Developments in Egypt’s early Islamic postal system (with an edition of *P.Khalili II 5*)

Jelle Bruning
Leiden University
j.bruning@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract

The importance of documentary sources for the history of the official postal system (*barīd*) in the first century of Islam has long been acknowledged. In addition to a small number of documents from the eastern part of the Muslim Empire, Egyptian papyri from the 90s/710s and 130s/750s form the main documentary sources for modern studies on the postal system. These papyri belong to a distinct phase in Islamic history. Papyri from other, especially earlier, phases have largely been neglected. The present article addresses the history of Egypt’s official postal system from the Muslim conquest up to c. 132/750. It argues that the postal system gradually developed out of Byzantine practices and was shaped by innovations by Muslim rulers through which their involvement in the postal system’s administration gradually increased. The article ends with an edition of *P.Khalili II 5*, a papyrus document from 135/753 on the provisioning of postal stations.

Keywords: Postal system (*barīd*), Early Islamic history, Egypt, Administration, Papyri

It is well known that historical studies of the first two centuries of Islam depend on sources other than the literary works written in the second century AH/eighth century AD or later. This is all the more true for the *barīd*, the official postal system (often combined with an “intelligence service”). Information on the postal system before the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Wāthiq (227/842–232/847), who commissioned the writing of a book on “Routes and Realms” (Ibn Khurdādhbih’s famous *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, the first version of which was produced in c. 232/846–847), is largely based on information of

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Whereas modern scholarly publications on the institution concentrate on (predominantly Arabic) documents from the Marwanid period and the first years of the Abbasid period, the Egyptian material is equally informative on the first decades after the Muslim conquest. Hence, it enables the development of the postal system to be traced throughout the first century of Muslim rule in Egypt.

In doing so, this article argues that Egypt’s postal system developed out of Byzantine practices and that from its beginnings until 132/750 three distinct phases can be identified. These phases are nearly identical to the general periodization of early Islamic history and coincide with the caliphs of the Rightly-Guided caliphs (18/639–41/661), the Sufyanids and early Marwanids (41/661–90/710), and the later Marwanids (90/710–132/750). It will be shown that during these three phases the character of the postal system reflects the nature of Muslim rule at that time, and that changes in the system must be seen in the context of changes in empire-wide policies. The article ends with an edition of *P.Khalili II* 5, from 135/753, showing hitherto unknown practices regarding the administration and provisioning of postal stations during the first years of Abbasid rule.

**Developments in Egypt’s postal system**

By c. 600 AD, the Byzantine imperial authorities charged local large landholding families or labour corporations with responsibility for the physical and financial maintenance of local sections of the imperial postal system.\footnote{J. Gascou, “Les grands domaines, la cité et l’état en Égypte byzantine (recherches d’histoire agraire, fiscal et administrative)”, *Travaux et Mémoires* 9, 1985, 53–9; A. Kolb, *Transport und Nachrichtentransfer im Römischen Reich* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 136, 194–5.} This included providing animals to postal stations, contracting stablemen and accountants, and regulating the use of stations by third parties.\footnote{See the discussion in Kolb, *Transport und Nachrichtentransfer*, 136 and 195. See *SB XVIII* 14063 (Oxyrhynchus/al-Bahnasā, 556) for the use of “the machine of the stable of the cursus velox” by local monks.} This allocation of what was initially an official liturgy to private parties was the result of socio-political
changes, especially the increase of the authority of local magnates. This situation lasted until the end of Sasanian rule over Egypt (619–29). Not only have the main large landholding families disappeared from our sources or had their influence weakened by that time, but the administration of the postal system itself seems to have undergone some changes. Under Sasanian rule, the administration of the postal system in Upper Egypt was brought under the authority of a sellarios (a title used for officials of different ranks) probably in order to obtain and maintain firm control over the postal system and, hence, the primary means of communication. In P.Oxy. XVI 1862 and 1863, for instance, a sellarios named Rhemē appears as the principal official charged with the administration of a postal station in Pinarachthis, a locality just south of Memphis/Manf. This sellarios was subordinate to another Sasanian official bearing the same title who had his office in the Arsinoitēs/Fayyūm and held authority over probably both Arcadia and the Thebaid. Such administrative changes by the Sasanians firmly placed the administration of Egypt’s postal system (back) in the administrative realm. Although we lack documentation on the postal system during the decade separating Sasanian and Muslim rule, the situation that we encounter in documents dating from the first two decades of Muslim rule over Egypt seems not to have differed much.

