chapters 2 and 3 and could have been consolidated.

Chapter 2 ends with a consideration of dossiers and archives. The documents relating to Aristophanes are compiled as a dossier. They were not archived together by him or anyone else, and they were not his personal papers. In one he appears only as the seller of a parcel of land; this text seems to have been archived by the buyer. The discovery of these texts is not documented in archaeological records, and

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6. Walter C. Till, *Die koptischen Rechtsurkunden aus Theben* (Vienna: Hermann Böhlau Nachf, 1964).

we cannot infer anything of their original arrangement in the absence of accounts of their discovery. Acquisition records, however, prove useful. A few sentences in the texts also allow us to reconstruct some of the archival practices in the village and the surrounding monasteries. Older deeds of sale are mentioned in new ones and were certainly kept by individual families. Documents of child donation were kept in the *bibliothèque* of the monastery of Apa Phoibammon, though it is not clear what exactly this meant. Overall, half of Aristophanes's dossier can be attached to a private or monastic archive. Private archives are presented together in a single section. These relate to an individual or to an entire family; approximately ten texts can be linked to each on the basis of the content of the documents and their acquisition history.

In Chapter 3, Cromwell focuses on Aristophanes's writing style, which differed among the types of documents and between his writing of Coptic and Greek. Just as Aristophanes appears as a witness, amanuensis, or signatory in documents that were written in the hands of others, references to other individuals commonly appear in his writings. Some of these other people are identified by their titles (*dioiketes*, *lashane*—two titles for village officials—or deacon). Cromwell confirms that status and literacy were not systematically connected in Late Antiquity, giving the example of a *dioiketes* who could not write his own witness statement.

### Microhistory

Chapter 6, "Aristophanes' Personal and Professional Lives," reconstructs the stages of Aristophanes' career, his neighborhood,

and his family. Cromwell demonstrates the difficulty of assessing what is in a name. Since Aristophanes's father's name, Johannes, is extremely common, it is difficult to ascertain who he was in the long list of homonyms attested in the village. She makes a strong case, however, for the identification of Aristophanes's brother, Johannake son of Johannes. Despite the very common patronymic, her argument is based on property acquisitions and similarity in scribal training. She also identifies a student of Aristophanes to whom he taught the writing of legal texts, using the social context of their respective documents and their chronology, paleography, and formularies.

In Chapter 5, "Recording Private Lives," Cromwell reconstructs neighborhood life using about thirty documents that Aristophanes wrote concerning personal property (houses, courtyards, land, dress, equipment, marriage gifts) and money. These texts were written for the transactions and legal issues of the wealthiest of the village. Large amounts of money are at stake (between one and twelve *holokottinoi*, or gold coins; see table 5.1, p. 147), which justifies the drawing up of a document by a professional scribe. On the other side of the spectrum, texts were also written for the transactions of those who were possibly among the poorest, though their status is difficult to establish: Aristophanes is the scribe of three documents of child donation out of the twenty-five such documents known for eighth-century Djeme, mostly from the 760s and 770s. Young boys were donated to the monastery of Apa Phoibammon, built on the ruins of the temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el Bahari, to serve the monastery, but

they were not destined to become monks.<sup>7</sup> Cromwell shows that the monastery could not act as the issuing authority for donation documents or travel permits. Monks needed to go to the village for an administrative scribe such as Aristophanes to write a petition to the *amīr* for them.

As for immovable property, Aristophanes's dossier shows that houses or even rooms within houses were legally divided between members of the same family, multiple houses shared the same front courtyard, and streets in Djeme were named (Culol Street, People of Pshumare Street, Palikene Street). The sale of a loom reached the considerable sum of one *holokottinos*, certainly because it was a source of income. Two *holokottinoi* were loaned for the purchase of a house. Scandalous affairs were brought before the *amīr* in the local capital when 10 2/3 *holokottinoi* were stolen from a house. These documents systematically involve women as share owners, buyers, sellers, or thieves.

Texts drawn up by Aristophanes mostly belong wider personal archives such as that of Aaron son of Shenoute, "the most prolific property buyer in the records from Djeme" (p. 135), with nine sale documents and a testament. The descriptions of the properties sold also show that Aristophanes was the neighbor of some of his clients. Transactions took place only in the village and with the surrounding

monasteries of Apa Phoibammon and Apa Paul. The inhabitants of Djeme did not seem to invest outside of the immediate surroundings.

### Conclusion

Cromwell's book is punctuated by very useful heuristic tools for the specialized and the nonspecialized reader alike: there are numerous lists and tables of documents and, most importantly, an initial aid for the reader on dating systems, technical terms, and papyrological conventions. Appendices comprise high-quality images of ten ostraca, a catalogue of Aristophanes's texts (p. 142) and of six others in which he acted as amanuensis, new editions of ten ostraca, tables with information gleaned from tax receipts, and corrections to published texts. The final index is rather short. For instance, it does not include personal names.

In all, Cromwell masters the art of reading and studying ancient texts, overlooking no aspect of the scribal process (formularly, various handwritings, effects of old age, use of Greek and Coptic). She analyzes texts as objects that were handled by different people, stored, disregarded, rediscovered, and sold, and she tracks down the acquisition history of documents using the methodology of museum archaeology established by Sarah Clackson.<sup>8</sup> A strong case is made in this

7. Arietta Papaconstantinou has shown that these documents allow us to reconstruct the pressure the monasteries put on the Christian population to elicit such donations at a time when the new fiscal burden imposed by the Umayyad administration was causing increased economic difficulties for monasteries: "Theia Oikonomia: Les actes thébains de donation d'enfants ou la gestion monastique de la pénurie," *Travaux et mémoires* 14 (2002): 511–526.

8. Sarah J. Clackson, "Museum Archaeology and Coptic Papyrology: The Bawit Papyri," in *Coptic Studies on the Threshold of a New Millennium*, Vol. 1, *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Coptic Studies, Leiden, 27 August–2 September 2000*, ed. Matt Immerzeel and Jacques Van der Vliet, 477–490 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

book for attention to detail when it comes to ancient documents, and the wealth of information that Cromwell extracts from a restricted number of texts is astonishing. The added value of this research is that it also firmly establishes the documents of Djeme as a corpus for the study of the early Islamic period that ought not escape the attention of historians of that period, thanks to the title on the cover and the focus in several chapters on administration and the payment of the poll tax. The book places a spotlight on the rich contribution

of Coptic documents to the history of early Islamic Egypt, a contribution that has been clouded by a narrative of Marwanid reform that considers only the highest levels of the administrative hierarchy. Cromwell expertly achieves the critical balance of being thought-provoking for specialists in Coptic papyrology while remaining accessible to the wider research community and students of Late Antiquity. This book is a must-read for scholars and students interested in early Islamic Egypt and late antique history.