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A matter of trust
On some principles of governance in the letters of Qurra b. Sharīk

Arietta Papaconstantinou

The Greek and Arabic letters sent by Qurra b. Sharīk, governor of Egypt from 709 to 714, to Basileios, administrator of the district of Aphrodito in Middle Egypt, are justly famous among students of early Islam. Their first publications were accompanied by translations into English or German, while the edition of the bulk of the Greek texts, now in the British Library, was preceded by a long introduction that carefully reconstructed from their content the logistics of the administration and taxation of the province under the Umayyads.[1] Since then, other aspects of the letters have been discussed at some length, most prominently their bilingual nature and what it can reveal of Umayyad linguistic policies,[2] or the implications of some of the letters for early judicial practices in Egypt.[3]

The letters are part of a larger group of documents that were originally kept at the offices of the district of Aphrodito, and are often referred to as the Aphrodito archive. This includes documents produced by the office, such as registers and memoranda, and documents received by it from the villages under its jurisdiction and from the governor's office in Fusṭāṭ. The latter group consists mainly of Qurra's letters to the local administrator, Basileios. These are concerned with a variety of issues, the most present being resource extraction, and they are usually occasioned by some form of perceived mismanagement on the part of the recipient.

Some years ago I gave an overview of the different types of accusations brought by Qurra against Basileios, and argued that despite the extraordinary rhetoric of power and blame displayed in the letters, the governor could not carry out his threats without risking to compromise the precious local knowledge represented by this local administrator – and, presumably, others like him.[4] I also noted, as had Nabia Abbott and H.I. Bell, that Qurra's letters showed a sustained concern for equity and justice, but I did not push the question further. Here I would like to give this truism that has been long repeated some more depth, by looking a little more closely at the vocabulary of the letters relating to the qualities of the good official, and then offering some thoughts on its broader significance. This topic has been the subject of countless conversations with Hugh, and I hope these brief and preliminary analyses will provide the foundation for more.

God, justice, the faithful and their commander

[1] Bell, Introduction to P.Lond IV; Bell, The administration of Egypt.
[2] Richter, Language choice; Sijpesteijn, Une nouvelle lettre.
[3] Tillier, Dispensing justice; Tillier, *L'invention du cadi*.
[4] Papaconstantinou, The rhetoric of power.

Qurra's letters display a strong consciousness of a direct line from God through the Commander of the Faithful to him and further down to his officials. Apart from the standard invocation in the *bismillah*, God appears often also in the body of the letters as the one who is ultimately behind the requests made of Basileios. Qurra intends by God's command' (κελεύσει Θεοῦ) to find out about church dues[5], to send inspectors to Aphrodito,[6] to pay those who will have helped find fugitives,[7] to figure out monetary fraud,[8] and to hear about malpractice by his officials.[9] The flood happens by God's command,[10] and so do the reception of the revenue,[11] or the evils that befall those who act badly.[12] His very letters are sent by God's command.[13] God also blesses the harvest,[14] an essential part of the province's revenue.

The reason Basileios was sent to his post, Qurra says, is 'to fear God and uphold his faith, and to uphold the rights of the Commander of the Faithful'.[15] He and his subordinates should act 'fearing God and upholding justice and equality',[16] and their assessment of taxes and fines should follow those principles.[17] Qurra hopes 'in God' that Basileios will be a one of those good officials.[18] 'For the serviceable (χρήσιμος) official collects without negligence what is due to the Commander of the Faithful with care and good will (συνάγει τὸ δίκαιον τοῦ Αμιραλμουμνιν μετὰ κυβερνήσεως καὶ καλοθελείας), not losing or destroying anything', says Qurra.[19] In any case, God knows if even a miliaresion has been withheld.[20] God also knows whether the lists of fugitives drawn up by the local office are complete,[21] and will denounce any misuse of inheritance to Qurra (ἐμβάλοι ἡμῖν).[22]

The importance of justice and equality is repeatedly stressed by Qurra. In one of his letters he uses the term ἀπροσωπολήμπτως (impartially), which is rare in the papyri but used in patristic literature as one of the qualities of God as judge.[23] Other letters insist on fairness and clemency (ἐπιήκεια)[24], or