Continuity of existing practices characterized the initial phase of the development of the postal system under Muslim rule. By the time Muslims had conquered Egypt in the early 20s/640s, the maintenance and administration of postal stations ultimately fell under the responsibilities of the dux, at that time the highest administrative official outside Fustḥāt. He sent entagia for the payment of money, goods or animals destined for postal stations. The Greek document P.Lond. III 1081 (pp. 282–3), for example, mentions a dispute between an administrative official and an agricultural worker (geōrgos) on the estates of a bishop in the district of Hermopolis/Ushmūn. The dux is called amiras in this document, establishing its date as the last four decades of the first/seventh century.

In P.Lond. III 1081, the agricultural worker writes that the dux had

4 P. Sarris, Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 149–76.
7 The palaeography of P.Lond. III 1075 and 1081 points to the first/seventh century. With the exception of Muslim army officials in the 20s/640s and 30s/650s, the term amiras (and variants) is only used for the dux before the turn of the second/eighth century (P.M. Sijpesteijn, Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Official (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 120); see also M.A.L. Legendre, “Hiérarchie administrative et formation de l’état islamique dans la campagne égyptienne pré-Tûlûnides”, in A. Nef and F. Ardizzone (eds), Les dynamiques de l’Islamisation en Méditerranée centrale et en Sicile: Nouvelles propositions et découvertes récentes (Rome and Bari: Edipuglia, 2014), 108 and, most recently,
sent to him a groom (hippokomos) with a letter ordering him to deliver three horses and two mules (gaidaria) at “the estate-controlled hamlet (epoikion) of my brother, the lord Germanos” (lines 4–5), where a postal station must have existed. 8 Whereas such entagia stemmed from the bureau of the dux, the pagarch was responsible for the execution of the dux’s orders. 9 Pagarchs delivered mounts at postal stations or ordered lower officials to do so. 10 The system must have functioned well. SB Kopt. I 36 (Apollonopolis Anò/Udfû), dating from 25–26/646, records that third parties could travel via the postal system and that it reached as far south as Oxyrhynchus/al-Bahnas (line 158). 11

The Muslim authorities of the 20s/640s and 30s/650s are not recorded as having been involved in the organization of the postal system as much as their Sasanian predecessors had been. 12 Beside the introduction of the term gaidarion (from the Arabic ghaydhār), “mule”, in documents related to the administration of the postal system (among others), 13 the influence of the arrival of the Muslims is primarily seen in their efforts to keep Babylon and Fustāt connected with the rest of the province via a postal station in Babylon. Dated to the mid-first/seventh century, the Greek document CPR XXII 6 shows for the first time requisitions made in the district of Hermopolis/Ushmûn or Arsinoitês/Fayyûm that are destined for Babylon’s postal and/or relay station (allagē). In contrast to the word allagê’s primary meaning of “relay station” in the context of the postal system, 14 a reference to “sailors of the ships of Babylon’s allagê” (ναύται(αῖς) τω(ῶν) πλοίοι(ον) τῆ(ς) ἀλλαγῆς(ῆς) Βαβυλῶν(ῶνος)) in the contemporary document P.Vind. Tand. 31 (Memphis/Manîf), line 6, might indicate that Babylon’s postal and/or relay station was also geared towards riverine traffic; but the exact meaning of...

8 For another postal station in the district of Hermopolis/Ushmûn, see CPR XXX 29, discussion on page 256.

9 If P.Lond. III 1075 (pp. 281–2) and 1081 belong together, the former documents that the pagarch had to solve the dispute.

10 P.Ross.Georg. III 50 (Arsinoitês/Fayyûm; 22/643), CPR XXX 29 (Hermopolis/Ushmûn; c. 22/643).


12 Medieval references to the administrative separation of Egypt into two independent provinces, with Abd Allâh b. Sa’d b. Abî Sarh ruling Upper Egypt from the Arsinoitês/Fayyûm and ‘Amr b. al-‘Ash ruling Lower Egypt from Fustāt, may attest that some of the Sasanians’ administrative changes lasted into the Muslim period. According to these reports, Egypt was unified under ‘Uthmân b. Affân. See Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, Futûḥ Misr wa-akhbârhû, ed. C.C. Torrey (New Haven, 1922), 173–4; al-Kindî, al-Wulât wa-l-ğudât, ed. R. Guest (Leiden: É.J. Brill, 1912), 11.

13 CPR XXX 20, commentary to line 5. For the introduction of other and mainly administrative terms shortly after the Muslim conquest, see Sijpesteijn, Shaping a Muslim State, 69–71.

