

Lajos Berkes: *Dorfverwaltung und Dorfgemeinschaft in Ägypten von Diokletian zu den Abbasiden*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2017 (Philippika 104). VIII, 300 p. € 84.00. ISBN: 978-3-447-10734-1.

Papyrology has been waiting for this book for more than a century, as Lajos Berkes' opening quotation from Ulrich Wilcken's *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyrologie* (1912) shows. Indeed, although papyri come overwhelmingly from rural sites, they have been exploited disproportionately for questions closer to the hearts of classicists and ancient historians – generally topics related to Graeco-Roman culture (political, social, linguistic, or intellectual) and its impact on the country. Villages have often been seen as the necessary hinterland of the municipal system that slowly established itself in Egypt, and understood primarily in their relation to urban centres, including through the study of their 'Romanisation' and 'Hellenisation'. Paradoxically perhaps, since papyrology is in essence a bottom-up discipline, Egyptian villages of the Roman period have mostly been approached top-down. That is, of course, a very general statement, and there are *ad hoc* exceptions where such and such village or group of villages have been studied through a local lens. Yet until Berkes' book there was no systematic, overall treatment of villages on their own terms.

The product of a doctoral thesis that won several well-deserved prizes, *Dorfverwaltung und Dorfgemeinschaft* brings together and analyses all the evidence offered by papyri for the day-to-day administration and management of village life in Late Antiquity – understood here in its 'long' version, from Diocletian to the Abbasids. Beautifully written and surprisingly readable for such an erudite and austere subject, the book takes us on a journey across the Egyptian countryside where minute philological analysis goes hand in hand with a wealth of anecdotal detail on the everyday life of the inhabitants. Berkes often cites and translates the texts he is discussing, which livens up the narrative, but also shows through example that technical analysis is not an end in itself, but helps untangle historical puzzles and offer a more accurate and coherent view of the society under study.

A substantial introduction sets out the main questions raised by the documentation, and discusses at some length the notion of 'village'. First the author discusses the terms used in late antique Egypt to describe a community (*κοινόν*, *κοινότης*) and the filiation of the institution of the village *κοινόν*. From

Diocletian onwards, collective tax responsibility became one of the key factors that defined the status of such a community. The *κοινόν* could possess land in its collective name and was fiscally responsible for it. It was also collectively responsible for its members, whom it could send to fill various obligations that fell on the community as a whole. Berkes links this development with the more general policy under the Tetrarchy to make groups collectively responsible for the obligations of their members, thus delegating some of the difficult decisions which were then made internally. This was true of villages as it was of guilds and, later, of monasteries, all of which are called *κοινόν* in the documents. That principle gave much power to the top layer of the village's inhabitants, those who ran its everyday business, but also served as intermediaries with the higher authorities.

The rest of the book is devoted to that top layer of officials and their roles and attributions. Understanding these roles necessitated a careful and systematic analysis of a plethora, but complex and unclear documentation, where informality often blurs terminology, and where keeping chronology and geography in mind is essential, as both the semantic field and the practices it referred to were fluid through space and time. In chapter 2 ('Dorfvorsteher', 29–87), Berkes dissects the evidence for the *πρωτοκομῆται*, the *μείζονες* and *μειζότεροι*, and the Coptic terms *ⲗⲁⲱⲁⲛⲈ* and *ⲁⲓⲠⲈ*; he also gives a brief overview of the *κωμάρχης*, based on the 1970 dissertation of Herbert Mißler, to which he refers the reader for more detailed analysis.¹ This is also because from the fourth century onwards, the terms *πρωτοκομῆτης* and *μείζων* are used as alternatives to *κωμάρχης* – even though the latter takes some time to fall into disuse, and is still found in Middle Egypt in the sixth century.

