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Supervision of weights and measures in early 7th-century Egyptian Alexandria in the light of the *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*¹

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The *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii* by Leontius of Neapolis in Cyprus is one of the most valuable sources offering insights into the history of early Byzantium. Although it predominantly pertains to life in early 7th-century Alexandria, the socio-economic issues raised in this account are equally relevant to other parts of the Roman East at that time. *The Life of John the Almsgiver* is not a classic text of the genre. Its author overlooks the early life of his protagonist, his social background and his ecclesiastical career, focusing instead on his public activities from the moment he took the patriarchal throne.² The charisma of the *Vita*'s eponymous hero,

¹ This article was written as part of a project financed by the Narodowe Centrum Nauki (National Science Centre, Poland; project no. UMO-2015/17/B/HS3/00135). The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes: ChA – “Christianitas antiqua”; CJ – “The Classical Journal”; CTh – Codex Theodosianus; JÖB – “Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik”; JACH – “Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum”; Nov.Iust. – *Novellae Iustiniani*; Nov.Maior. – *Novellae Maioriani*; Nov.Val. – *Novellae Valentiniani*; SBU – “Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia”; VP – “Vox Patrum”; ZPE – “Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik”.

² C.A. Mango, *A Byzantine Hagiographer at Work: Leontios of Neapolis*, in: *Byzanz und der Westen. Studien zur Kunst des europäischen Mittelalters*, ed. I. Hutter, Wien 1984, p. 33; V. Déroche, *Études sur Léontios de Néapolis*, Uppsala 1995 (SBU 3), pp. 25–36, 151–153, 254; E. Wipszycka, *Études sur le christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'antiquité tardive*, Roma 1996, p. 241; S. Efthymiadis, V. Déroche, A. Binggeli,

his involvement in public affairs, his character and the scale of his charitable deeds, as well as the political and economic role of the bishopric of Alexandria during this period provide Leontius of Neapolis with an opportunity to describe many aspects of public life in the early Byzantine metropolis.³

The *Vita Joannis Eleemosynari* tells us that one of the first decisions taken by the patriarch after ascending the throne in 610 was to issue an edict (...δημόσιον πρόσταγμα) concerning the use of unified measures (μέτρον), weights (στάθμιον) and balances (κάμπανος)⁴ in the marketplaces of Alexandria. According to Leontius, the prevailing lack of standardisation was one of the major scourges of trade in the city, and was especially keenly felt by the poorest members of society. We can only assume that the situation was similar in other towns of the Byzantine Empire.⁵

Thus, at the behest of the patriarch, church treasurers and stewards went around the local markets to check the weights and measures being used there. Interestingly, once this control had been carried out, it was John and not the local authorities (who were usually responsible for regulating this area of economic life)⁶

Z. Ainalis, *Greek Hagiography in Late Antiquity (Fourth–Seventh Centuries)*, in: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, vol. 1: *Periods and Places*, ed. S. Efthymiadis, Farnham–Burlington 2011, pp. 72–73; N. Viermann, *Herakleios, der schwitzende Kaiser. Die oströmische Monarchie in der ausgehenden Spätantike*, Berlin–Boston 2021, pp. 19, 161–162.

³ J.J. van Ginkel, *Heraclius and the Saints. The “Popular” Image of an Emperor*, in: *The Reign of Heraclius (610–641). Crisis and Confrontation*, eds. G.J. Reinink, B.H. Stolte, Leuven–Paris–Dudley 2002, pp. 232–234; W.E. Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*, Cambridge–New York 2003, pp. 80–81.

⁴ Leontios, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii* 3, in: H. Gelzer, *Leontios von Neapolis, Leben des hl. Johannes des Barmherzigen*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1893, pp. 9–10. Cf. also M. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c. 300–1450*, Cambridge 1985, pp. 333, 355–356; D. Rohmann, *Ungleicharmige Waagen im literarischen, epigraphischen und papyrologischen Befund der Antike*, “Historia” 2017, Bd. 66, pp. 106–108.