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[5] P.Lond. IV 1363, 10 (4 Sept. 710)
[6] P.Ross.Georg. IV 11, 3 (13 June 710); P.Ross.Georg. IV 6, 25-26 (23 January 710); P.Lond. IV 1344, 16 (after 2 April 710)
[7] P.Ross.Georg. IV 2, 13 (17 June 710).
[8] SB XX 15102, 16 (19 February 709).
[9] P.Lond. IV 1349, 22 (14 January 710).
[10] SB X 10458, 7 (19 May 710).
[11] P.Ross.Georg. IV 1, 26 (2 April 710); P.Lond. IV 1370, 17 (3 November 710); P.Lond. IV 1464, 5-6 (709-714).
[12] P.Ross.Georg. IV 2, 17 (17 June 710)
[13] P.Lond. IV 1384, 33 (709-714).
[14] P.Lond. IV 1380, 13 (1 June 710).
[15] P.Lond. IV 1380, 10-11 (1 June 710).
[16] P.Lond. IV 1345, 1-2 (1 January 710).
[17] SB III 7241, 17-19 (7 January 710); P.Lond. IV 1356, 8-9; 13-14; 36 (15 April 710); P.Lond. IV 1345, 26-27 (1 January 710); SB III 7241, 17-19 (7 January 710).
[18] P.Lond. IV 1361, 6 (31 July 710).
[19] P.Lond. IV 1349, 19-21 (14 January 710).
[20] P.Lond. IV 1380, 19-20 (1 June 710).
[21] P.Lond. IV 1343, 16 (30 December 709).
[22] P.Ross.Georg. IV 15, 10 (ca 30 January 710).
[23] P.Lond. IV 1356, 33-34 (15 April 710): σχεῖν τὸν φόβον τοῦ Θεοῦ πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν καὶ [ἀπροσωπ]ολήμπτως διαστεῖλαι τὸν ῥηθέντα μοιρασμόν (to have the fear of God before their eyes and to carry out said division impartially). In various forms, the term appears 81 times in the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, and the overwhelming majority of these refers to God or Christ in their judicial function. It seems to have been a favourite term for Cyril of Alexandria and John Chrysostom in particular.
[24] P.Lond. IV 1349, 8 (14 January 710); P.Lond. IV 1394, 22 (709).

guidance and assistance (χειραγωγεία).[25] The individual who was in power locally was ultimately, through multiple delegation, doing the work of God himself, and had to be not only just, but also accessible to all, so as to fulfil the expectations for justice of the population. In one letter Qurra explicitly tells Basileios that the official's duty is to receive without hesitation 'the petitions of all the people of his district, and with the fear of God to administer to each his due'. Further in the same letter the injunction is repeated: 'devote yourself to the people of your administrative district, to hearing what they say and to judge each according to what is just, not shutting yourself up but allowing them [access to you]'.[26]

Competence and trust

If the promise of justice and fairness co-opted the consensus of the population at large, what held the power pyramid itself together was loyalty and trust. In order to be trusted, the official had to show himself competent and useful.[27] He also had to surround himself with trustworthy and competent subordinates. That duo of virtues, 'ἱκανὸς καὶ πιστός', comes up repeatedly in the letters, especially when Qurra instructs Basileios to find competent and trustworthy people to carry out given tasks at the level of the villages of the district, or to convey requisitioned goods to Fusṭāṭ or Alexandria.[28]

Trustworthy men, as Ian Forrest has shown in detail for the later middle ages,[29] were usually men of means in local communities. This is explicitly stated by Qurra in a long letter regarding requisitions for the army.[30] To begin with, well-off guarantors are to be chosen to cover costs in case anyone tries to evade their duties (l. 3-4). Once the goods have been collected, Qurra gives instructions on their expedition: 'The supplies ordered from your administrative district you are to send off in full, appointing in charge of them serviceable and trustworthy men of means (εὐπόρους), testifying [lac.] on behalf of other trustworthy men, and they should not be deceivers or fraudsters' (12-16). Any money send in lieu of supplies in kind must be sent 'by your trustworthy agent with instructions to pay it over in full' (l. 38-39). The entire operation was undepinned by local guarantors in each village who were also 'men of means' (l. 43-44).

