

# Trouble in Alexandria in a Letter of the Sixth Century

*Margaret Maehler*

**A**MONG THE POPYRI from Hermoupolis now in the papyrus collection of the Egyptian Museum in West Berlin,<sup>1</sup> a fragment of a letter has come to light which, although found at Hermoupolis, must have been written in or near Alexandria: *P.Berol.* 25009 measures 14.7 cm. by 31.7 cm. and is incomplete at the top and the bottom. The text of the letter is written across the fibres in a handwriting which can be compared with R. Seider, *Paläographie der griechischen Papyri* I nos. 55 (probably written in A.D. 551) and 57 (A.D. 595) and appears to belong to the second half of the sixth century (see PLATE 2). Apart from diacritical marks on initial *iota* and *upsilon*, the writer uses no lectional signs and does not write *ἰῶτα ἀνεκφώνητον*.<sup>2</sup> The surface of the other side of the papyrus has been partially rubbed away, but the beginning of the address of the letter is still legible. It is written roughly in the middle of the fragment parallel to the fibres in the narrow, stylized uncials often used for addresses and runs: ✠ΔΕΣΠ(ΟΘΗ) Μ(ΟΥ) ΤΑ Π(ΑΝΤΑ) ΜΕΓΑΛΟΠΡ(ΕΠΕΣΤΑΤΩΙ) ΚΟΜΙΤΙ . . . . As the addressee is called *comes*, he must belong to the 'upper class', presumably of Hermoupolis where the papyrus was found, and might be, for instance, an official in the administration or the owner or steward of an estate.

Above and below the address are, in all, eight lines of what appears to be a draught written later than the letter and in a different hand. The few phrases of this badly preserved text which can be read are:

<sup>1</sup> Ägyptisches Museum, Schloss-Str. 70, D-1000 Berlin 19. For another letter from this collection see *GRBS* 15 (1974) 305–11. I am indebted to Dr Herwig Maehler for a photograph and a transcript of the papyrus and the permission to publish them, and I thank him, Professor Gustav Karlsson and Herr Hansjörg Wölke, for an interesting and useful discussion of the text. Professor Karlsson and Dr Maehler will be publishing more Byzantine letters from Berlin in *ZPE* and *JÖBG*.

<sup>2</sup> For a letter of the same period with accents and mute *iota* see *P.Cair.Masp.* 077.

→ (line 1) καὶ πρὸς τὸν πανεύφημον δοῦκα---|<sup>2</sup>ὁμοίως ὑπανεπ[ ]---|  
<sup>3</sup>πάντες οἱ ἐν λόγῳ ἀξιωματικοὶ τε καὶ κτήτορες ἔφασαν ὀφείλειν |  
<sup>4</sup>πέμψαι \τινὰς εὐνοπολήπτους/ ἐπὶ τὴν Ἀλεξανδρέων (scil. πόλιν) χάριν---  
 |<sup>5</sup>---χρυσιο --- τοῦ μέλλοντος πρὸς τοὺς ἐπαρχι.[ ] |<sup>6</sup>ζητηθῆναι εἰς  
 κατα- --- τῶν χ[ω]μάτω[ν ] |<sup>7</sup>μέρεσιν \τεσσεράκοντα/ --- (-)δοσεως  
 τῶν ὑμετέρων γραμμάτων ἐς τοῦτο |<sup>8</sup>αὐτὸ εὐτρεπ- ---

The words in line 3, “all the persons of good reputation and the landowners said [possibly to the *dux Thebaidis*? See line 1] that some respectable people ought to be sent to Alexandria,” and the reference to dikes in line 6 suggest that this text may reflect the reaction in Hermoupolis to the news contained in the letter itself. This hypothesis is too uncertain, however, to be of use in the interpretation of the letter, the text of which follows:

