

The rhetoric of power and the voice of reason: tensions between central and local in the correspondence of Qurra ibn Sharīk

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**The Rhetoric of Power and the Voice of Reason:
Tensions Between Central and Local in the Correspondence of Qurra ibn Sharīk¹**
Arietta Papaconstantinou

Concerning the ‘significant adjustments to the organisation of the empire’ made by ‘Abd al-Malik, Petra Sijpesteijn writes: ‘The result of this transition was a state that simultaneously decreased its role by delegating authority to local representatives at the level of the pagarchy and increased its presence by ensuring that its regional representatives, lacking an independent power base to sustain them, were personally beholden to them’.² An important part of the transition in question was the appointment at the regional level of Arab Muslim officials who had no ties with the local population. This is typically the sort of reform to be expected from an administration which feels too dependent on officials of local origin. This is because by nature, local officials find themselves at the intersection of two systems of allegiance, one based on territoriality and comprising their local community, and the other based on power and leading in a straight line from themselves to the central authority directly or through a series of intermediaries. The situation of constant tension and latent conflict in which those two systems operated put officials ‘with a local power base’ in a situation that scholars in the Roland Mousnier tradition have aptly called *conflit de fidélités*. The theme has been very widely explored, following Mousnier, for early modern France, a royal absolutist state based on the power of local aristocracies. This situation arose when the loyalty of local aristocracies to the sovereign was in conflict with their loyalty to their network of clients, kin and local relations. That conflict was resolved through some form of negotiation between the two loyalties - and that resolution was far from being always in favour of the sovereign. On the whole, local elites did use their client networks to support the central administration, as their very position was dependent on its survival; they could not, however, afford to lose their local power base entirely, and thus had to opt for some form of compromise and balance their two loyalties according to the circumstances.³

The reforms introduced under the Marwānids would suggest that a similar situation was prevalent in their day. It is important to point out, however, that in practice we are not dealing with a single thought-out reform but rather with a series of ongoing adjustments to the system, despite the fact that the historical tradition has specifically insisted on the role of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān, presented as the great reformer of the Islamic state.⁴ The process had begun before ‘Abd al-Malik⁵ and continued after him, in particular under his

¹ In what follows I have used the Greek texts as published in *P.Lond.* IV and the corrections incorporated from the *Berichtigungsliste*; the translations are by H.I. Bell (1911-1928) and A. Grohmann (*P.Cair.Arab.* III), but with some modifications that seemed necessary. I have also reproduced the Greek texts without diacritics for the clarity, except where the restitutions are not certain.

² Sijpesteijn 2007, 450.

³ See for ex. Mousnier 1971; Harding 1978; Jouanna 1981; Jouanna 1989. Also, centred on cities rather than rural client networks, Blockmans 1989; Boltanski 2006 insists on the synergy of local and central achieved by some aristocrats.

⁴ See the extreme position of Robinson 2005.

⁵ See for example Clive Foss’s focus on Mu‘āwiya’s role in the construction of the state apparatus: Foss 2002; 2009; 2010.

successor al-Walīd. It has been noted by several scholars that according to al-Kindī the language of the *dīwān* was only changed to Arabic in 706 under al-Walīd, when ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Malik was governor of Egypt (705-709). This fits perfectly with the evidence from the papyri, since systematic production of correspondence in Arabic (in fact often bilingual) only appears under the governorship of Qurra ibn Sharīk (709-714),⁶ while the first fully Arabic dated tax receipt is from 765.⁷

Under Qurra there was still a Christian Greek-speaking pagarch in Aphroditō, called Basileios, to whom the governor addressed a large number of letters generally known as the Qurra archive/dossier, but more accurately perhaps described as the Basileios archive.⁸ However, one of Basileios’ neighbouring pagarchs was a Muslim, Hishām ibn ‘Umar,⁹ while the Hermopolite also seems to have had a Muslim pagarch under Qurra, Sufyān ibn Ghunaym.¹⁰ In the Fayyūm there was already a Muslim pagarch at the end of the seventh century, Flavius ‘Aṭīya ibn Ju‘ayd (694-97), which shows that the transition was not sudden but happened very gradually. Many documents of the Basileios archive have been published, some individually, others in large groups like *P.Lond. IV*, generally separated according to language.¹¹ No general study of the dossier has yet been undertaken. It contains many different types of documents, including registers of fugitives and tax registers, but the majority consists of letters sent by the governor to the pagarch. I will concentrate here on a selection of those letters that can throw light on the question of why a series of reforms undermining the local roots of regional administration might have been necessary.

In general, Qurra’s letters have been seen as authoritarian, and taken as the sign that the state was extending its control to a very low level, since they give the impression that every single logistic detail of tax collection was decided centrally and sent down: ‘the rulers ... exercised strict and direct control over the administration’.¹² Sir Harold Bell, the editor of the Greek documents from the British Library (in *P.Lond. IV*), also insisted on that aspect in his introduction to the volume, as well as in an article on the administration of Egypt under the Umayyads which was based essentially on this archive.¹³ The structures that can be reconstructed from those texts do indeed reflect a solid and tentacular apparatus of control that could in no possible way be bypassed.¹⁴

If the central authorities nevertheless felt it necessary to appoint officials with no local power-base, this picture must be somehow misleading. Identifying those officials in

⁶ Qurra is known from several later narrative sources; the information they give has been gathered in Abbott 1958, 57-69.

⁷ *P.Cair.Arab.* III 197.

⁸ The most recent overview of the archive is in Richter 2010, where the texts are classified thematically and analysed in relation to their choice of language. Previous bibliography and a list of documents can be found there; see also Trismegistos, archID 124: ‘Basileios pagarches of Aphroditō’.

⁹ *P.Cair.Arab.* III 151.

¹⁰ *SB XVI* 13018 (15 Aug 714); on the dating see Gonis 2001, 226-27.

¹¹ See Cadell 1967, 142-52 for a chronological list of Qurra’s letters as publications stood at the time; more recent lists of the entire archive, including the Coptic texts, grouped together by language and type of document, can be found in Richter 2010.

¹² Sijpesteijn 2009, 122.

¹³ Bell 1928.

¹⁴ *P.Lond. IV*, introduction, esp. xxiv-xxv.

the papyri is not as straightforward as it seems. Since the documents they issue at this time are all in Greek, it is not possible to know whether the individuals with Arab names who appear in documents of the late seventh and early eighth centuries are actually Muslim Arabs sent from the centre, or whether they were converted locals who had taken Arab names, in which case they were not at all without a local power base. However, the question is only relevant for a relatively short period of time, because by the mid-eighth century it is clear that the transition to an Arabophone Muslim administration had actually taken place.

The issue then is whether the impression of total control given by the documents, and generally accepted in scholarship, is really the reflection of an absolutist and authoritarian state rather than an effect of the rhetoric deployed in Qurra's letters. On close scrutiny, this correspondence between the governor and the pagarch of Aphrodito in Middle Egypt contains many indications that there were failings in the system, and that the governor's rhetorical flights should not be taken absolutely literally. As early as 1938, Lionel Casson noted, and even quantified, the existence of important arrears in taxes during the pagarchy of Basileios.¹⁵ Casson drew attention to the fact that there was delay in collection from 698 onwards and until 716, when things seem to have improved. He also notes that this corresponds to the period during which Qurra sent letters 'scolding Basilius for his tardiness in sending the money-taxes' and that in June 710 (*P.Lond.* IV 1380) 'Basilius is scolded for his delay in the collection of "the two-thirds part of the gold taxes"'.¹⁶ Casson, however, attributes this to Basileios's lack of competence, implicitly accepting that it is an exceptional case, an accident of the system rather than the system itself. Yet Basileios is very likely to have been the norm rather than the exception. We have no other contemporary archive from Egypt with equivalent contents, so this will, of course, remain open to discussion. However, it is presumably this sort of behaviour from local officials that prompted the gradual reform of the administration, and this was certainly not done because of Basileios alone.