14 Kolb, Transport und Nachrichtentransfer, 213.
these words remains uncertain at present. The Muslim authorities’ initial concentration on Babylon’s connectedness compares well with other facets of their conquest policies of the 20s/640s and 30s/650s, especially their requisitioning of building material for Fustat and their directing of tax money to Babylon. The Muslims’ wish to maintain connections between their newly founded capital and the rest of the province may well explain the continued upkeep of postal stations elsewhere in Egypt.

This situation lasted until c. 40/660. After the First Civil War of the late 30s/650s, the new caliph, Muʿawiya b. Abi Sufyān (r. 41/661–60/680), actively sought to establish or increase his power by initiating reforms that centralized his administration in Damascus as well as that of his governors in the provincial capitals. The Greek document P.Mert. II 100 (Arsinoïtēs/Fayyûm), dated 18 Ramaḍān 49/20 October 669, shows that these reforms directly affected the postal system in Egypt, as they did in Syria and the East of the empire. With the arrival of Muʿawiya’s rule, then, in Egypt already in 38/658–659, the second phase in the early history of the postal system begins.

The above-mentioned document P.Mert. II 100 records requisitions made by Pettērios, pagarch of the Arsinoiētēs/Fayyûm, to the inhabitants of the village of Stratōn. They should deliver salt and seasoning to an “overseer of the same stable” (line 2: ἐβπὶξ[ε][μ][ν] θ(ύ)[ο] and στόβ[λ][ο] who bears a partially lost but still unmistakably Arabic name. The stable is located in the village itself. The requisitions are considered part of the dapanē, a tax for the maintenance of officials, and are explicitly in accordance with an official communication of a fiscal assessment stemming from the bureau of the Arcadian διοικήτης Iordanēs (line 2: δια(τί) Επισταλμάτου). Such official communications were introduced early in Muʿawiya’s caliphate and were part of the reforms

15 Cf. F. Morelli’s doubts about the employment of sailors at an allagē in CPR XXII 6, commentary to line 3.


17 CPR XXX (especially the discussion on pages 75–8), P.Vind.Tand. 31, P.Got. 29 (possibly Arsinoiētēs/Fayyûm; mid-first/seventh century).

18 SB VIII 9749 (Herakleopolis/Ilnās; 21/642).


20 C. Foss, “Muʿawiya’s state”, in J. Haldon (ed.), Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria: A Review of Current Debates (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 75–96. Note that these reforms are best documented for the former Byzantine part of the Muʿawiya’s empire. For his and his governors’ policies in the eastern provinces, see R.S. Humphreys, Muʿawiya ibn Abī Sufyān: From Arabia to Empire (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 85–114.

21 Foss, “Muʿawiya’s state”, 81 and 83.


he initiated.\textsuperscript{24} \textit{P.Mert}. II 100 is the oldest known document that shows the central administration in Fustāṭ, represented by the \textit{dux} in Arcadia, to control the organization of a local postal station. Although Mamluk historians may not be correct in stating that Muʿāwiya was “the first person to establish the \textit{barīd} in Islam”,\textsuperscript{25} his efforts to centralize the administration placed the existing, official postal system firmly under Muslim control.\textsuperscript{26}