## TEXT

↓ . . . . εἰς χ[.]ρη εἰς Ἀλεξάνδρειαν ρο . . [.]ο[.]  
 καὶ τὰς ἀποθήκας τὰς οὔσας ἐν τῇ Νέᾳ Πόλει ὕδατος ἐπλήρωσεν καὶ θέαμα  
 καινὸν ἐστὶν σήμερον ἰδεῖν Ἀλεξάνδρειαν. τοῦ οὖν πα[ν]ευφήμου ὑπάτου  
 τῇ ἐξῆς τουτέστιν τῇ νεομηνία τοῦ παρόντος μηνὸς Χ[ο]ιακ ἀναπλεύσαντ[ο]ς  
 5 ἐπὶ τὴν Χορτασὸ εἰς ἐπίσκεψιν τῶν εἰρημένων τόπων, ἡμεῖς αὐτοὶ τῇ  
 δευ[τ]έρα τοῦ αὐτοῦ παρόντος μηνὸς εἰσῆλθαμεν ἐν Ἀλεξανδρ(εία) βραδεία  
 ὥρα μετ-  
 [αλλ]άζαντες τὸ σχῆμα ἡμῶν, ἵνα μὴ κρατηθῶμεν, καὶ μετὰ πολλοῦ κόπου  
 [καὶ] ζημίας πολλῆς ἐδυνήθημεν αὐτὰ τὰ ἱμάτια ἡμῶν τὰ καὶ ὑπολειφθέντα  
 εἰς-  
 [.] . εἰν, ἐπειδὴ μὴ ἕτερόν τι ὑπελείφθη ἡμῖν διὰ τὰς πολλὰς ἡμέρας ἄσπερ  
 διετελέσαμεν  
 10 κατὰ τὸν ποταμόν· καὶ κατὰ τὴν 5 τοῦ παρόντος μηνὸς Χοιακ μετὰ τὸ  
 ὑποστρέψαι τὸν  
 [.] . τη . ε . . [.] . . α . ε . φη [ . ] . . [ . . ] ε [ . . ] ζ [ . . ] . δε . . [ . . ] . . . . α πε  
 . . . αρωγη . . ε . . [

2 ὕδατος pap.

3 ἰδειν, ὑπατον pap.

5 leg. Χορτασώ

6 βραδια pap.

7 ἵνα pap.

8 ἱματια, ὑπολειφθεντα pap.

9 ὑπελειφθη pap.

10 5̄:; ὑποστρεψαι pap.

## TRANSLATION

“---<sup>2</sup>and he (it) filled the warehouses in the New Town with water, and Alexandria is a strange sight to see today. Well, after the Most Honourable Consul sailed up to Chortaso the next day, that is, on the first of the current month, Choiak, to inspect the places I mentioned, we for our part came into Alexandria on the second of the same current month, late in the evening and in disguise so that we should not

be caught, and with a lot of trouble and a lot of expense (or loss) we managed to . . . only our cloaks which in fact were left, since nothing else of ours was left because of the number of days we had spent on the river (or canal). And on the sixth of the current month, Choiak, after the return of the ---”

## NOTES ON THE TEXT

LINE 1. εἰςχ[.]ρη: The subjunctive εἰςχωρηῆ is the most probable reading, but the verb is not common. After that, εἰς Ἀλεξάνδρειαν with a proper name, e.g. Ῥουφ[ἴν]ο[ς], Ῥούφ[εἰ]ο[ς] or Ῥουτ[ίλι]ο[ς], or Ἀλεξάνδρεια(ν) πρὸς τ[.]ο[ς] are possible. If a proper name is to be read, this person may have been helped to enter or prevented from entering Alexandria by the subject of ἐπλήρωσεν in line 2. I cannot tell whether R. could be identical with the consul in line 3, nor can I identify him, but it may be worth mentioning a Rufinus who was military commander in Africa and, apparently, *dux Tripolitanae* around A.D. 540.<sup>3</sup>