The archive of Basileios contains many letters that give straightforward instructions, generally related to money taxes or to requisitions in kind or in labour.¹⁷ It is primarily those documents that give the impression of a well-oiled central administration reaching far down into the details of local life. A large part of the archive, however, is made up of reminders, containing the mention of previous orders that were not obeyed or taken into account, and letters that desperately attempt to obtain the state's due. Several of them even seem to be repeated reminders:

πολλάκις φαινόμεθα γράμμασιν ἡμῶν χρησάμενοι πρὸς σὲ περὶ τοῦ διμοιρομέρους τῶν χρυσικῶν δημοσίων τῆς διοικήσεώς σου καὶ ἔδοκοῦμεν ὡς ἤδη τοῦτο κατεβάλου.

¹⁵ Casson 1938.

¹⁶ *Ibid* 286.

¹⁷ See Bell 1945.

We seem to have written to you many times concerning the two-thirds of the public gold taxes of your administrative district, and we thought that you had already paid this.¹⁸

This lack of discipline and efficiency displeases not only the governor of Egypt,¹⁹ but also the caliph himself, says Qurra:

καὶ γὰρ ὁ Ἀμιραλμουμνιν οὐ καταδέχεται διὰ προφάσεών τινων ὑστερεθῆναί τι ἐκ τῆς συμπληρώσεως τῶν ἐπιζητουμένων ὡς λέλεκται διὰ τῆς διοικήσεώς σου καὶ εἰ εἶχες φρένας ἐρρωμένας οὐκ εἶχες δεηθῆναι πλείστων ἡμῶν γραμμάτων τούτων ἔνεκα.

For indeed the *amīr al-mu'minīn* will not allow that on any pretext there should be delay in paying any of the complement of the taxes required as aforesaid from your district, and if you had any proper sense you would not have required many letters from us on this account.²⁰

This does not necessarily mean that the case of Basileios was notorious enough to have been known in Damascus. The *amīr al-mu'minīn* is presumably invoked here metonymically as the heart of the caliphate, in a political conception where one's obligations were to the sovereign and not fulfilling them was tantamount to offending or betraying him.²¹

Another very pressing problem, related to the first one, is the fact that the pagarch tolerated the presence of fugitives hiding in his pagarchy, without declaring their presence to the authorities. Those 'fugitives' (φυγάδες) were individuals who had left the place where they were registered to pay their taxes, presumably in order to avoid payment, and thus protecting them amounted to obstructing tax collection. Many of Qurra's letters concern this apparently crucial question.

...περιγύρευσαι μαθεῖν τ[ὸν τύπον] ὃν ἐξεθέμεθα ἔνεκε τῆς ἀποστροφῆς τῶν φυγάδων τοῦ Ἀρσινοίτου εἰ μέντοι συνιεῖς. ἤδη γὰρ ὡς γινώσκεις γεγραφήκαμέν σοι περὶ τούτων καὶ μέχρι τῆς δεῦρο τινὰ ἐξ αὐτῶν οὐκ ἐπέμψας· δι' ἣν αἰτίαν ἀγνοοῦμεν.

...seek (?) to learn the [order] which we issued regarding the sending back of the fugitives from the Arsinoite, if at least you have any understanding; for already, as

¹⁸ *P.Lond.* IV 1380, 3-5 (1 June 710); another letter from the same year repeats this complaint: πολλάκις γράμμασι φαινόμεθα χρῆσάμενοι πρὸς σὲ περὶ τῆς ἐξανύσεως τῶν χρυσικῶν δημοσίων ἐβδόμης ἰνδικτίονος καὶ μέχρι τῆσδε τῆς ἡμέρας οὐ διηγέρθης εἰς τοῦτο οὔτε μὴν ἀπέστειλάς τι τὸ σύνολον ἀλλ' ἡμελήσας καταφρονήσας (We seem to have written to you many times concerning the collection of the public gold taxes of the seventh indiction, and to this day you have not roused yourself to attend to this matter nor yet sent anything at all, but have been disobedient and neglectful): *P.Lond.* IV 1394, 3-7 (708-9).

¹⁹ *P.Lond.* IV 1380, 19-21 (1 June 710): γινώσκει γὰρ ὁ Θεός, ὡς οὐκ ἤρεσεν ἡμῖν τὸ πῶς πεποίηκας εἰς τὸ πρᾶγμα τῶν τοιούτων δημοσίων (for God knows that your conduct in the matter of the said public taxes was not pleasing to us).

²⁰ *P.Lond.* IV 1338, 12-17 (12 Sept 709).

²¹ See *P.Lond.* IV 1349, below p. ***.

you know, we have written to you about them, and to this day you have not sent any of them; why, we do not know.²²

Qurra expresses his irritation in very strong language, in particular through an extravagant series of threats which he pours upon Basileios:

... μὴ εὐρεθῆς παραλείψας τί ποτε ἐν τῇ ἐπιτροπῇ ἡμῶν εἰς τοῦτο μήτε μὴν διδούς κατὰ σεαυτοῦ τὴν οἶαν οὖν πρόφασιν ἢ σκάνδαλον. μέλλομεν γὰρ κελεύσει Θεοῦ καλοποιῆσαι τῷ καλῶς διαπραττομένῳ, ἐξαλείψαι δὲ τὸν χαώτην ῥαδιουργόν τε καὶ ἄδικον.

... do not let us find that you have omitted anything at all in our commands regarding this matter, nor give any ground of complaint or cause of displeasure whatsoever against yourself; for we intend by God's command to recompense the man whose conduct is good and to wipe out the unjust and unscrupulous wastrel.²³

The following year the same tone prevails in Qurra's letters:

ἔση οὖν ἐπιστάμενος ὡς ἐὰν φανείης παραμελήσας τι τὸ καθόλου ἐκ τῆς ἐπιτροπῆς ἡμῶν ἢ καὶ εὐρομέν τινα ἐν τῇ διοικήσει σου ἐξ ὧν περ γεγραφήκαμέν σοι ἀποστεῖλαι συνέφερέν σοι μὴ γεννηθῆναι ὄλως μήτε φανῆναι ἐν τοῖς ζῶσιν.