At the end of Sufyanid rule over Egypt and the beginning of that of the Marwanids, there is a significant change in the organization of the postal system. Documents belonging to the archive of Papas, pagarch of Apollônopolis Anō/ Udfū, and which have been dated to the end of the Sufyanid period refer for the first time to a \textit{beredos}, “post-horse” (\textit{P.Apoll.} 33 and 64), and a \textit{beredarios}, “official courier” (\textit{P.Apoll.} 27)\textsuperscript{27} – terms related to the Arabic \textit{barīd}.\textsuperscript{28} The use of the term \textit{beredarios} in pre-Islamic Egypt is recorded in a fourth-century document, but not in documents of later date.\textsuperscript{29} From this, it follows that the \textit{beredos} and \textit{beredarios} were (re)introduced in Egypt’s postal system around the third quarter of the first/seventh century. These “new” elements in the postal system possibly had a Syrian origin, where the term \textit{beredarios} is recorded as having been used on the eve of the Muslim conquests.\textsuperscript{30} Interestingly, these changes seem to have predominantly affected the part of the administration that was headed by Muslim officials.\textsuperscript{31} Non-Muslim administrators continued to employ members of their staff, such as \textit{symmachoi}, as messengers throughout the period.\textsuperscript{32} Continuity on the local level is also visible in the pagarch’s central role in the organization of the postal system and his authority over its use. According to \textit{P.Apoll.} 64 and \textit{CPR} IV 1 (Arsinoïtēs/Fayyūm; prob.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Jelle Bruning, \textit{The Rise of a Capital}, ch. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{25} See the discussion in Silverstein, \textit{Postal Systems}, 53–4.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Cf. C. Foss, “Egypt under Muʿāwiya: Part I: Flavius Papas and Upper Egypt”, \textit{Bulletin of SOAS} 72/1, 2009, 13–4.
\item \textsuperscript{27} For the date of these documents, see J. Gascou and K.A. Worp, “Problèmes de documentation apollonopolite”, \textit{Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik} 49, 1982, 88–9.
\item \textsuperscript{28} On the relationship between the Arabic and Greek terminology, see A. Silverstein, “Etymologies and origins: a note of caution”, \textit{British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies} 28/1, 2001, 92–4; Silverstein, \textit{Postal Systems}, 29–30 and 46 (with the references on p. 29, n. 136). Note that the papyrological record for \textit{beredos} is limited to three documents: the two documents mentioned here and the Coptic \textit{O.CrumVC} 49 (Memphis/ Manf; second/eighth century). Other documents, such as \textit{P.Lond.} IV 1347 and 1433–35 (Aphroditō/Ishqūḥ; dates range between 88/707 and 98/716), refer to the same type of horses with a phrase such as δρομικός ἄλαχρας, literally “horse of the relay station”.
\item \textsuperscript{29} See \textit{CPR} XIV 33, introduction (correct the reference to \textit{P.Oxy.} LIV 3758, line 120).
\item \textsuperscript{30} P.M. Sijpesteijn, “The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the beginning of Muslim rule”, in R.S. Bagnall (ed.), \textit{Egypt in the Byzantine World: 300–700} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 448. For the use of \textit{beredarios} in Syria, see Silverstein, \textit{Postal Systems}, 38. For other terms that may have been introduced in Egypt from the Near East, see Sijpesteijn, \textit{Shaping a Muslim State}, 70.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Foss, “Egypt under Muʿāwiya: Part I”, 13.
\end{itemize}
first/seventh century), for example, a pagarch allows the use of post-horses by third parties.33

Within a few decades of the introduction of the post-horse and official courier, the organization of Egypt’s postal system drastically changed. Documents from the reign of the caliph al-Walid (86/705–96/715) and his first successors testify to a starkly increased centralization as well as the Islamization of the postal system. These changes must be considered directly part of or a direct result of the well-known Marwanid reforms, which aimed to support and legitimize the rule of the Marwanids after the Second Civil War (64/683–73/692). The period of the later Marwanids, starting around the year 90/710, constitutes the third phase in the history of the early Islamic postal system.34 From the 90s/710s, for instance, comes our first documentation of the șāḥib al-barīd, “postal chief”, an official appointed next to the pagarch and directly subordinate to the governor. His main tasks seem to have been the management of the postal system. These changes must be considered directly part of or a direct result of the central administration outside its headquarters. Indeed, P.Lond. IV 1347 (Aphroditō/Ishqūh), from 91/710, shows how administrative contact between a pagarch and a șāḥib al-barīd went via the bureau of the governor in Fustāt. This administrative novelty fits well with other developments initiated by the Marwanids, in particular the (gradual) Islamization of administrative personnel and the public display of Muslim sovereignty via Islamic inscriptions on milestones set up along the empire’s main roads.38 This Islamizing policy also affected other personnel in the postal system. Beside a few uncertain names,39 all

33 See also P.Apoll. 45, line 9 (with commentary).
34 The postal system in this period is better known; see Silverstein, Postal Systems, 71–2 for a discussion.
35 Although attested in documents from the (probably early) first/seventh century (e.g. P.Ant. III 197 (Hermopolis/Ushmūn) and P.Oxy. XVI 1908 (Oxyrhynchos/ al-Bahnasā)), the term archistablītēs is mostly found in documents from the Marwanid period. In the preceding century, the dominant term is stabilītēs; see A. Kolb, “Der Cursus Publicus in Ägypten”, in B. Kramer et al. (eds), Akten des 21. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses, Berlin, 13.–19.8.1995 (2 vols, Stuttgart and Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1997), 1: 539.
37 According to P.Lond. IV 1347 and P.Cair.Arab. III 153 (both from Aphroditō/Ishqūh and dated 91/710), one al-Qāsim b. Sayyār was șāḥib al-barīd in the pagarchy of Antaiopolis-Appolōnopolis. One Qays b. ʿAyyār is mentioned as an epikeimenos in the fragmentary context of goods and money related to a postal station in the same pagarchy in 98/716 (P.Lond. IV 1434, line 246); he may have been a successor of al-Qāsim b. Sayyār (cf. P.Lond. IV 1434, comm. to line 246).
39 P.Lond. IV 1383, address: Agōpa; P.Lond. IV 1416, line 51: Melee; P.Lond. IV 1433, line 194: Meeisa; SB XX 15100, line 15: Abū Thouma.
beredarioi mentioned in contemporary documents bear Muslim names. The majority of these beredarioi have no patronymic and some among them are only referred to with a kūnyā.\textsuperscript{40} In agreement with the impression given in the literary sources, this probably indicates that most of these couriers were slaves or mawālī.\textsuperscript{41}