⁵ See also Peter Schreiner’s comment on the variety of weights and measures used at the time: “Das System der Maße und Gewichte hat dagegen nie eine Reichseinheitlichkeit erreicht und bleibt, scheint es, noch oft antiken Normen verhaftet, wenngleich konstantinopolitanische Maße und Gewichte wohl einen gewissen Vorrang besitzen”; cf. P. Schreiner, *Das byzantinische Reich: Hauptstadt und Peripherie*, in: *Fragen der politischen Integration im mittelalterlichen Europa*, hrsg. v. W. Maleczek, Heidelberg 2005, p. 166.

⁶ Cf. Nov.Iust. 218, 15 (AD 545). Cf. also M. Hendy, *Studies...*, p. 332; K.W. Weeber, *Waage*, in: K.W. Weeber, *Alltag im Alten Rom. Ein Lexikon*, Zürich 2003, pp. 387–388; C. Morrisson, *Weighing, Measuring, Paying Exchanges in the*

who published an ordinance which was then circulated throughout Alexandria. From then on, all commercial transactions were to make use of one standardised weight and measure. The purported decree read as follows:

“John, the humble and unworthy servant of the servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, to all who live under our poor jurisdiction and who are ruled by this same Lord and God, take heed. The blessed and noble Paul lays down a law for all in the name of Christ, who speaks through him. ‘Be obedient to those who have the rule over you, and be subject to them’ (Hebrews 13.7). For they care for you and will be held responsible for your souls. I, the least of men, yet have confidence that you will accept our requests as a divine word from God, not from men. In this knowledge I therefore warn you that in your charity none of you should be in any doubt on that score. Divine Scripture says ‘God holds unequal weights in abhorrence’ (Proverbs 11.1). If anyone after reading this prescription is found to be guilty of this crime let him give all his goods to the poor, without any appeal or mitigation. We therefore hasten to publish this order and expect it to be obeyed”.⁷

A few words of commentary on this edict. Firstly, the *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii* is the only record we have of the existence of this proclamation. It does not tell us where and in what form it was made public. Was it read aloud in church during or after a service, or was a church messenger sent to recite its contents in the market square? Or perhaps a stone with the patriarch’s edict engraved on it was set up there? Another issue to consider is whether we know of any similar action taken by secular authorities during the early Byzantine period, or in the Latin West either in late Antiquity or the early Middle Ages. To these numerous questions I shall try to provide some answers.

Firstly, there is no doubt that the biblical citations in this edict are there to bolster its strength, given that this was still an age when every attempt was made to convince contemporary society of the superiority of ‘divine law’ over human law and norms dictated by secular authorities. Appeals to maintain certain standards of

Market and the Marketplace, in: *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, ed. C. Morrisson, Dumbarton Oaks 2012, pp. 383, 385, 387.

⁷ Leontios, *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii* 3. English translation for: E. Dawes, N.H. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies Translated from Greek*, Oxford 1948, p. 211.

honesty in commercial transactions, primarily the minor, everyday ones that took place at markets, were among the issues raised by Christian authors of the day,⁸ who were also often the bishop of their town, an office whose range of responsibilities extended far beyond ecclesiastical matters.⁹ A point of interest, which is also highlighted by the author of the analysed text, is that the patriarch's edict included a warning not to treat it like secular laws, which, as can be inferred from Leontius's account, were usually ignored.

We know of no comparable order dating from the early Byzantine period, though this does not mean that similar regulations were not proclaimed at the time, one example being the edict issued during the late 380s–early 390s at Andriake in Lycia. In that instance, however, it was the local authorities who issued it, ordering the inscription to be engraved on the wall of one of the granaries that had been built to serve the town and region back in the days of Hadrian.¹⁰ An analogous text, dated to 488, is also known from Rome.¹¹ Meanwhile, imperial regulations to combat fraud associated with the weighing of money, gold and silver coins, were decreed by Constantine the Great,¹² Honorius and Theodosius II,¹³ Valentinian III¹⁴ and Majorian.¹⁵

Let us return, however, to the order issued by John the Almsgiver. From the analysed text we can infer that food traders in Alexandria had decided to take advantage of the increased demand for their commodities by manipulating the weights and measures they

⁸ I. Milewski, *Einige Bemerkungen zum Markt in der spätantiken christlichen Literatur*, in: *Market(s) – Market Buildings – Market Squares*, Seminar für Alte Geschichte Universität Kassel, 26.–28. Februar 2019, Wiesbaden 2022, pp. 575–594; A.E. Laiou, *Trade, Profit, and Salvation in the Late Patristic and the Byzantine Period*, in: *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. S.R. Holman, Grand Rapids 2008, p. 247.