Now you will be aware that if you should be proved to have neglected any part at all of our instructions or if we find in your district any of the persons whom we have written to you to send off, it would be better for you not to have been born at all or appeared among the living.²⁴

Some of the letters are more explicit about the sort of punishments Basileios and the people of his district should be expecting:

μὴ γνωσθῆ δὲ ἡμῖν ὡς ὑστέρησάς τινα τὸ σύνολον ἐκ τῶν ὀρισθέντων σταλῆναι φυγάδων. ἐπεὶ γινώσκει ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν εὐρισκόντων τινὰ μετὰ τὸ καταλαβεῖν τὸν ἀπόστολον ἡμῶν μὴ ἐγκείμενον ἐν τῇ καταγραφῇ τῇ στελλομένῃ παρὰ σοῦ ἀποδίδομέν σε τὰ θλίβοντά σε ἀπὸ τε ζημίας βαρυτάτης καὶ σωματικῆς ἐπεξελεύσεως ζημιούντες καὶ τοὺς τοῦ χωρίου ἔνθα εὐρέθη ὁ τοιοῦτος φυγὰς ζημίαν ἢ οὐ δύνανται ὑπενέγκαι. ἐρημοῦντες τόν τε μείζονα καὶ διοικητὴν καὶ φύλακα αὐτοῦ μεθ' ὃ καὶ ἀποδιδόντες αὐτοῖς σωματικὴν ἐπεξέλευσιν ὀφείλουσαν φθάσαι τὰ ἔσχατα αὐτῶν. (...) μέλλει γὰρ οὗτος μακαρίσαι τοὺς τεθνεῶτας ἐν τῷ μὴ ὑποφέρειν αὐτοὺς τὰ ἐπερχόμενα αὐτῷ δεινὰ ἄνθ' ὧν παρήκουσεν κελεύσεως ἡμῶν καὶ ἀπετόλμησεν κατὰ τῆς ἰδίας ψυχῆς

²² P.Lond. IV 1344, 2-5 (710, after 2 April).

²³ P.Lond. IV 1338, 24-29 (12 Sept 709).

²⁴ P.Lond. IV 1344, 6-9 (710, after 2 April).

And let it not become known to us that you have delayed sending anyone at all of the fugitives ordered to be dispatched; for God knows that if we find anyone after the return of our messenger not entered in the register which is dispatched from you, we shall deal out to you such requital as will crush you, both a very heavy fine and corporal chastisement, fining also the people of the place where the fugitive was found, with a fine which they are not able to support; and we will strip bare its headman and administrator and guards, after which we will deal out to them such corporal chastisement which must surpass their extremest (fears). (...) For such a man will count the dead happy in that they do not bear the calamities which will come upon him for his disobedience to our command and his reckless disregard of his own life.²⁵

Another letter contains the amounts of the fines to be given out, which are especially heavy compared to the tax one hoped to escape as a fugitive, and about the forms of corporal punishment to be dealt out:

... ἀπαιτηθῆναι τοὺς φαινομένους ἔχοντας φυγάδας μετὰ τὴν παροῦσαν παρ[] ... ὑπὲρ ἑκάστου ἀνδρὸς νομίσματα δέκα καὶ τὸν φυγόντα νομίσματα πέντε καὶ τοὺς διοικητὰς καὶ μείζονας καὶ φύλακας τοῦ χωρίου καὶ ... νομίσματα πέντε (...) καὶ αὐτῶν φαινόντων ἔχειν τινὰς ἐξ αὐτῶν κατάγραφον παρὰ σοὶ τὴν ὀνομασίαν καὶ πατρωνυμίαν καὶ ἀπὸ ποίου χωρίου ἔφευγεν ἕκαστος αὐτῶν, ἀπαιτῶν δὲ αὐτὸν νομίσματα πέντε καὶ νοτίζων τεσσαράκοντα μαγλάβια καὶ καθηλῶν αὐτὸν ξυλομαγγάνοις ἀπόστειλον πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐπιτρέπων τῷ στελλομένῳ μετ' αὐτοῦ ... ὅπως αὐτοῦ παραδιδούντος αὐτὸν ἡμῖν κομίσηται ὑπὲρ' αὐτοῦ ἀπόδειξιν.

... that those who are proved to have any fugitives after the present ... are to be fined ten solidi for each man, and the fugitive five solidi and the administrators and headmen and police of the place and five solidi (...) And if they prove to have any of them, register the name and patronymic of each of them, with the place from which he fled, fining him five solidi, and scourge him with forty lashes, and nailing him to a wooden yoke send him to us, instructing the man who is sent with him to ... in order that when he hands him over he may receive a receipt for him.²⁶

This last example is a relatively objective description of the sanctions that corresponded to a given act, and an order to carry them out. It contrasts with the tone and content of the preceding letters, where the rhetoric is more hyperbolic and the content much less precise, expressing anger and exasperation, and indicating a degree of helplessness despite the strong language they use. Why was that? If the administration had such a well-oiled system of sanctions for every hidden fugitive and every delay in payments, surely the situation would not have been so trying on Qurra's temper.

²⁵ P.Lond. IV 1343, 14-25 and 41-44 (30 Dec 709).

²⁶ P.Lond. IV 1384, 5-9 and 23-30 (708-710).

A close reading of the letters shows that the fugitives and the tax arrears were but the tip of the iceberg, and that the central government had to deal with much more than simple incompetence, inefficiency or negligence. Those were relatively controllable, but the reproach is nevertheless made against Basileios by Qurra:

ἡμῶν οὖν ἐπιτρεψάντων τοῖς νοταρίοις ἐγκύψαι εἰς τὰ χαρτία τῆς σακέλλης ἐφ' ᾧ μαθεῖν τὸ τί κατεβάλου ἐν τῇ σακέλλῃ ἠύραμεν τὸ ἔργον σου ἀνίκανον καὶ μηδαμινὸν καὶ σε εἰς τοῦτο κακῶς διαπραττόμενον. καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἀπεστείλαμέν σε σχολάσαι εἰς τὸ φαγωνεῖν, μᾶλλον δὲ ἀπεστείλαμέν σε φοβεῖσθαι τὸν Θεὸν καὶ φυλάξαι τὴν πίστιν σου καὶ ἀνύσαι τὸ δίκαιον τοῦ Ἀμιραλουμιν. (...) ἐπιστάμεθα δὲ ὡς ἀνικανία καὶ ἀχρησιμία φερόμενος ὁ ὑπουργὸς ζητεῖ τὰ πρὸς ἀφορμὴν τοῦ ὑστερῆσαι τὰ δι' αὐτοῦ.

Now when we instructed the clerks to look into the treasury's documents in order to find out what you had deposited in the treasury, we found that your work is unsatisfactory and worthless and that your conduct is evil in this matter. For indeed we did not send you to idle away your time in gluttony; rather we sent you to fear God and keep your faith and collect the dues of the *amīr al-mu'minīn*. (...) And we know that the official controlled by an unsatisfactory and worthless character always seeks excuses for delaying his work.²⁷

However, Qurra's letters show that he did not only think Basileios was lazy or unable to do things right; they imply that he was consciously not entirely compliant with the instructions arriving from the governor's office, that he disobeyed, lied, and willingly dragged his feet instead of doing his duty:

καὶ γὰρ γινώσκομεν ὡς οὐ μέλεται σοι οὔτε μὴν τοῖς τῆς χώρας μὴ ἐκτελέσαι μήτε δοῦναι πέρασ παντοίῳ ἔργῳ ἐφ' ὅσον οὐκ ἀπαιτεῖσθε ὑπὲρ τῶν λοιπαζομένων δι' ὑμῶν εἰ μὴ πρὸς τὸν θεματισμὸν τὸν ἐνκείμενον ἐν τοῖς ἡμετέροις ἐνταγίοις. ἀλλ' οὐ μὴ συγχωρήσωμεν εἶναι τὰ πράγματα οὕτως.

For indeed we know that it is no concern to you nor yet to the people of your district to carry out or perform any sort of duty as long as you are not importuned by us for the arrears in your payments, except in accordance with the instructions contained in our demand notes. But we will not allow this to be so.²⁸

²⁷ *P.Lond.* IV 1380, 5-11 and 28-30 (1 June 710).