Contemporary documents concerning the financing and maintenance of postal stations likewise testify to the highly centralized character of the later Marwanids’ postal system in Egypt. These documents belong to the archive of Basileios, chief administrator of the Upper Egyptian pagarchy of Aphroditō/İshqîq during the governorate of Qurra b. Sharīk (90/709–96/714). The bureau of the governor in Fustāt apportioned to each pagarchy an amount in coins to be spent on various specified items. For example, the above-mentioned \textit{P.Lond.} IV 1347 records that Basileios’s pagarchy had to contribute 10 1/2 \textit{solidi}, meant for the purchase of fodder, bridles and items known as \textit{pasmusgandia} as well as a year’s wages for an \textit{archistablitēs} (2 \textit{solidi}) and a groom (\textit{hippokomos}; 1 1/2 \textit{solidi}), to the maintenance of a postal station in Mounachthē, a village in the neighbouring pagarchy of Antaiopolis-Apollônopolis.\textsuperscript{42} These expenses can, indeed, be found in the pagarchy’s financial records.\textsuperscript{43} That a postal station was not maintained by the pagarchy in which it was located may indicate that it was dependent on the central administration in Fustāt for its finances and supplies. Elsewhere, I have argued that a similar dependency existed between garrisons, irrespective of their location, and the bureau of the governor.\textsuperscript{44} \textit{CPR} XXII 43 (provenance unknown; 96/715 or 97/716) shows, however, that some pagarchies did finance their own postal stations.

Despite the governor’s tight control over the postal stations, the allocation of a pagarchy’s maintenance costs for a postal station among its various communities could differ. This shows that the responsibility to meet the governor’s demands lay with the pagarchs and that the central administration was only indirectly involved at the local level. For example, \textit{P.Lond.} IV 1433, dated 88/707, records that on Tybi 23 (8 Şafar/18 January) of that year one Râshîd or Rashîd collected various amounts of money in three villages and three \textit{epoikia} in the pagarchy of Aphroditō/İshqîq for the wages of an \textit{archistablitēs} and the purchase of 3 arouras of trefoil for the postal station in Mounachthē. By contrast, \textit{P.Lond.} IV 1434, from 98/716, records that each of five communities paid for


\textsuperscript{41} According to these records, Aphroditō/İshqîq did not contribute to the maintenance of a postal station within its own borders, if it had one (cf. the introduction to \textit{P.Lond.} IV 1347).

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{P.Ross.Georg.} IV 25 (first decades of the second/eighth century).

\textsuperscript{44} Brüning, \textit{The Rise of a Capital}, ch. 3.
the costs of specific items only, including the wages of an archistablitēs and a groom, on Pachōn 4 (2 Ramadān/29 April) of that year. It is important to note that these contributions were all in coins and that the actual items were not requisitioned. Once collected, the contributions were deducted from that year’s tax quota, which the pagarchy needed to send to the central administration in Fustāṭ.45

The pagarchy further bore the costs for the maintenance of those beredarioi who were within its borders. That these couriers received their wages at their destination is shown by documents such as CPR XIV 33 (Hermopolis/Ushmūn; late first/seventh or second/eighth century), a short receipt for the payment of 3 artabas of barley to the beredarios Sulaym. The unpredictable costs of the maintenance of such visitors, as well as their animals,46 were included under the dapanē and then deducted from the tax quota.47