⁹ I. Milewski, *Kilka uwag o roli biskupa w mieście późnoantycznym (na przykładzie prowincji wschodnich)*, VP 2001, vol. 21, pp. 407–424 (with an extensive list of works on the subject published up to the year 2000).

¹⁰ G. Manganaro, *Due note tarodoantiche*, ZPE 1992, Bd. 94, p. 283. For a discussion on earlier editions of the inscription and attempts to interpret it; cf. *ibidem*, p. 284.

¹¹ Manganaro, *Due note...*, p. 286.

¹² CTh 12,7,1 (325).

¹³ CTh XI, 8, 3 (409).

¹⁴ Nov.Val. 16,2 (445).

¹⁵ Nov.Maior. VIII, 14–15 (450). Cf. also A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602. A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, vol. 1, Oxford 1964, p. 444; Henty, *Studies...*, pp. 317–327.

used, seeing this as an opportunity to make an easy and, above all, quick profit. A separate matter is the punishment that was to be meted out to those defying the patriarchal directive: their property was to be confiscated and given to the poor. This issue raises the greatest doubts. There was no legal basis for such a severe, not to say extraordinary, sanction. Thus, what we have here is probably an attempt to introduce a regulation for which there were no legal grounds under the prevailing norms of law.

Why was it the patriarch and not the secular authorities, in this case the local prefect or even the governor of the province, who announced the edict regulating weights and measures used in Alexandria? Before attempting to answer this question, it is worth observing that the *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii* offers a negative appraisal of secular authorities, so it is hardly surprising that it contains no information that presents local administrators in a positive light. Returning to the main topic, let us recall that since the early Empire what happened at markets, including the weights and measures used there, was controlled by local stewards, curiales, and members of city councils.¹⁶ And in principle, the same was true of late Antiquity, though in practice, the increasing incompetence and corruption of local authorities resulted in some, or even many, of their powers being taken over by the local bishop and his clergy. This was one of the features of socio-political life in early Byzantium. The situation was similar in the West, where state administrative structures had become defunct in many places. None of this would have happened without the consent, and sometimes even the encouragement, of secular power, one example being the Emperor Justinian's revival of the office of *defensor civitatis*, which had been created by Constantine the Great (or possibly Valentinian I), and which gave bishops considerable power in the cities where they held office.¹⁷ This was a deliberate ploy designed

¹⁶ E. Schilbach, *Byzantinische Metrologie*, München 1970, p. 186 *et seq.*; *idem*, "Rechtes Maß von Gott gesetzt". *Zur Legitimierung von Maßen in Antike und frühem Mittelalter*, in: *7. Internationaler Kongreß des Internationalen Komitees für Historische Metrologie*, ed. H. Witthöft, St. Katharinen 1999, pp. 17–31.

¹⁷ A. Hohlweg, *Bischof und Stadtherr im frühen Byzanz*, JÖB 1971, Bd. 20, p. 51 *et seq.*; K.L. Noethlichs, *Materialien zum Bischofsbild aus den spätantiken Rechtsquellen*, JACH 1973, Bd. 16, p. 28 *et seq.*; R.M. Frakes, *Late Roman Social Justice and the Origin of the Defensor Civitatis*, CJ 1994, vol. 89, pp. 347–348; *idem*, *The Syro-Roman lawbook and the defensor civitatis*, "Byzantion" 1998, vol. 68, pp. 347–355; I. Milewski, *Kilka uwag o roli biskupa...*, pp. 416–417; C. Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 2005, pp. 288–290.