²⁸ *P.Lond.* IV 1337, 11-17 (10 Sept 709); see also *P.Lond.* IV 1394, 3-7 (708-709): πολλάκις γράμμασι φαινόμεθα χρυσάμενοι πρὸς σὲ περὶ τῆς ἐξανύσεως τῶν χρυσικῶν δημοσίων ἐβδόμης ἰνδικτίονος καὶ μέχρι τῆσδε τῆς ἡμέρας οὐ διηγέρθης εἰς τοῦτο οὔτε μὴν ἀπέστειλās τι τὸ σύνολον ἀλλ' ἡμελήσας καταφρονήσας (We seem to have written to you many times concerning the collection of the public gold taxes of the 7th indiction, and till today you have not roused yourself to attend to this matter nor yet sent anything at all, but have been disobedient and neglectful); *P.Lond.* IV 1343, 42-44 (30 Dec 709): τὰ ἐπερχόμενα αὐτῷ δεινὰ ἄνθ' ᾧν παρήκουσεν κελεύσεως ἡμῶν καὶ ἀπετόλμησεν κατὰ τῆς ἰδίας ψυχῆς (the calamities which will come upon him for his disobedience to our command and his reckless disregard of his own life); *P.Lond.* IV 1345, 34-37 (1 Jan 710): ὑποκεῖσθαι δὲ αὐτοὺς καὶ μεγάλης ἀνταποδόσεως ὑπὲρ παρακοῆς καὶ καταφρονήσεως τῆς κελεύσεως ἡμῶν (and will be liable besides to severe punishment for their disobedience in disregard of our command).

There was much worse than this deliberate but passive obstruction. In other letters Basileios is accused of being dishonest and of practising all sorts of trafficking. One surprising document accuses him of sending low-quality gold coins to the treasury:

... λειψον καὶ ἀποίητον ὄν κατέβαλον οἱ πεμφθέντες παρὰ σοῦ ὑπουργοὶ ἐκ τῶν τραπεζιτῶν· καὶ ἐν τούτῳ οὐκ ἔγνωμεν τὸ πῶς διεγένου οὔτε πάλιν τί ἔλαβες παρὰ τῶν τῆς διοικήσεώς σου ὑπὲρ καταλλαγῆς τοῦ αὐτοῦ χρυσοῦ. δεχόμενος οὖν τὰ παρόντα γράμματα σήμανον ἡμῖν διὰ γραμμάτων σου τὸ πῶς λαμβάνεις ἐξ αὐτῶν τὸ τοιοῦτο κακοχάρακτον κρυσίον καὶ τί ἐθεμάτισας δοθῆναι τῷ ὑποδεχομένῳ . υτ[. . .]η τὰ αὐτὰ χρυσικά δημόσια ὑπὲρ τοῦ εἰσπραττομένου ἐν[. . .]. ον . ποσοῦ, μὴ γράφων ἡμῖν εἰ μὴ πᾶσαν ἀλήθειαν καὶ καταστασίαν ὡς πρὸς ὃ ἐστίν. ἐπεὶ ἡμῶν εὕρισκόντων σε ψευσάμενον ἢ καὶ ἀλλοίως γράψαντα τούτου ἕνεκα μέλλεις ἀπολαβεῖν ἐξ ἡμῶν ἀνταπόδοσιν βλάπτουσάν σε οὔτε γὰρ διαλαθεῖν ἡμᾶς ἔχει κελεύσει θεοῦ τὸ πῶς διαγίνεται τὸ τοιοῦτο κεφάλαιον.

... what was paid in by the officials among the bankers, sent by you, was found inferior and unsuitable. And in this affair we do not know how you behaved nor what you received from the people of your district in exchange for that gold. Thus on receiving this letter make clear to us by a letter how you can possibly have received from them such badly struck coins, and what you deposited to give to the collector the above gold taxes for the sum to be levied, not writing to except to tell the entire truth and describe the situation as it is. For if we find you have lied or modified things in your letters, you will receive from us a repayment that will harm you; for by the will of God the way something so important was handled cannot possibly escape our notice.²⁹

The gold coins sent to the treasury for the year's public tax were of lower quality than the standard. It is unclear in which way they were inferior. Κακοχάρακτον (l. 9) would indicate something related to the quality of the strike, but this would normally not have affected their value. Βαρυσταθμία (l. 3), like λειψον (l. 4) probably refer to the weight of the coins, which was evidently below that of the standard set for the tax coins. As Qurra says, Basileios' behaviour in this matter is not entirely clear. Did he simply accept and retransmit the bad coins without noticing? Did he notice but close his eyes in order to protect the local taxpayers? Or did he receive the sum in proper coins and exchange them fraudulently for his own profit?

The last possibility cannot be ruled out, however enormous it might seem. Basileios seems to have been accustomed to taking liberties with the tax money. Another letter warns him not to pay from the tax money for the transport of requisitioned goods he is sending to Fustāṭ, except for the grain for the city of Babylon (ἐμβολῆς).³⁰ Requisitions in

²⁹ SB XX 15102, 4-17 (19 Feb 709).

³⁰ P.Lond. IV 1386, 9-15 (708-709): καὶ μὴ δόξη σοι παρελθεῖν τι ἕνεκεν ναύλου τὸ σύνολον εἰ μὴ τὸ τοῦ παραδιδόμενου σιτοκρίθου ἐμβολῆς εἰς τὰ ὄρρια Βαβυλωνῶνος. μέλλω γὰρ ἐρευνηῆσαι καὶ μαθεῖν τὰ περὶ τούτου καὶ ἂν εὕρω σε παρελθόντα τι τὸ σύνολον ὑπὲρ ναύλου ἕξωθεν τῆς εἰρημένης ἐμβολῆς τῶν ὄρριων ἀποδιδῶ

kind usually included a sum for their own freight, and requisitions of *corvée* labourers included their expenses and salary during their period of work. These were paid by the village which had contributed the items or individuals. What Basileios was doing was paying from the public tax money a sum that his district should have provided in addition to the year's taxes. Once again, this could be taken to mean two different things: either that Basileios was protecting the taxpayers of his district by not asking them to provide the freight costs, or that he kept that sum for himself and paid the freight from the tax money.

Other letters show that Qurra suspected the pagarchy's officials of accepting bribes in connection to the hiding of fugitives and to the requisition of forced labourers:

... παραγγέλλων αὐτοῖς σταθῆναι ἐνδρανῶς εἰς τὸ ἔργον αὐτῶν καὶ μὴ λαβεῖν παρά τινος τί ποτε τὸ σύνολον ὑπὲρ σπορτούλου. ἔση γὰρ ἐπιστάμενος ὡς ἐὰν καταγνωσθῆ τις ἐκ τῶν πεμπομένων παρὰ σοῦ ἐσχηκῶς παρ' οἰουδήποτε ἀνθρώπου σπόρτουλον εἰς σὲ ὄρᾳ ὁ κίνδυνος καὶ μέλλεις σὺν τῷ καταγινωσκομένῳ εἰς τοῦτο ἀπολαβεῖν.