It is a document from the early Abbasid period that gives information on how the postal stations themselves were administered and supplied in the mid-second/eighth century. Dating from 135/753, P.Khalili II 5 records the delivery of various types of fodder at specific postal stations; see the edition below. Documents from the early Abbasid period indicate that the transition from Umayyad to Abbasid rule caused no direct changes.48 In Egypt, a corpus of six documents from Hermopolis/Ushmūn, spanning the period 127/745–141/759, testify to the unabated continuation of the governor’s involvement in the affairs of local ašḥāb al-barād and his authority over the use of the facilities of postal stations and mounts (in addition to the continued use of Umayyad documentary formu- lae).49 P.Khalili II 5 shows a similar measure of control over the postal system’s organization and administration. Similarly, in the east of the Muslim empire, two documents attest to the continued existence under the early Abbasids of a supplementary tax for the maintenance of the postal system.50 The later Marwanids’

45 See the money contributed by the epoikion Paunakis for “fodder for the animals of the postal station of Mounachṭē” (line 80), which is recorded under the logisima (line 75) in P.Lond. IV 1414 (Aphroditō/Ishqūī; early second/eighth century). The payments in this fiscal category are deducted from the tax quota (see the discussions in P.Lond. IV, 125–6 and K. Morimoto, The Fiscal Administration of Egypt in the Early Islamic Period (Kyoto: Dohosha, 1981), 105–7). As to the payment of the personnel of the postal system, cf. Silverstein, Postal Systems, 75–7.

46 O.Crum/V/C 49 (Memphis/Manf; second/eighth century).

47 P.Lond. IV 1441, lines 80, 84 and 89; P.Lond. IV 1443, lines 35, 48 and 56. The wages of beredarioi are also mentioned, but further not specified, in P.Lond. IV 1433, lines 45, 121, 143, 311, 350 and 368. All documents come from Aphroditō/Ishqūī and date from the first quarter of the second/eighth century.

48 Silverstein, Postal Systems, 87.


organization of the postal system, the third phase in its history under Islam, endured into the first years of Abbasid rule. With few other documentary sources for the postal system under the early Abbasids being known, however, the effects of changes to the postal system introduced by the Abbasids during the first fifty years of their rule cannot yet be traced outside literary source material.

**P.Khalili II 5**

Accession no. PPS131 12 × 20 cm Poss. Fustāṭ

Plates, see *P.Khalili II*, 31 Shawwāl 17, 135/April 26, 753

Light-brown papyrus. The original cutting line is preserved at the bottom of side 1/ the top of side 2. Text is missing on the left side and top of side 1 and the left and right sides, as well as the bottom of side 2. Side 1 is written in brownish ink perpendicular to the papyrus’ fibres; side 2 is written along the fibres in two hands (cf. below) in black ink. Although doubtless contemporary, the scripts of both sides are not identical. Significant differences are visible in the realization of, e.g., the medial käf in the word sīkka (side 1, lines 4 and 6; side 2, line 6), the final mūm in bi-sm (side 1, line 1; side 2, line 1), the final nūn in the word mīn (side 1, line 4; side 2, especially lines 5 and 10), and the final háʾ in the word allāh (side 1, line 1; side 2, line 1). A few diacritical dots are used on side 2.

Side 1 is a register documenting the time of the feeding of animals (*dawābb*) in at least two stations, those of al-Qāṣr and ʿAyn Shams. The register is not finished. Empty spaces after the words “day” and “month” (in lines 3 and 4), where one could specify the time of feeding, are left blank.

Side 2 is a “statement” (line 1: *dhikr*) of the amount of fodder delivered to at least one relay station, that of al-Qāṣr (line 6). In its present state of preservation, it consists of two sections, the first being an overview of fodder “for ten months” delivered to al-Qāṣr in the year 135/753 (line 2), the second being another overview that covers an entire year (line 8), probably the same as that of the first section, and possibly related to another station. The second statement is not

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Other, albeit somewhat later, documents from the early Abbasid period occasionally refer to postal stations, see *P.Philad.Arab.* 74 (sent from Hermopolis/Ushmūn; second/eighth or third/ninth century), A. Grohmann, “Neue Beiträge zur arabischen Papyrologie”, *Anzeiger der phil.-hist. Klasse der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 85, 1948, no. 6 (provenance unknown; third/ninth century), and E. Herzberg, *Geschichte der Stadt Samarra* (Hamburg: Verlag von Eckardt & Messtorff, 1948), 272–3 [no. 4]. *P.Heid.Arab.* II 21 (provenance unknown; third/ninth century) refers to an anonymous *sāhib al-barīd*; costs for the private use of the postal system are mentioned in *P.Hamb.Arab.* I 13 (Hermopolis/Ushmūn; 294/906–?).

For a discussion of the early Abbasid period on the basis of literary sources, see Silverstein, *Postal Systems*, 59–84 and 87–9.