The section on the *πρωτοκομῆτης* clarifies many points regarding that institution, even though many texts are far from transparent. An office that was still a liturgy in the fourth century, it evolves to include a range of more or less official attributions and duties, for which it is difficult to draw a line between what was an official role and what was the result of social and moral authority. Villages had several *πρωτοκομῆται*, as they did *κωμάρχαι*, and the sixth-century texts cited by the author show that the term could refer to the village elite as a whole. They were responsible for the village's finances, and acted as its representatives. To illustrate the population's expectations from

1 H. Mißler: *Der Komarch. Ein Beitrag zur Dorfverwaltung im ptolemäischen, römischen und byzantinischen Ägypten*. Diss. Marburg a.d. Lahn 1970.

the *πρωτοκωμήτης*, in other words the ideal image of the official, Berkes analyses a short passage from the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (14,13–14), in which a *πρωτοκωμήτης* brags about his qualities. Even though his self-presentation is couched in the language of ascetic virtue, Berkes shows that the catalogue of virtues listed in the passage corresponds rather well with what the holders of this office actually did or were expected to do. The section brings out very clearly the role of the *πρωτοκωμήται* as the powerful local patrons with whom lay the fortunes of the rest of the village population.

The following section (53–82) discusses the *μείζονες* (and to some extent *μειζότεροι*) at some length, not least because this involves an engagement with substantial previous scholarship on those terms and their meaning. Having first established that the second term has often been misunderstood, and in fact should be taken to mean *maior domus*, the author leaves it for later and proceeds in this section – still devoted to the village management layer – to discuss the *μείζονες*. This is also a term, and a corresponding role, that changed over time. Probably introduced as an official function by Diocletian, its remit remains unclear during the fourth century. From the fifth century onwards, the title is found more and more often, first in connection with the Apiones, and later in other localities of Middle and Lower Egypt. In that period, the term clearly refers to the highest official in the village, to whom the remaining *πρωτοκωμήται* answered. The Aphrodito material uses the term as the equivalent of the Coptic *ⲗⲁⲱⲁⲛⲒⲈ*. A short section (83–87) on this last title, as well as the Coptic *ⲁⲡⲒⲈ*, broadly the equivalent of *πρωτοκωμήτης*, closes the second chapter on village officials.

The *μειζότεροι* are the subject of an excursus forming chapter 3 (88–121), which collects the references for that title not only in Egypt, but also in the rest of the Byzantine empire, as well as in Greek and Coptic texts from Nubia (with a very helpful list on p. 119). Berkes' analysis of the material shows that from the fourth to the twelfth century, the term did not change from its initial meaning of head of the household staff, which developed in the West under the name *maior domus*. It was generally used in private households, but is also found in ecclesiastical institutions and parts of the *domus divina*.

Chapter 4 ('Weitere Termini für Dorfvorsteher', 122–167) goes back to village officials, reviewing the more specialised terms such as *ἱερέυς*, found in some villages of the Arsinoite and the Hermopolite; *κεφαλαιωτής*, a tax official at the village level; *διοικητής*, a term that in Late Antiquity seems essentially linked to the level of village administration with attributions that are difficult

to pin down exactly, but seem to have involved judicial duties and a relatively long time in office. Perhaps the most famous *δοικητής* of Late Antiquity is Basileios, active in Aphrodito in the early eighth century and the recipient of scores of strongly worded letters from the governor Qurra b. Sharik. His case can hardly help in clarifying the attributions of the office, however, because of the special autonomous status of Aphrodito. Berkes notes some more informal and generic terms used to describe prominent villagers, such as *πρωτεύοντες*, with the Coptic equivalent *ΝΟΔ ΝΡΩΜΕ* ('great men'), or *ἡγούμενος* or *ἐπιχείμενος*, describing those responsible for the village.

Next come the officials described as 'Dorfschreiber' (136–157), the *κωμογραμματεὺς* and the *γνωστήρ*. The terms varied in their usage, and the section opens with a very useful terminological analysis, before covering their important role in village life. They were essential interlocutors for the inhabitants who needed to carry out written transactions, be they private or official, and also played a role in the tax collection. The little information we have on their social status shows that at least some of them were part of the landed elites of the village. Even though they were officially of lower hierarchical status, *κωμογραμματεῖς* most certainly had considerable power and leverage within the village, and connections beyond it. The *γνωστήρ* was, for his part, a sort of registration officer, keeping count and control over the population of specific areas, both in cities and villages – largely for tax purposes, but probably also such operations as conscription and forced labour. The last official discussed is the *βοηθὸς κώμης*, a form of mediator and networker evolving between the level of the village and that of the pagarchy.