LINE 2. ἐπλήρωσεν may be governed by a human or by a natural agent: for instance a tidal wave after an earthquake or torrential rain; see *infra* p.201. For the Νέα Πόλις in Alexandria see A. Ausfeld in *Philologus* 63 (1904) 481–97, who comes to the conclusion that this name was given to the part of the city on the eastern harbour which had to be rebuilt after the fire in the civil war of 48 B.C. It is known from papyrus documents of the first to fourth centuries that the grain levied in Egypt was brought by boat *via* the canal connecting Alexandria with the Nile to the public granaries in the ‘New Town’, where it was stored before being shipped to Rome or, later, Constantinople.<sup>4</sup> These granaries are usually referred to as δημόσιοι θησαυροί or δημόσια ὄρρια, so ἀποθήκας in line 2 may be a general term for public and private warehouses: *cp.* Cass. Dio 42.38.2 (on the civil war) ὥστε ἄλλα τε καὶ τὸ νεώριον τὰς τε ἀποθήκας καὶ τοῦ σίτου καὶ τῶν βίβλων . . . καθῆναι.

Το θέαμα *cp.* Procop. *Aed.* 1.1.27 (on the Haghia Sophia) θέαμα τοίνυν ἡ ἐκκλησία κεκαλλιστευμένον γεγένηται, τοῖς μὲν ὀρώσιν ὑπερφυές, τοῖς δὲ ἀκούουσι παντελῶς ἄπιστον (*cp.* Pind. *Pyth.* 1.26f).

LINE 3. *σήμερον*: The warehouses were still flooded when the letter was written, that is, sometime after the sixth of Choiak (see line 10), so if the narrative at this point follows the order of events and the flooding took place the day before the consul left Alexandria, they will have been under water for a week or more. It does seem a little strange, however, that the consul should leave town immediately after a catastrophe, and it is possible that the flooding actually took place after his departure and that τοῦ οὖν resumes a narrative which the writer interrupted before line 1 in order to describe the flooding: see LSJ *s.v.* οὖν II.

<sup>3</sup> See RE 1A (1914) 1198, *s.v.* RUFINUS 35.

<sup>4</sup> See A. Calderini, *ΘΗΣΑΥΡΟΙ* (Milan 1924) 26f and 57 (plus *P.Oxy.* 2408, 3 and 9).

*ὑπάτου*: With the exception of the emperors themselves, there are no more regular consuls after the year 541; if, therefore, the assignment of the papyrus to the second half of the sixth century is correct, this consul will be an *ex consule ordinario* or an honorary consul. \*Υπατος is used loosely instead of ἀπὸ ὑπάτων ὀρδυναρίων in *P.Oxy.* 1911, 148 (A.D. 557); 1913, 8; 1917, 2 and *P.Kl.Form.* I 86, 2 (*Stud.Pal.* III) of Flavius Strategius Apio, who was *consul ordinarius* of the eastern empire in 539, and of people of consular rank in *P.Oxy.* 1991, 8 (A.D. 616, of Apio's greatgrandson, Strategius); in *P.Cair.Masp.* 002 III 24; 004, 21; 097<sup>v</sup> B 20; *P.Fuad* 86, 10; *SB* 9616, 15 (of the *dux Thebaidis*); *cp.* *SB* 4671<sup>v</sup>, 2. LINE 4. Choiak 1st=Nov. 27th, in the Gregorian calendar Dec. 10th. The level of the water in the Nile and in the canal to Alexandria would have started to sink by this date.