Many of the Egyptian documents from the Nasser D. Khalili Collection are likely to come from Fustāṭ, see *P.Khalili I*, 23–4. The toponyms referred to in *P.Khalili II 5* also suggest this provenance.
finished. Amounts of delivered fodder are not specified below the column headings. Line 12 contains the traces of new headings.

The first section contains seven columns. Column $a'$ and line 5 of column $a$ did not belong to the original statement and were added later. These additions are written in a hand which is different from that of the rest of the first section and seems identical with the hand of section 2. As such, (these parts of) lines 4 and 5 are set apart from the rest of the section. Beside palaeography, the organization of the statement also shows that we are dealing with additions. First, column $a$ starts exactly below lines 1 and 2. This probably attests to the original size of the right margin and suggests that column $a'$ was added at a later moment in that margin. Second, the phrase *lahā min* (“of which is/are of”) in column $c$, line 5, is replaced by *wa-min* (“and of”) in the succeeding columns on the same line. This indicates that column $c$ was originally the first to state the amount of fodder. Again, column $a'$ and line 5 of column $b$, which also contain such information, must have been added later. Therefore, the original document contained, after the opening lines 1 and 2, a column with names of relay stations (*a*), a column stating the number of animals in each station (*b*), and then columns stating the amounts of various types of fodder (*c* and further). The columns of the second section of side 2 are not written exactly below those of the first section.

**Side 1**

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم} & \text{فظاظة واللحى} & \text{الفددة} & \text{فيوم} & \text{شهير} & \text{بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم} \\
\text{vac.} & \text{vac.} & \text{vac.} & \text{..} & \\
\end{array}
\]

**Side 2**

\[
\begin{array}{ccccccccc}
\text{القرط لعشرة/اشهر سنة خمس وتلثين وثمانية من ليلة خلت من شوال} & \text{ارادب قناطير فندين الال} & \text{قنا طضر} & \text{فيصا} & \text{سكا القصر} & \text{طاع} & \text{لاقنا عشيرة شهرآ} & \text{vac.} & \text{vac.} & \text{vac.} & \text{vac.} \\
\text{من القرط المدقوق} & \text{النواب لى من الشعر} & \text{من التين ومن القرط} & \text{من القرط} & \text{من القرط} & \text{من القرط} & \text{من القرط} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من القصر} & \text{من القصر} & \text{من الشعر} \\
\text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} & \text{من الشعر} \\
\end{array}
\]

Diacritical dots: 1.
Translation

**Side 1**
1. In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate.
2. Fustāṭ and al-...
3. [ ]
4. I fed the riding animals of the station of al-Qaṣr from day [ ]
5. [ ]
6. And I fed (the riding animals of) the station of `Ayn Shams, day [mon]th ...[

**Side 2**
1. In name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. Statement of what has been given of fodder and trefoil for ten months of the year one hundred thirty-five, 13 days remaining of Shawwāl 135.
2. vac.
3. a’ a b c
4. Qinṭārs Irdabbs
5. Of] stamped trefoil And given of trefoil Animals Of which are barley 2,100
6. ] 2,203 The station of al-Qaṣr 60 3,000
d e f
7. Qinṭārs Faddāns [ ]
8. And of chaff And of trefoil ... [ ]
9. 2,400 [ ]
10. For twelve months vac.
11. g h i j
12. Qinṭārs Qinṭārs Faddāns
13. And of bar[ley And of chaff And of stamped trefoil
14. k Irdabbs
15. ... 
16. vac.
17. ... 

**Commentary**

**Side 1**
2. *Wa-ḥl-...*. The identity of this toponym remains unknown. Possible interpretations, such as al-Bujūm and al-Nakhāmūn in the eastern delta[54] or al-Buḥayra, in medieval times possibly the name of a town in the western

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delta, 55 are too remote from Fustāt and ‘Ayn Shams to be considered likely candidates.