The trust put in well-off villagers was certainly a way to co-opt those local elites, but it was also a risk for them as they were made responsible for others' defaults. In many ways, this high-risk, high gain game rested on the same principle as tax farming, and seems to have been very efficient in maintaining the social order, at least as seen from above.

Another quality of trustworthy men was literacy. When instructing Basileios on how to register fugitives and those who hid them, he suggests to send 'a competent and trustworthy person who is

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[25] P.Lond. IV 1349, 8 (14 January 710); P.Lond. IV 1375, 10 (1 May 710).
[26] P.Lond. IV 1356, 7-9; 12-15 (15 April 710).
[27] P.Lond. IV 1337, 18 (10 September 709); P.Lond. IV 1343, 11; 19 (14 January 710); P.Lond. IV 1348, 11 (13 January 710).
[28] P. Lond. IV 1367, 10 (13 October 710); P.Ross.Georg. IV 5, 8-9 (709-714); P.Ross.Georg. IV 2, 8 (17 June 710); P. Lond. IV 1367, 10 (13 October 710); P.Lond. 4 1343, 35 (30 December 709); P.Lond. 4 1371, 10 (710 – 711); only 'trustowrthy': P.Lond. 4 1366, 8 (28 September 710); P.Lond. 4 1375, 12 (1 May 710); P.Lond. 4 1392, 11 (711); P.Lond. 4 1404, 15 (709-714). In one case we find πιστοὺς καὶ εἰδήμονας, 'trustworthy and expert': P. Lond. 4 1356, 17 (15 April 710).
[29] Forrest, *Trustworthy men*.
[30] SB III 7241 (7 January 710).

able to write' to meet 'the leaders of the fugitives' and draw up the register with them.[31] It is clear from papyri throughout the late antique period that those being able to write in villages had the precious advantage of being aware of, and often in control of, other peoples' affairs. Literacy offered on a plate the status of mediator with the powers that be, and was therefore an important social asset. Perceived trustworthiness tended to go hand in hand with such symbolic capital.

In a previous study I had suggested that perhaps the main reason why Qurra – or any governor – needed people like Basileios was because they held information he could not easily obtain without them.[32] This related to a request for the names of the men who returned from the raids on North Africa, in which Qurra very candidly admitted he had no idea who or how many they were: 'We do not know the number of the sailors who returned home to your administrative district of those who went out to the raiding fleet of Africa with ʿAṭāʾ ibn Rāfiʿ, whom Mūsā ibn Nuṣayr dispatched, and of those who remained in Africa'.[33] Basileios was therefore to find out and report on the subject. The importance of local knowedge is acknowledged by Qurra in another letter, once again about fugitives: 'Now on receipt of this letter send three competent men *who know the places where they find refuge*, putting at their head a competent and trustworthy man'.[34] It is noteworthy that the men who knew where fugitives went had to be supervised by someone trustworthy, as their own credentials were probably not so good – just like police informers today, presumably.

Bad officials

This entire edifice of virtues and duties of the good official had its flip side, the bad official (κακὸς ὑπουργός).[35]. Negligence (ἀμέλεια) was seemingly the most common problem, and Qurra never tires of asking Basileios not to neglect such and such duty, and not to allow his subordinates to be neglectful themselves. Yet although neglect reflected badly on an official, it does not seem to have been the worst offence. Unsurprisingly perhaps, it was transgressions of the code of conduct outlined above that were most contentious.

Acting with partiality by showing 'sympathy' or 'antipathy' to groups or individuals during the assessments of fines, taxes, or special levies angered Qurra enormously, as it undermined the trust of the population in the justice of the state. He put into place a system of inspectors who were specifically instructed to check whether such assessments were done in a way that was just to everyone. Sympathy and antipathy are too present to be simple transgressions, and point to a more systemic issue. Part of it was probably the traditional networks of patronage at work, but another part was corruption. Qurra says so exlicitly, even using the term δωροδοκία (bribe).[36] Again this is a relatively rare term in papyri, appearing in particular in the second century in a petition by Dionysia to the prefect, and in the text of an edict promulgated under Trajan which prohibited bribes in legal procedure.[37] Intriguingly, among the virtues of God as judge found in patristic texts there is a passage