LINE 5. *Χορτασο* is written with final *omicron* also in *SB* 9590, 22 (seventh century), but with *omega*, *ibid.* 5 and 11 and in *Stud.Pal.* X 233 ii 5 (fifth century). It was a village near Heracleopolis in Arcadia. After the coming into force of Justinian's thirteenth edict, issued probably in 539,<sup>5</sup> according to which Arcadia and Alexandria with Northern Egypt became separate administrative units placed directly under the control of the *praefectus praetorio Orientis*, the 'consul' presumably would have needed special authorization from the emperor or the *p.p.O.* to act in an official capacity at both Alexandria and Chortaso.<sup>6</sup> If his private interests were involved, it may be worth noting that the consul Apio mentioned above owned land in the vicinity of Heracleopolis.<sup>7</sup>

*ἐπίσκεψιν*: The regular official land inspection of Roman times seems to have been discontinued in the Byzantine period,<sup>8</sup> so presumably something unusual, perhaps a natural disaster, had occurred at Chortaso and was described in the missing part of the letter. For *ἐπίσκεψις* in a non-technical sense see *SB* 9397, 2 (sixth/seventh century) *ἐξῆλθον εἰς ἐπίσκεψιν τῆς . . . ἀδελφῆς*.

LINE 6. *ἐν Ἀλεξανδρ(εία)*: In line 1 the writer apparently remembered to write *εἰς Ἀλεξάνδρειαν*, but here he has lapsed into normal late Greek usage: *cp.* *PSI* 953, 68 and 78; *P.Amh.* 157, 1; 158, 1f; *P.Oxy.* 151 and 1904, 2.

*βραδεία ὥρα* also occurs in *P.Cair.Masp.* 077, 8.

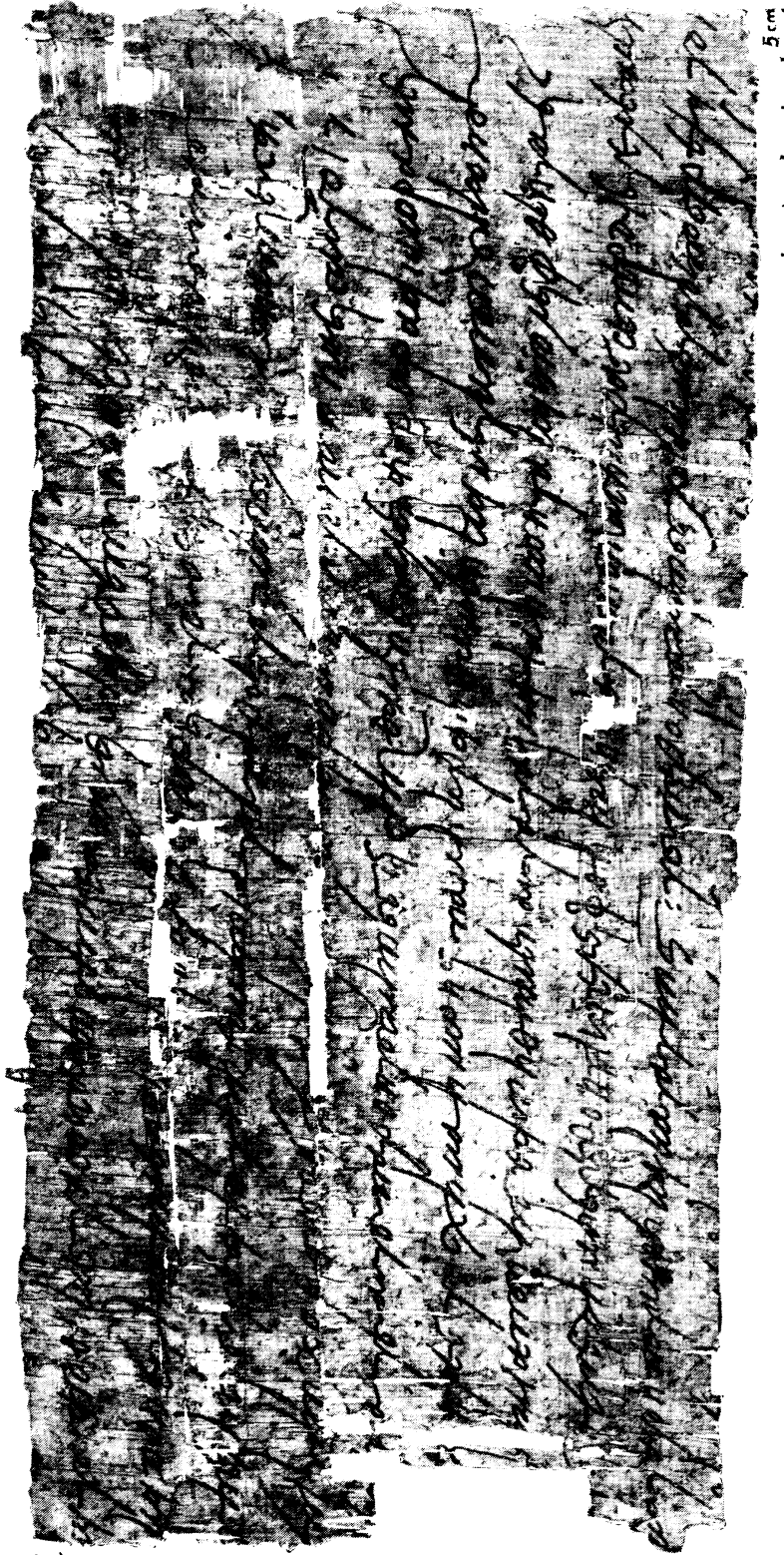
LINES 8–10. The writer and his companions had spent so long on the river that their resources were exhausted and they had only their personal clothing left:

<sup>5</sup> Or, less probably, in 554: see G. Rouillard, *L'administration civile de l'Égypte byzantine*<sup>2</sup> (Paris 1928) 20–24; G. Malz, *Byzantion* 16 (1942–43) 135–41; E. R. Hardy, *Christian Egypt, Church and People* (New York 1952) 226 n.52, and "The Egyptian Policy of Justinian," *DO Papers* 22 (1968) 35.

<sup>6</sup> For a doubtful parallel see Dioscorus' eulogy of Athanasius, *P.Cair.Masp.* 097<sup>v</sup> B 18 *γῆς Φαρίης κρατέων ἡδ' Ἀρκαδίης μετὰ Θήβης* (*cp. ibid.* 055<sup>v</sup>, 2), regarded by Maspero as a poetical exaggeration.

<sup>7</sup> See E. R. Hardy, *The Large Estates of Byzantine Egypt* (New York 1931) 82.

<sup>8</sup> See D. Bonneau, "La disparition de l'épiskepsis officielle des terres au IV<sup>e</sup> s. ap. J.-C.," *Actes du X<sup>e</sup> Congrès int. de Papyrologues* (Warsaw 1964) 142–48.



P. BEROL. 25009, FRAGMENT OF SIXTH-CENTURY LETTER (reduced)

to *αὐτά* = 'only' see Kühner-Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache*<sup>3</sup> II.1 652f § 468, Anmerk. 2.

*εὐ*[. .] *· εἰν*: *-εἰν* is preceded by a letter on the line followed by one with a tail, e.g. *rho* or *tau*; *εἰσφέρειν* would fit, and Professor Rudolf Keydell has suggested that the writer and his companions had to leave their own clothes on the ship when they stole into Alexandria in disguise. Afterwards, they managed to bring them (or have them brought) into town with a lot of trouble and expense (i.e. they probably had to bribe someone to help them).

*κατὰ τὸν ποταμόν* could mean either travelling by boat to Alexandria or hiding among the rushes on the Nile or the canal: cp. John of Nikiu's account of the insurrection of Heraclius, *cap.* 108, 15,<sup>9</sup> during which the adherents of Phocas concealed themselves in their boats on the canal after failing to take Alexandria; and Justinian, *Edict* 13, *capp.* 17 and 22, which mention that insurgents from Alexandria often took refuge in the Mareotes. As the writer and his companions entered Alexandria in disguise, it is likely that they had been obliged to escape from the city and lie low.