... ordering them to set about their work energetically and not to receive from anyone anything whatever by way of gratuity; for you will be aware that if anyone of the persons you send is convicted of having received a gratuity from anyone whatsoever, the danger is yours and you will receive punishment along with the guilty person.³¹

This suspicion of bribes taken by Basileios' officials becomes an outright accusation in a letter to Basileios himself:

οὔτε γὰρ μέλλομεν ἐξιῶσαι τὸν ἱκανὸν καὶ χρήσιμον καὶ πληροῦντα ἀκαταφρονήτως τὰ δι' αὐτοῦ τῷ ἀνικανοῦντι ἐν τοῖς ἐπιτρεπομένοις αὐτῷ παρ' ἡμῖν διὰ δωροδοκίας. λοιπὸν ἐὰν ἔχεις φρένας ἐκτέλεσον τὴν διὰ γραμμάτων ἡμῶν ἐπιτροπὴν μὴ ληθῆ παραπέμπων τι ἐκ τούτων ἀλλ' ἐμπόνως ἀποτελῶν.

For we shall not level the capable and efficient man who zealously performs his duty with the one who through corruption falls short in the tasks we entrusted to him by us. Therefore if you have any sense perform the command given you by our letter, not sending any of these monies negligently but discharging your duty meticulously.³²

Qurra's grievances against Basileios are serious and involve charges of dishonesty and corruption, not only incompetence or calculated negligence. In yet another letter he complains of some form of traffic in palm wood, the acquisition and sale of which was

σοι ἀνταπόδοσιν συντείνουσιν εἰς τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ ὑπόστασίν σου (And see to it that you do not pay anything at all for freight except that of the [wheat?] of the *embola* which is paid to the granaries of Babylon. For I intend to make enquiries and find out the truth about this, and if I find that you have paid anything at all for freight except for the said *embola* for the granaries I will requite you with a retribution which will threaten your life and estate).

³¹ *P.Lond.* IV 1333, 10-17 (25 Dec 708).

³² *P.Lond.* IV 1337, 17-24 (10 Sep 709).

strictly controlled by the authorities at that time because of the high demand from the state itself for the shipyards at Klyasma and for the various monumental building projects in Fustāṭ, Jerusalem and Damascus.³³ In several of the above cases Qurra states that he intends to start an inquiry, a threat he advances again in another letter concerning payments from churches, which is unfortunately incomplete, but which clearly states that Basileios is once again suspected of malpractice.³⁴

Seeing the potential implications of all the above situations, it is not at all surprising that Qurra should be considering inquiries. There is no evidence, however, that any such inquiry was actually undertaken, except perhaps at the treasury itself.³⁵ Nor is there evidence that any of the punishments were ever put into practice. Despite all the threats on his life and fortune, Basileios was left in place by Qurra for at least three years, even though he knew about his pagarchy's deficit in payments on his arrival. The impressive rhetoric of power deployed in those letters seems to have been as ineffective as Basileios' tax collection.

Indeed, although the first impression on reading Qurra's letters is that of an authoritarian governor who wants to control every single administrative activity in his territory, this impression is quickly mitigated by a sense of helplessness that also comes through in the letters. Faced with corruption, obstruction and passive resistance and unable to raise the sums he should be raising, Qurra has to plead with his subordinates by explaining that he is in need of the money in order to pay the sustenance of the *muhājirūn* and their families:

... καθότι τὸ ρουζικὸν τῶν Μωαγαριτῶν θέλομεν ἐξαπολύσαι αὐτοῖς ἐν τοῖς ὀρρίοις καὶ ἀνένδεκτος τρόπος ἐστὶν εἰ μὴ πληρωθῆναι αὐτούς.

... seeing that we wish to pay in full the grain allowance (*rizk*) of the *muhājirūn* to them in the granaries, and it is quite inadmissible that they should not be satisfied.³⁶

He also needs money to pay the soldiers who participate in the annual raids against Byzantium:

ἐπέφθασεν ὁ καιρὸς τῆς ρόγας τῶν Μωαγαριτῶν τοῦ Φοσσάτου καὶ τῶν κούρσων καὶ ἡ ρόγα αὐτῶν ἀπὸ δημοσίων ἐβδόμης ἰνδικτίονος δίδεται.

And now has arrived the time for the allowance of the *muhājirūn* of Fustāṭ and for the raids, and their allowance is being paid out of the public taxes of the seventh indiction.³⁷

³³ *P.Berl. Frisk* 6, 4-21 (26 Jan - 24 Feb 710); on price control see also *P.Lond.* IV 1377 (2 May 710); on wood requisitions for buildings under al-Walīd see Morelli 1998.

³⁴ *P.Lond.* IV 1363, 3-12 (4 Sept 710): μέλλομεν γὰρ κελεύσει Θεοῦ καταζητῆσαι καὶ καταμαθεῖν περὶ τούτου καὶ οὐ μέλλει διαλαθεῖν ἡμᾶς τὸ πῶς διεγένου ἐν τούτοις (For we intend by God's command to make inquisition and find out the truth about this and your conduct in these matters will not escape us).

³⁵ *P.Lond.* IV 1380, 5-6 (passage translated above, p. ***).

³⁶ *P.Lond.* IV 1404, 7-9 (709-714).

The seasonality of the raids put the central authorities in a very difficult position if the necessary sums had not come in. The treasury would be lacking not only the money to pay the soldiers for the raids, but also their allowances in wheat. Moreover, the seasonality also affected the shipyards and the supplies in kind requisitioned by the authorities for the sustenance of the sailors during the raids. Those were sent to Klyisma, where the ships were built and repaired, but also presumably anchored out of season, safely away from the Mediterranean. This made the entire system (transport of supplies, but also transport of the ships) dependent on the Nile-Red Sea canal, still known in the eighth century as Trajan's canal, and consequently on the Nile flood:

καὶ τὰ τούτων ἐντάγια πρὸ ἡμερῶν πολλῶν γράψαντες ταῦτα διὰ συντομίας ἐκέμψαι πρὸ τοῦ γένηται ἀπόβασις τῶν ὑδάτων τοῦ Τραιανοῦ, καὶ μέχρι τῆς δεῦρο οὐκ ἔπεμψας τίποτε ἐκ τούτων ἄξιον λόγου. (...) ἐσὴ γὰρ ἐπιστάμενος ὡς ἐὰν ὑστερήσης τὸ ὀτιοῦν ἔκ τε τῶν αὐτῶν εἰδῶν καὶ δαπανῶν καὶ γένηται ἀπόβασις τῶν ὑδάτων μέλλεις ταῦτα διὰ στρατάς βασιτάξι ἕως τοῦ αὐτοῦ Κλύσματος παρέχων τὸ φόρετρον αὐτῶν ἐξ ἰδικῆς σου ὑποστάσεως.