4. *Al-Qasr*. Judging from the mention of Fustāt and ‘Ayn Shams in lines 2 and 6, this toponym is in all likelihood to be identified with Qāṣr al-Sham’ (Babylon), the Byzantine fortress located just to the south of Fustāt. Al-Ya‘qūbī (d. 292/905 or later) writes explicitly that Qāṣr al-Sham’ was simply known as al-Qasr, “the Fortress”. 56 This statement is confirmed by this toponym’s use in historical sources. 57 That Qāṣr al-Sham’ is meant may also be reflected in the 60 animals that are held in al-Qasr (line 5). Compared with a postal station in the pagarchy of Antiochopolis-Apollōnopolis, which counted 14 animals in 98/716, 58 al-Qasr surely was a large and, by implication, important station. Another reference to a place called al-Qasr, which does not seem to be located in the vicinity of either Fustāt or ‘Ayn Shams, can be found in *P.Philad.Arab.* 54 (third/ninth–fourth/tenth century; the Arsinoitēs/Fayyūm or Hermopolis/Ushmūn). 59

6. ‘Ayn Shams. The Late Antique history of ‘Ayn Shams (Heliopolis), located c. 18 kilometres north of Fustāt, is poorly understood. 60 The town appears very infrequently in documentary source material. By the time *P.Sijp.* 25 (Apollōnopolis Parva or Antiochopolis) was written, probably in 80/699 or 95/714, the town was still the capital of a pagarchy. It is not known if ‘Ayn Shams kept this administrative centrality until the late-third/ninth century, when Muslim historians and geographers first mention a kūra, “district”, of ‘Ayn Shams. 61 That *P.Khalili II* 5, the only Arabic papyrus known to mention ‘Ayn Shams, refers to a postal station in the town probably indicates that it continued to be of local importance until the mid-second/eighth century. Third/ninth- and fourth/tenth-century geographers do not mention a postal station at ‘Ayn Shams. The city seems not to have


58 *P.Lond.* IV 1434, line 245.

59 The phrase sāhib al-qāṣr in *P.Cair.Arab.* VI 410–11 (third/ninth century; al-Ushmūn) and *P.Ryl.Arab.* I § VII 16 (date unknown; prob. Upper Egypt) must be taken literally (“lord of the fortress”) and does not contain a toponym.


been a major stop on itineraries between Fustāṭ and the north and north-east.62

Side 2

1. Dhikr alladhī duḍi’ a ilaynā min a’l[āf]. This title is written on the same line as the basmala. This is an unusual, but not unattested, practice in documents pre-dating the third/ninth century; see K.M. Younes, “Joy and sorrow in early Muslim Egypt: Arabic papyrus letters: text and content” (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2013), no. 1, commentary to line 1 (p. 88); see also E.M. Grob, Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus: Form and Function, Content and Context (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 191–2 (and 191, n. 97 for exceptions) and P.Vente, 2:13 [§ 32].

The tale of the ‘āyn in duḍi’a reaches to the bottom of line 2. Instead of ilaynā, the scribe first wrote ilā (“to”) and then corrected it into ilaynā by writing over the alif maqsūra. The reconstruction of the word a’l[āf] is based on the assumption that, like side 1, the trefoil, barley and chaff listed on side 2 were used as ‘alaf, “fodder”. According to classical Arabic grammar, the use of a’lāf, a “plural of paucity” (Ar. jami’ qilla) of ‘alaf, indicates that the number of types of fodder in this document ranges between three and ten. See W. Wright, Arabic Grammar (2 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896–98), 1:234 [§ 307]; cf. S. Hopkins, Studies in the Grammar of Early Arabic: Based upon Papyri Datable to before 300 A.H./912 A.D. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 110 [§ 87.f].

2. Khamas wa-thalāthīn wa-mi’a. The word thalāthīn is written with a scriptio defectiva of the ā. See Hopkins, Studies, 9–10 [§ 9.c].


5. (col. a’) Min al-qurt al-madqūq; (col. a) wa-duḍi’a min al-qurt 2,100. Hand 2.

6. ḫγy[l]. The letter that follows the c consists of a separately written vertical and horizontal stroke. While it resembles a τ (“300”), this option is ruled out by the clearly legible c. Only tens, units, and fractions may follow c. The reading f[l] (“1/300”), which is theoretically possible, seems unlikely in a description of an amount of trefoil. If the vertical stroke belongs to a letter now broken off, the reading f (“10”) instead of y should be considered.

6. Sikkat al-Qasr. See the commentary to line 4 of side 1 above.

8–12. Hand 2.

10. Wa-min al-[sha’ār]. The restoration of this entry is based on the beginnings of the entries in columns h to j. Another possible restoration would be la-hā min al-[sha’ār] (“of which are barley”), cf. column c.

12. The traces visible in this line are of letters underneath a piece of papyrus that should be removed.

Abbreviations


P. Mert. II

P. Oxy. XVI

P. Oxy. LIV

P. Philad. Arab.

P. Ross. Georg. III

P. Ross. Georg. IV

P. Ryl. Arab. I

P. Sijp.

P. Vente

P. Vind. Tand.

SB I–XXVIII

SB Kopt. I