[31] P.Lond. 4 1333, 5-9 (25 December 708); duplicate: P.Lond. 4 1332 (same date).
[32] Papaconstantinou, The rhetoric of power, 274-75.
[33] P.Lond. IV 1350, 3–16 (29 January 710).
[34] P.Ross.Georg. IV 2, 6-8 (17 June 710).
[35] P.Lond. IV 1349, 37 (14 January 710).
[36] P.Lond. IV 1337, 21 (10 September 709).
[37] P.Oxy. II 237, 7 (AD 186) and P.Oxy. XXXVI 2754, 7 (111) respectively.

by John Chrysostom which combines impartiality and imperviousness to bribes as virtues of the Judge and Examiner (ὁ ἀπροσωπόληπτος δικαστὴς, ὁ ἀδωροδόκητος ἐξεταστὴς).[38]

Bad officials also disobey (παρακοή) the governor's requests, and display contempt (καταφρόνησις) for him, as well as for their own soul.[39] They are also lazy gluttons: 'and we did not send you there to idle away in gluttony', complains Qurra, once again using the imagery of a vice with strong patristic overtones.[40]

The timeless virtues of the imperial official

Such virtues, vices, and complaints refer to the very real logistics of running an empire, and real situations one could encounter when dealing with mid-level officials. However, they also represent a very received version of moral language which comes in direct line from the cumulative Mediterranean and Middle Eastern *koine* that preceded it. Comparable letters were sent to Ptolemaic officials by their superiors, with injunctions to do what was useful to the King, to provide justice for all and not to be partial, and to assess taxes according to everyone's means.[41] Similarly, Assyrian official correspondence insists on vigilance and assiduousness, criticises negligence, and implies subordinate officials wanted to look good in the eyes of their superiors.[42]

This is not the place to make sweeping claims on the functioning of pre-industrial empires, but the structures of such entities are very recognisable in this case as in many others. In order to rule by consensus, local elites had to be brought into the power pyramid, and guaranteeing justice and fairness to the population was seen by the imperial centre as the only way to keep conflict at bay. The latter did go against the natural tendency of local elites, however, hence the existence of elaborate centralised systems of justice that allowed individuals to bypass them – at least in principle.[43] The cornerstone of the entire edifice was trust. As this was a pyramid, however, like loyalty, trust could only go one way: vertically. Alternative horizontal trust networks were discouraged and when possible dismantled, as they could only foster disloyalty – or at least divided loyalty. To paraphrase Max Weber, empires claimed the monopoly of legitimate trust.

To come back to Qurra and his favourite virtues, arguably they were part of the gradual construction of Umayyad imperiality, manifesting itself through an ideology of power largely based on the Roman model. Even though the notion of citizen in the Roman sense had disappeared, the discourse casting the imperial centre as the guarantor of equity and justice for the inhabitants remained. Beyond the theoretical texts that eventually surfaced also in the Islamic tradition, Qurra's letters provide the most interesting glimpse into this ideology on the ground.

Another technology of power, the ideology underpinning the image of the good official was at the centre of Roman imperial legitimacy since the inception of the empire and the maintenance of its

[38] John Chrysostom, *Sermon 2 on penitence*, PG 60.701 lines 68-69.
[39] P.Lond. IV1345, 36 (1 January 710); P.Berl. Frisk 6, 6 (26 January – 24 February 710).
[40] P.Lond. 4 1380, 9 (1 June 710): καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἀπεστείλαμέν σε σχολάσαι εἰς τὸ φαγονῖν.
[41] Armoni, Amtliche Ermahnungsbriefe, 134-136.
[42] Baker and Groß, Doing the King's work, 84-85; 79.
[43] These dynamics are very well described in Rustow, *The lost archive*, 55-66 and *passim*; and the essays in Morris and Scheidel, *The dynamics of ancient empires*.

attachment to Republican tropes. The notion, like that of ruling through soft power by coopting 'trustworthy' locals, became central in Umayyad governance, and arguably constituted a key part of its claim to imperial continuity in formerly Roman lands .

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