And we sent you also the demand notes for these many days ago, and wrote you to send them off quickly before the waters of Trajan's canal subside, and to this day you have not sent any of them at all worth mentioning. (...) For you will know that if you delay anything whatsoever of the said articles and supplies and the waters subside, you will have to convey them by land to Klyisma, paying for their carriage out of your own property.³⁸

The raids and naval expeditions also created administrative work once they were over, as the central authorities in Fustāṭ seem to have had no other way of assessing the number of casualties and knowing who had returned home than to ask the local authorities to make a declaration concerning those individuals:

οὐκ ἔγνωμεν τὴν ποσότητα τῶν ἐπαναλυσάντων ναυτῶν ἐν τῇ διοικήσει σου ἐκ τῶν ἐξελεθόντων εἰς τὸ κοῦρσον Ἀφρικῆς μετὰ Ἄτα υἱοῦ Ῥαφε ὠνπερ ἀπέστειλεν Μουση υἱὸς Νοσαειρ, καὶ τῶν ἀπομεινάντων ἐν αὐτῇ Ἀφρικῇ. λοιπὸν δεχόμενος τὰ παρόντα γράμματα γράψον πρὸς ἡμᾶς τὴν ποσότητα τῶν καταλαβόντων ἐν τῇ διοικήσει σου ὡς εἴρηται ναυτῶν, καταμανθάνων ἐξ αὐτῶν καὶ ἐρωτῶν χάριν τῶν ἀπομεινάντων ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ Ἀφρικῇ, καὶ δι' ἣν αἰτίαν ἐναπέμειναν ἐκεῖσε ὡσαύτως καὶ τὴν ποσότητα τῶν τελευτησάντων ἐν αὐτῇ ὡς λέλεκται καὶ κατὰ στρατὰν μετὰ τὸ ἀπολυθῆναι αὐτοῦς, καὶ ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν ἅπασαν φανέρωσιν καὶ εἴδησιν αὐτῶν ἀπαραλείπτως

³⁷ *P.Lond.* IV 1349, 15-17 (14 Jan 710); see also *P.Cair.Arab.* III 148, 5-9 and 23-26 (708-710): Verily thou knowest already what I have written to thee about gathering in the money and about that which is impending in respect to allowance to the troops and their families and to the sending off the men to the campaign. (...) For, indeed, if the money had already come to me, I should already have ordered, please God, that the troops be paid their allowance (transl. Grohmann).

³⁸ *P.Lond.* IV 1346, 8-11 and 16-20 (3 Jan 710) = *Sel.Pap.* II 432; see also *SB X* 10459 (709-714) and *PAF* IV.

ποιῶν ἀπόστειλον πρὸς ἡμᾶς διὰ πάσης συντομίας μετὰ τὴν ἀνάγνωσιν τῶν παρόντων γραμμάτων.

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 ‘Aṭā ibn Rāfi’, whom Mūsā ibn Nuṣair dispatched, and of those who remained in Africa. Therefore, on receiving the present letter, write to us the number of the sailors who returned to your district as aforesaid, enquiring and asking of them concerning those who remained in Africa and for what reason they remained there, and so too the number of those who died there as aforesaid and on the journey after their discharge; and in a word, noting completely all they know and can communicate, send it to us with all speed after reading the present letter.³⁹

This was vital information for a state that wanted to have control on the numbers of its adult male population, and Qurra could not obtain it without local knowledge. The same was true more generally, since the registration of landed property and the census in view of the land tax, the poll tax and the *corvée* could not be carried out without the cooperation of the locals, especially in a country as densely populated as Egypt. Qurra repeatedly asks for detailed registers containing the names and patronyms, names of family members, goods, land etc of the population, but also of the fugitives from other pagarchies to his own whom he was able to locate.⁴⁰

Like local officials throughout the empire, Basileios had the necessary local networks to obtain the information that the governor wanted. This made him useful and necessary to the governor. It is highly plausible that Aphroditō was not the only pagarchy where Qurra encountered the difficulties described above. There are no other preserved archives from Qurra’s governorship that would allow us to make similar observations on other pagarchies, but some documents from the archive of the pagarch Papas in Apollōnos Anō/Edfū in the 660s and 670s indicate that Basileios was not entirely unique.⁴¹ Had Basileios been totally outside the norm, he could easily have been replaced early on by a more trustworthy official and we would know little of his turpitudes. The fact that for several years this did not happen indicates that the problem was too widespread to be dealt with in this way. The central authorities needed the local elites and had to be relatively conciliating.

Qurra did not have an infinite number of solutions. Beyond the indignant rhetoric and the warnings that Basileios would regret having ‘appeared among the living’ once Qurra’s wrath had befallen him, fining, inspection and central control would seem the most obvious ways for him to deal with the situation. However, those solutions had their own problems. The size of the repressive apparatus could not have been sufficient for the governor to control and possibly punish every single pagarch at any given time. As for fines, they were levied locally and thus, predictably, created the same problems:

³⁹ *P.Lond.* IV 1350, 3-16 (29 Jan 710) = *Sel.Pap.* II 433.

⁴⁰ *P.Lond.* IV 1338, 18-24 (12 Sept 709): demand for a register relating to the poll tax; *P.Lond.* IV 1343, 1-9 (30 Dec 709): demand for a register relating to fugitives; *P.Lond.* IV 1345, 7-12 (1 Jan 710): demand for a register with the individuals who were assessed to pay a given fine.

⁴¹ For ex. *P.Apoll.* 6 (660s/70s); 9 (660/61 or 675/76); 13 (17 Apr 661 or 676); 26 (660s/70s).

μη γνωσθῆ δὲ ἡμῖν ὡς ἀπήτησάς τι τὸ καθόλου τοὺς τῆς διοικήσεώς σου ὑπὲρ τῆς θεματισθείσης διὰ σοῦ ζημίας ἢ συνῆλθες ἢ καὶ ἀντεπάθησας τὸ σύνολόν τινα ἐν τῇ διαστολῇ τῆς τοιαύτης ζημίας.

And let it not come to our knowledge that you have in any respect at all cheated the people of your district in the matter of the fine assigned by you, or that you have shown any preference or antipathy at all to anyone in the collection of the said fine.⁴²

As for control from the centre, it took mainly two forms, both no doubt inefficient to some degree: one was to send inspectors from Fustāt, and the other to use local informers. Qurra's letters very often make mention of specially dispatched individuals, whom he variously describes as ἀπόστολον ἡμῶν, ἄνθρωπον ἡμῶν or μαγιστριανόν, and who were generally given instructions to remain in the pagarchy until Basileios had fulfilled his obligations, or were in charge of an inquiry on a given matter.

ἐπετρέψαμεν γὰρ τῷ ἀποστόλῳ ἡμῶν μὴ ἀποκινηθῆναι ἐκ σοῦ ἄχρις ἂν ἐκπέμψης ἐντελῶς τὴν ὑστέραν ψυχὴν τῶν εὕρισκομένων ἐν τῇ διοικήσει σου ἀπὸ εἰκοσαετοῦς καὶ ὧδε ὡς λέλεκται, ἐνέγκαι δὲ καὶ τὸ προνομασθὲν κατάγραφον περιέχον ὡς δεδήλωται τοὺς σταλέντας καὶ τοὺς παρεαθέντας ἐν τῇ διοικήσει σου ἐξ αὐτῶν. (...) τοῦ Θεοῦ γὰρ συνεργοῦντος οὐ μὴ παρεάσωμεν ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ μίαν παγαρχίαν καὶ μόνην εἰ μὴ δ' ἂν ἀποστείλομεν ἐν αὐτῇ ἄνθρώπους ἡμῶν πιστοὺς καὶ ἰκανοὺς ὀφείλοντας ἀνενδότως μετὰ πάσης ἀκριβείας ἐρευνῆσαι καὶ καταψηλαφῆσαι χάριν τῶν αὐτῶν φυγάδων...

For we have instructed our messenger not to depart from you until you send out completely the very last soul of the persons found in your district from twenty years and onwards as aforesaid, and to bring also the aforesaid register containing as aforementioned the persons dispatched and those among them who were overlooked in your district. (...) For with God's help we will not omit a single pagarchy in Egypt into which we shall not send our faithful and efficient agents with instructions to search and make inquisition unyieldingly and with all minuteness after the said fugitives.⁴³

⁴² *P.Lond.* IV 1345, 12-16 (1 Jan 710).