The fifth chapter ('Verwaltung und Dorfgemeinschaft in Djeme', 168–200) offers a synthetic view using the village of Jeme as a case study. The choice is guided by the important documentation that has come down to us from the area, offering insights not only on the internal structure of the village, but also of its relation with smaller settlements around it, with the capital of its own nome, Hermonthis, but also with cities further to the north, like Koptos. For this reason, life in Jeme has not been neglected by scholars, and has even been the subject of two books, one by Terry Wilfong published in 2002,² and focused on the village's women as they appear mainly in their

2 T. Wilfong: *Women of Jeme. Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt*. Ann Arbor 2002 (New Texts from Ancient Cultures).

legal dealings and transactions, and another by Jennifer Cromwell,³ centred on one of the village's most prolific scribes, Aristophanes, but branching out into the wider implications for scholarship of a village scribe's work. As it was published in 2017, after *Dorfverwaltung und Dorfgemeinschaft*, it was not used by Berkes – but in many ways, it is complementary to his section on 'Dorfschreiber'. Jeme's documentation also earned it a full sub-chapter in Chris Wickham's *Framing the early middle ages* (2005)⁴, which Berkes discusses briefly and positively in the chapter's conclusion. His analysis generally confirms Wickham's observations about the social structure and the power relations within the village – even though Berkes, rightly I believe, insists more on the element of negotiation present in those relations. Despite all the work on Jeme, its administration had never been addressed systematically – except in part by Wickham. This chapter is therefore extremely welcome, as it clarifies a number of documents and their relevance for the village's everyday life and management.

A very clear and systematic concluding chapter (201–231) reviews the chronological and spatial distribution of the evidence and the titles it documents, and brings together the different aspects of administration and community in Egyptian villages. Berkes inserts his results in the broader debate on the existence or not of close-knit village communities in the late antique Mediterranean, demonstrating that villages were not, as has been argued, merely brought together artificially through their collective fiscal responsibilities, but were indeed communities also in the social sense. He also inserts his findings within the early Byzantine empire as a whole, showing that on the whole, village administration took on the same forms, at least in the provinces for which there is enough evidence to judge. Four technical appendices, and a substantial bibliography, as well as a series of thematic indices, close the volume.

So papyrology has not waited in vain: Berkes has delivered a masterful study of the evidence for the everyday administrative aspects of life in villages, and has made a strong and well-documented case for the existence of a strong communal feeling in late antique rural Egypt. This sense of community did

3 J. Cromwell: *Recording Village Life. A Coptic Scribe in Early Islamic Egypt*. Ann Arbor 2017 (New Texts from Ancient Cultures).

4 Ch. Wickham: *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800*. Oxford 2005.

not go without tensions, internal hierarchy, and mutual exploitation, but these are also processes that create mutual dependence, and ultimately are what creates communities and holds them together. In this book, Berkes primarily aimed to clarify the documentation and make it speak for itself in a structured manner. Although the book is organised to fulfil that aim, it is also clear from the introduction and the conclusion, as well as from the way the questions are asked, that the author is very conscious of the historiography of rural history well beyond Egypt. Throughout, one feels a certain tension between the philologist and the social historian in the author. In my opinion, this tension is rather satisfactorily resolved, as Berkes limits both aspects to only what is necessary to make his point. The subject necessitated a thorough review and revision of hundreds of difficult documents, and this has been done in a reader-friendly way, with brief conclusions recapitulating the main points at the end of every chapter, and sometimes even of chapter sections. But never, despite the mounts of erudition, does Berkes lose sight of the bigger picture. This is a quality one would like to see more often in papyrological publications.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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