LINE 11. *· α . ε . φ η [ . . ]*: *πανεύφη[μ]ο(ν)? "Υ]πατον* cannot be read at the beginning of the line.

The flooding of the warehouses can have been the result of a natural catastrophe which might also have caused damage at Chortaso, or of an act of sabotage. The latter is perhaps more likely, considering Alexandria's reputation for riots<sup>10</sup> and the precautions taken by the writer to avoid detection in the city. The main causes of the unrest in Alexandria during the sixth century were the taxation policy of the imperial government and its attempts to bring the Monophysite church of Egypt into conformity with the Melkite or imperial church by imposing patriarchs of its own choosing upon it.<sup>11</sup> Justinian's main concern in *Edict* 13 (see *supra* on line 5) is to safeguard the supply of corn to Constantinople: the *augustalis* of Alexandria and Northern Egypt is made a military governor and authorized to use his troops against people who instigate disturbances to avoid paying taxes.<sup>12</sup> His troops, however, do not seem always to have had the situation in Alexandria under control, and sometime before 560 when Procopius wrote his work *On Buildings*, the place in Alexandria where the corn

<sup>9</sup> See *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, transl. R. H. Charles (London 1916) 174, or *Chronique de Jean, Évêque de Nikiou*, publié par M. H. Zotenberg, *Notices et extraits des mss. de la Bibliothèque Nationale* 24 (Paris 1883) 548.

<sup>10</sup> Cp. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ed. E. W. Brooks, *PO* 18.4 (Paris 1924) 528: "and severe fighting and much slaughter took place, as is common in that great city."

<sup>11</sup> See the article of Hardy (*supra* n.5) and his p.1 n.1 for further literature.

<sup>12</sup> See *Edict* 13, *capp.* 1 and 11, and *supra* on line 10 of the papyrus.

barges were unloaded—and, presumably, where the state granaries stood (see *supra* on line 2)—had to be fortified: ἐπειδὴ τῷ δήμῳ ἐς στάσιν πολλάκις καθισταμένῳ ἐνταῦθα διολωλέναι τῷ εἰτῷ ξυνέβη, βασιλεὺς Ἰουστινιανὸς τειχίσματι τόνδε τὸν χώρον περιβαλὼν τὴν ἐπὶ τῷ εἰτῷ ἐπιβουλήν ἀνεχαίτιζε (Procop. *Aed.* 6.1.3–4). This place was called Φιάλη,<sup>13</sup> which suggests that it may have been the former royal harbour basin mentioned by Strabo at 17.1.9 *cap.* 794. (I suppose that even after the fortification it may have been possible to flood this area by diverting the water from the canal, or perhaps by opening the sluices.<sup>14</sup>)

In 546–ca 551 Alexandria was governed by a competent *augustalis* called Hephaestus, who reduced the amount of corn available to the Alexandrians to ensure that the full quota might be sent to Constantinople and even so managed to “stop the riots.”<sup>15</sup> After that, there appears to be no more definite evidence for resistance to the grain levy until 600, when a rebellion broke out in the Delta during which the rebels intercepted the grain transport on the Nile.<sup>16</sup> An attack on the granaries in Alexandria is not mentioned explicitly in connection with this rising, but both it and that on behalf of Heraclius in 609 would be likely occasions for one.<sup>17</sup>

On at least three occasions in the sixth century the arrival of a patriarch nominated in Constantinople and escorted by a bodyguard of soldiers led to fighting in the streets of Alexandria: a couple of years before *Edict* 13 was drawn up, after the restoration of Patriarch Theodosius in 536;<sup>18</sup> in 546 when the Alexandrians drove out Patriarch Zoilus<sup>19</sup> and were brought to order by Hephaestus (see *suprap.* 202); and in 551 or 552 when Justinian had Apollinarius, a former military commander installed as patriarch.<sup>20</sup> In 566 Belisarius’ stepson,

<sup>13</sup> See A. Adriani, *Repertorio d’arte dell’Egitto greco-romano* C I–II (Palermo 1966) 235 s.v.