⁴³ *P.Lond.* IV 1343, 9-14 and 33-37 (30 Dec 709); see also *P.Lond.* IV 1384, 33-34 (708-710): πέμπομεν γὰρ ἄνθρωπον ἡμῶν ἐν τῇ διοικήσει σου... (for we are sending our man into your district...); *P.Lond.* IV 1394, 14-15 (708-709): ἐπετρέψαμεν γὰρ τῷ παρόντι ἀποστόλῳ ἵνα μὴ ἀποκινηθῆ ἐκ σοῦ ἕως δ' ἂν πέμψης εἴ τι δ' ἂν ἦνυσας (for we have instructed the present messenger not to depart from you until you have sent whatever money you have collected); *P.Lond.* IV 1404, 16-19 (709-714): προηγγείλαμεν γὰρ τῷ παρόντι μαγιστριανῶ μὴ δοῦναι ἄνεσιν παντοίαν ἕως ἂν ἐκπέμψης ὡς εἴρηται εἰς πλήρες τὸ λοιπαζόμενον διὰ τῆς διοικήσεώς σου ἔτι μὴν καὶ τὸν ἐν κοκκοείδει ἀπαργυρισμόν (for we have instructed the present agent not to give any sort of acquittance till you have sent off, as aforesaid, the arrears from your district in full and also the money composition for the threshed grain).

Predictably, when the names of such envoys are given, they are Arab names. This is also true of the few cases we can trace of individuals informing Qurra about the situation in Basileios' pagarchy.

Hishām ibn 'Umar has written to me mentioning fugitives of his in your district. And I had already sent (messengers) to the administrators and had written to them not to give refuge to a fugitive. Therefore, when this my letter reaches you, give back to him what fugitives of his are in your district, and I do not wish to hear again that you sent back his messengers, or that he should write to me to complain about you.⁴⁴

It appears from this letter, however, that Hishām ibn 'Umar had first tried to contact Basileios about the fugitives, and only reported to Qurra when Basileios ignored his messengers. Qurra himself seems to expect the two pagarchs to treat the matter between themselves.⁴⁵ On the contrary, the *sāhib al-barīd* (postmaster), who was not based locally and only passed through the various pagarchies while fulfilling his duties, seems to have reported on his return to the capital on the irregularities he saw.⁴⁶

Interestingly both cases of information given to Qurra and the two mentions of bribes above relate to giving over individuals to the authorities, not to payments in kind or in money. This is too small a sample from which to come to any general conclusions, but it could point to a strong underground network of solidarity among the local population. It looks like fugitives (and no doubt those who were requisitioned for *corvée* as sailors or builders) were systematically hidden by people in the villages under the more or less benevolent eye of the local authorities and their 'men', who did not hesitate to take the occasional *baksheesh* if necessary in order to keep their mouths shut.

As is typical in such cases, Qurra's offices resorted to offering rewards in exchange for information:

τοῦ Θεοῦ γὰρ συνεργοῦντος οὐ μὴ παρεάσωμεν ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ μίαν παγαρχίαν καὶ μόνην εἰ μὴ δ' ἂν ἀποστείλομεν ἐν αὐτῇ ἀνθρώπους ἡμῶν πιστοὺς καὶ ἱκανοὺς ὀφείλοντας ἀνενδότως μετὰ πάσης ἀκριβείας ἐρευνῆσαι καὶ καταψηλαφήσαι χάριν τῶν αὐτῶν φυγάδων, θεματίσαι δὲ δοθῆναι καὶ τοῖς μηνύουσὶ τινα ἀποκρυφθέντα ἕξ ὧν πετρέψαμεν σταλῆναι ὑπὲρ ὃ νομίζεις λόγῳ μηνύτρων.

For with God's help we will not omit a single pagarchy in Egypt into which we shall not send our faithful and efficient agents with instructions to search and make

⁴⁴ *P.Cair.Arab.* III 151, 6-18 (6 Apr-5 May 710).

⁴⁵ The fact that Hishām refers to Qurra when Basileios ignores him does not necessarily mean that he is always more loyal to the governor than Basileios, and even less does it show that he is an Arab with no local attachments rather than a converted Christian. His behaviour can be explained by local enmities or competition, or simply by a more rigorous 'work ethic' if one may say; the same attitude is displayed in the third quarter of the seventh century by Platon, pagarch of Latopolis and clearly a member of the local Hellenised elites, towards Papas, pagarch of Apollōnos Anō: in a letter Platon complains of Papas' inaction in regard to an order from the *amīr*, protesting that οὐ δύναμαι παρακοῦσαι τὰς κελεύσεις τῶν δεσποτῶν (for I cannot disobey the orders of our masters): *P.Apoll.* 40 (660s/670s).

⁴⁶ *P.Cair.Arab.* III 153, 6-15 (7 Jan - 6 Feb 710): 'al-Qāsim ibn Sayyār, the postmaster, has mentioned to me that you have fined some villages in your district in account of what is due from them of the gold-tax'.

inquisition unyieldingly and with all minuteness after the said fugitives, and also to order that to those who give information concerning any concealed person among those whom we ordered to be sent an amount greater than you expect as information-money.⁴⁷

The letter quoted above giving the amount of the fines for hiding fugitives also states that every man who will give information on fugitives will receive 2 solidi per fugitive, a sum which represented twice the amount of the annual poll tax.⁴⁸

Along with the attempts at controlling Basileios' actions and transactions, Qurra tried to inspire him through exhortation and example, to flatter him into acting more responsibly, or simply to motivate him through the promise of reward. In a long letter which spells out the duties of an upright official, we read:

ἄρξαι οὖν ἐπ' ὀνόματος τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τῆς βοηθείας καὶ ἀγαθοῦ τὴν ἐξάνυσιν τῶν χρυσικῶν δημοσίων μετὰ ἐπιεικείας καὶ χειραγωγίας. ἐκάστῳ γὰρ ἀγωνιζομένῳ εἰς σύστασιν καὶ διόρθωσιν ὡς ἀρμόττει αὐτῷ ὁ Θεὸς καὶ συνεπισχύει καὶ σοῦ συνάγοντος πόσον χρυσοῦ ὀφείλων δεῖξαι σε ἰκανὸν παρ' ἡμῖν τοῦτο ἀπόστειλον ἐν τῇ σακέλλῃ ἀγωνιζόμενος εἰς τοῦτο ἐντρανῶς καὶ ἐμπισμένως. (...) ὁ χρήσιμος γὰρ ὑπουργὸς ἀκαταφρονήτως συνάγει τὸ δίκαιον τοῦ Ἀμιραλμουμνιν μετὰ κυβερνήσεως καὶ καλοθελείας μήδεν ἀπολλύς ἢ ἐξαλείφων. μέλλομεν τοίνυν καταμαθεῖν κελεύσει Θεοῦ τὸ πῶς διαγίνῃ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις σου καὶ οὐ μὴ διαλάβῃ ἡμᾶς τί πότε. θέλομεν γὰρ εὐρεθῆναί σε μετὰ τῶν ἐχόντων ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὖνοιαν καὶ ἐὰν εὐρωμέν σε ἐν τούτοις ὠφελοῦμέν σε ἀνταμοιβόμενοι κατὰ τὰ ἔργα σου, εἰ δὲ καὶ ἄλλως πῶς διαπραττόμενον ἀποδιδουμέν σε ὡσαύτως καταβιβάζοντες καὶ χυδαιότερον πάντων ἀποδεικνύοντές σε. ἀλλ' ὅμως ἐλπίζομεν εἰς τὸν Θεὸν ὅτι μέλλεις εὐρεθῆναι ἐκ τῶν ἀληθινῶν καὶ γνησίων ὑπουργῶν τῶν σπευδόντων ἀρέσαι ἡμῖν καὶ φυλαττόντων—? τὰ καταπιστευθέντα αὐτοῖς.