to persuade bishops to take over at least some of the administrative duties of the state, and was probably based on the assumption of a certain level of episcopal honesty, and on the fact that bishops enjoyed considerable authority among the faithful. Given that corrupt local officials often held no sway in the places where they presided, the local bishop and church administration under him would at least ensure that the state could function in the provinces. Decisionmakers in Constantinople were well aware of this, prompting them to grant bishops further privileges, which in practice led to equality between civil and ecclesiastical authorities in the provinces. This approach resulted in charismatic characters, such as John the Almsgiver undoubtedly was, wielding tremendous power in cities, all the more so in the metropolis that was early 7th-century Alexandria. More ambitious bishops, who had enormous authority in the provinces, in effect became the leaders of local communities. They were still listened to and usually trusted by the people, especially if they invoked 'divine law' to endorse their actions, or cited examples from Holy Scripture worthy of emulation. This was one of the manifestations of progressive decline in the authority of secular power at that time.

As mentioned earlier, we know of no comparable edict issued by another bishop during this period. Imperial ordinances concerning the falsification of weights and measures carried the threat of harsh penalties, yet they were frequently flouted. In the case of the particular document in question, two specific issues are worth highlighting: namely, the reference to divine law prohibiting the use of fraudulent weights and measures, and a second aspect that the author of the account does not mention. I am thinking here of the early Byzantine weights and measures that have survived to this day. They are discussed by Brigitte Pitarakis,¹⁸ who draws particular attention to the symbols inscribed on them. Interestingly, in her study, which mostly focuses on the middle and late Byzantine period, she makes no reference to the substance of John the Almsgiver's edict on the use of weights and measures. Images of specific artefacts published in Pitarakis' article, and the inscriptions and symbolism associated with them are entirely consistent with what we read in this edict. Many of the objects feature a cross or Christogram, religious invocations

¹⁸ B. Pitarakis, *Daily Life at the Marketplace in Late Antiquity and Byzantium*, in: *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, ed. C. Morrisson, Dumbarton Oaks 2012, pp. 399–426.

or even excerpts from prayers. Symbols and religious inscriptions on weights and measures (ceramic or sheet-metal containers for liquids or dry goods) were meant to vouch for the honesty of the traders who used them, guaranteeing that they would not dare to commit fraud using weights and measures marked in this fashion.¹⁹ The situation was similar in the case of exagia, weights used to determine the weight of gold and silver coins. These usually bore an image of the reigning emperor or emperors (there are numerous extant exagia featuring emperors of the Theodosian dynasty, such as Theodosius the Great and his two sons, Honorius and Arcadius, or Honorius, Arcadius and Theodosius II),²⁰ and more besides. Sometimes, as well as imperial busts, exagia featured a cross²¹ or Christogram.²² I also know of an exagium weighing 10.65 grams marked with the number three, in this case the Greek letter gamma and a cross. The weight of the exagium, as well as the aforementioned number, suggest that this object was the equivalent of three solidi(?), albeit of a much lower than standard weight.²³ There are large numbers of extant early Byzantine exagia.²⁴ The same is true of lead seals.²⁵

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 412–416. See also Peter Schreiner's remark on the analogous meaning of the iconography of money in the Byzantine period: "Die byzantinische Münze trug bis zuletzt das Bildnis von Kaiser und Christus als Garanten der Qualität"; cf. P. Schreiner, *Das byzantinische Reich...*, p. 166.

²⁰ C. Morriison, *Weighing...*, p. 387; I. Milewski, *Kilka uwag na temat techniki badania jakości szlachetnych kruszców zmonetaryzowanych oraz obecności hypochalkoi na rynku pieniężnym Cesarstwa w świetle późnoantycznej greckiej literatury chrześcijańskiej*, ChA 2017, vol. 8, pp. 53–54.

²¹ Cf. *exagium* of Honorius and Theodosius II, <https://leunumismatik.com/en/lot/19/2014>; <https://www.bidder.com/auctions/aquilanumismatics/browse?a=3177&l=3603387&hl> [accessed: 6.01.2023]; *exagium* of and his sons, Honorius and Arcadius, https://www.vcoins.com/en/stores/athena_numismatics/18/product/theodosius_i_with_arcadius_honorius_ad_393395_exagium_solidi_weight_choice_for_the_type/1245517/Default.aspx [accessed: 6.01.2023].