<sup>14</sup> Could the *Portae Petrinae* on the eastern branch of the canal in Alexandria have been connected with a lock? On these see Adriani, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.13) 236 s.v., and P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* II (Oxford 1972) 79f n.184.

<sup>15</sup> See Procop. *Anecd.* 26.35–44; E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* II (Paris 1949) 753f.

<sup>16</sup> See John of Nikiu (*supra* n.9) *cap.* 97; J. Jarry, *BIFAO* 62 (1964) 187–206.

<sup>17</sup> See John of Nikiu 97, 17 (“and John found that much devastation had been wrought in the city of Alexandria”) and 107, 17.

<sup>18</sup> See Liberatus, *Breviarium cap.* 20, Migne *PL* 68, 1037B = *Acta Conc. Oecum.* II.5 (Berlin 1936) 135, and John of Ephesus (*supra* n.10) 528.

<sup>19</sup> See Sévère, Évêque d’Achmounein, *Réfutation d’Eutychius*, publ. P. Chebli, *PO* 3.2 (Paris 1909) 197; and Stein, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.15).

<sup>20</sup> See the Jacobite authors, Severus (*supra* n.19) 203f, and Petrus Ibn Rahib, *Chronicon orientale*, *CSCO* 46, 128; and the Melkite, Eutychius, *Ann.*, Migne *PG* 111, 1069B–D.

Photius, who had reached the *ὑπατικὸν ἀξίωμα* before being obliged to become a monk,<sup>21</sup> was in Egypt with orders from Justin II to “reconcile all its churches,”<sup>22</sup> but it is not known whether this mission provoked any serious disturbances.

The papyrus letter must be seen in the light of these events, although it does not seem possible to connect it directly with any of them. Apart from the absence of mute *iotas*, the spelling *βραδία* and the lapse into colloquial speech (*εἰσῆλθαμεν ἐν Ἀλεξανδρ(εία)*) in line 6, it is written carefully, and the *chiasmus* in line 7f (*μετὰ πολλοῦ κόπου [καὶ] ζημίας πολλῆς*) and the elegant turn of phrase in 2f (*θέαμα καινόν ἔστιν σήμερον ἰδεῖν*) show that its author is a man of some education. Although he gives the consul the usual complimentary epithet, *πανεύφημος*, he does not appear to be a supporter of the government: his description of the flooding gives the impression that he was not particularly distressed about it, and *ἵνα μὴ κρατηθῶμεν* without an agent (line 7) is more naturally taken of arrest by the authorities<sup>23</sup> than of capture by insurgents. He might be a Monophysite bishop, as they were forbidden by Apollinarius and his successors to enter Alexandria,<sup>24</sup> but the letter contains no pious expressions. His education is not necessarily an argument against his being a brigand.<sup>25</sup> However, the most likely reason for him to write a letter to a dignitary in Hermoupolis describing the plight he has been in is that he is the steward or business partner of the addressee and must explain to him why he has not been able to transact his business in Alexandria.

BERLIN-LICHTERFELDE

March, 1976

<sup>21</sup> See Procop. *Anecd.* 2.7 and 3.29.

<sup>22</sup> See Theophanes, *Chron.* A.6058, Migne PG 108, 525=de Boor 1, 242, 4; cp. John of Nikiu (*supra* n.9) 94, 17.

<sup>23</sup> See Preisigke, *WB s.v. κρατεῖν* 3.

<sup>24</sup> See Severus' *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, ed. B. Evetts, PO 1.4 (Paris 1948) 469, cp. 478 and 501f.

<sup>25</sup> For a freebooter from the upper class see John of Nikiu (*supra* n.9) 97, 10.