Begin then in the name of God and in the name of efficiency and integrity the collection of the public gold taxes with equity and submissiveness; for to every man who exerts himself in their organisation and management as he ought God also gives aid, and therefore do you, collecting the quota of money - for you ought to show yourself capable in our eyes - send it to the Treasury, exerting yourself vigorously and energetically in this matter. (...) For the serviceable official collects without negligence the just dues of the *amīr al-mu'minīn* with prudence and good will, not losing or obliterating anything. We intend, therefore, by God's command to find out how you conduct yourself in your work, and you will certainly not conceal anything from us. For we wish you to be found among those who show integrity and good will, and if we do find you among them, we will recompense you with benefits according to your deeds, but if we find you behaving otherwise, we will requite you

⁴⁷ *P.Lond.* IV 1343, 33-39 (30 Dec 709).

⁴⁸ *P.Lond.* IV 1384, 10-11 (708-710): καὶ τῷ μηνύοντι μετὰ τὴν καταγραφὴν δοθῆναι νομίσματα δύο ὑπὲρ ἐκάστου ἀνδρός (and that 2 solidi are to be paid for each man to any one giving information after the making of the register).

accordingly, degrading you and making you meaner than anyone. But nevertheless we hope to God that you will be found one of the true and honest officials who are anxious to please us and fulfil the duties entrusted to them.⁴⁹

When Qurra sent this letter he had been governor for hardly a year, while Basileios had already been in place for several years, accumulating important arrears in taxes. The tone of *captatio benevolentiae* that runs through this letter no doubt reflects what Qurra saw as one possible way of improving Basileios' performance. At the same time, he was sending him letters threatening him of fines, corporal punishment and death. Using different strategies designed to obtain results from a local administrator is an unambiguous sign of a policy of compromise. Although Qurra's official letters convey an official discourse of power, authority, control and sanction, they also clearly show that the orders were not always followed, and they signify, through their repeated threats that were never put into practice that this exhibition of total power was to some extent a compensation for a fundamental impotence - the incapacity, or rather the unwillingness, to enforce the proclaimed punishments.

As both Sir Harold Bell and Nabia Abbott have noted, Qurra's letters reveal a strong concern for the taxpayers and the will to protect them against injustice and abuse by Basileios.⁵⁰ The letter quoted above concerning the fair assessment of a fine that had to be paid is a case in point. In another letter he forbids the use of torture with lime and vinegar, as 'there is on the whole no other torture that leaves the tortured person more incurable and incapable of work than lime with vinegar'.⁵¹ His concern for the pagarchy's inhabitants, in particular for their fair treatment and tax assessment and their free access to the authorities, is expressed in a number of letters, both in Arabic and in Greek.⁵² Cracking down on corrupt officials may at first sight seem like an obvious way to protect the people. This, however, was much easier said than done, since at the local level, the social, economic and even family links between such officials and the population were strong and varied. Pagarchs were generally members of the local landed elites, who no doubt employed a large number of the pagarchy's inhabitants, protected some of them even if they despoiled others (as Qurra's letters suggest), and had very probably lent money to several of them to allow

⁴⁹ *P.Lond.* IV 1349, 6-12 and 19-36 (14 Jan 710); see also *P.Lond.* IV 1338, 10-12 (12 Sept 709): πάνυ γὰρ ηθεως ἔχομεν εἶναι τὸ ἔργον σου προκόπτον καὶ σταθηρὸν πλείω οὔ ἐστί (for we are very anxious that your work should be more energetic and trustworthy than it is); *P.Cair.Arab.* III 148, 27-30 (708-710); *NPAF* 1.

⁵⁰ Abbott 1958, 65-69; *P.Lond.* IV, introduction, xxxv-xli; both authors discuss the contrast between the image of Qurra as a harsh and ruthless governor given by the later Christian and Muslim narrative tradition, and that of a much more moderate, efficient and just individual, which emerges from his letters.

⁵¹ *P.Ross.Georg.* IV 16, 2-4 (30 Jan 710): οὐκ ἔστιν τὸ σύνολον οὐδὲν ἄλλο βασανιστήριον ἀνίατον καὶ ἀργὸν ἀποδεικνύον τὸν βασανιζόμενον χεῖρω τοῦ λεπταρίου μετὰ καὶ ὀξιδίου.

⁵² See the references given in Abbott 1958, 65-66. In *P.Lond.* IV 1356, 11-15 (15 Apr 710) Qurra explicitly asks Basileios to receive his district's representatives: δεχόμενος οὖν τὰ παρόντα γράμματα ἀποσχόλασον σεαυτὸν τοῖς τῆς διοικήσεώς σου εἰς τὸ ἀκούσαι τὰ παρ' αὐτῶν λεγόμενα καὶ κρῖναι ἐκάστω τὸ δίκαιον μὴ ἀποκλείων σεαυτὸν καὶ παρεῶν αὐτοῦς [- -]ιτους (On receiving the present letter, therefore, devote yourself to the people for your administrative district hearing what they say and giving just judgement to each, not shutting yourself up but allowing them [free access to you]). See also the expression of the concern for fairness in tax assessment as expressed by a lower official in an eighth-century papyrus now in Vienna (*P.Vindob.* AP 5.379), edited in Sijpesteijn 2007, 172-75.

them to pay their seed for the sowing season and their taxes at the moment of levy.⁵³ This complex social situation created interdependence between the members of local society and made it very difficult for the governor to oust the pagarch without some damage to the tax base and the social fabric.

This created a need for compromise and cooperation as far as that was possible. In a sense, the local elites were key actors who formed the main articulation of the system and in many ways defined the form in which power was exerted. This brings us back to the initial question of why it was necessary to replace those elites with Arab Muslims who had no local power base and, perhaps more importantly, a different approach to their duties towards the state. If Qurra - and the caliph behind him - really wanted to rule the caliphate in the way those letters imply, it was essential to replace that central link in the system with one that shared their view of governance.

Basileios is no longer mentioned after 711, and only one document from Qurra's offices is securely dated after that date.⁵⁴ It is impossible to know whether this means that the papers from that period were archived together and that the rest has not been preserved or found, or whether it represents the totality of the archive and its interruption means that Basileios was finally removed from his post and replaced by someone more trustworthy. In that respect, it is perhaps significant that one of Basileios' neighbouring pagarchs bears an Arab name. He may have replaced some Greek-speaking local magnate who had been acting like Basileios, and it is not so implausible that the same thing happened to Basileios at some point in 711. If this is true, it would mean that Qurra's rhetoric of power was not, ultimately, as empty as his initial tolerance towards the pagarch would imply. The helplessness of the authorities in the face of the dominance of local elites was eventually short-circuited through their slow replacement by outsiders with different social, economic and political habits and loyalties.

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⁵³ Seeing the ubiquity of the practice it would be surprising if Basileios had not in one way or another indulged in it: see Papaconstantinou 2010. In any case, several letters mention other rich Christians who are appealing to Qurra regarding debt issues: see Abbott 1958, 66.

⁵⁴ SB XVIII 13218 (22 Nov 713): this is a demand for sailors for the raid addressed to the village of Boubaliton, and as such does not mention any official.

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