²² Cf. <https://www.numisbids.com/n.php?p=lot&sid=1226&lot=905> [accessed: 6.01.2023].

²³ Cf. <https://www.marcwalter-numismatik.com/webshop/byzanz/#cc-m-product-13751575725> [accessed: 5.01.2023].

²⁴ Cf. R. Göbl, *Antike Numismatik*, Bd. 2, München 1978, pp. 228–229; J.P.C. Kent, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 10: *Divided Empire and the Fall of the Western Parts (Honorius and Arcadius-Romulus Augustulus)*, London 1994 (Pl. 8); Gorny und Mosch, *Katalog. Antike Münzen und Lots*, Auktion 208, 16.17. Oktober 2012, p. 201 (lot no. 2646).

²⁵ Gorny und Mosch, *Katalog. Antike Münzen und Lots*, Auktion 208, p.182 (lot no. 2519); Gorny und Mosch, *Katalog. Münzen der Antike*, Auktion 293, Osnabrück 2023, pp. 173 (lot no. 686), 178 (lots no. 705–706), 182–183 (lots no. 711, 713).

Let us return to the edict issued by John the Almsgiver. As noted earlier, there is no example of a bishop having taken similar action to regulate the use of weights and measures in any other cities of the Empire during the early Byzantine period. The nature and tone of the patriarch's order are in keeping with the reality of life in that era, and the aforementioned artefacts described in Pitarakis' article substantiate the rationale behind its content, above all the invocation of divine law regarding the use of fair weights and measures. The only doubt raised by this ordinance is the stated punishment for not complying with it. Naturally, some kind of pressure may well have been exerted on dishonest traders, but such a severe sanction sounds highly implausible. Although certain financial penalties were imposed in similar situations (as confirmed by the earlier cited *Novellae* of Justinian the Great),²⁶ the punitive measures mentioned in Leontius' account are absolutely out of the question. We do not know how the edict was received, what impact it had, and how long it remained in force, given that by ad 619, in the face of Alexandria being threatened with capture by the Persians, John decided to abandon the city of which he was patriarch. On leaving Egypt he made his way to Cyprus, where he took charge of another bishopric.

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²⁶ Nov.Iust. 218.

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Streszczenie

Nadzór nad miarami i wagami w egipskiej Aleksandrii początku VII wieku w świetle *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii*

W tekście omówiono krótki *passus* z *Vita Joannis Eleemosynarii* autorstwa Leoncjusza z cypryjskiego Neapolis, dotyczący okoliczności wprowadzenia przez patriarchę Jana Jałmużnika znormalizowanych miar i wag na terenie Aleksandrii. Wedle autora relacji było to jedno z pierwszych zarządzeń, które patriarcha ogłosił po objęciu tronu. Niestety, tego faktu nie potwierdzają inne źródła. Nie można jednak wykluczyć, iż takowe rozporządzenie rzeczywiście zostało ogłoszone w Aleksandrii krótko po 610 r. Analogiczne rozporządzenia są nam znane z okresu wcześniejszego (schyłek IV–poł. VI w.), za każdym razem jednak były one ogłaszane przez władze świeckie. Autor artykułu, poza analizą interesującego go przekazu, wyjaśnił, dlaczego w tym przypadku edykt normujący stosowane w Aleksandrii miary i wagi mógł być wprowadzony przez lokalnego biskupa, patriarchę Jana. Wpływało to co najmniej z dwóch powodów. Po pierwsze, z roli, jaką biskupi odgrywali w miastach w okresie wczesnobizantyńskim, kiedy kolejni cesarze w obliczu nieudolnej, a przede wszystkim skorpumpowanej władzy świeckiej upatrywali w nich gwaranta funkcjonowania państwa. Z tego też względu otrzymali spore przywileje dające im w praktyce władzę lokalnych zarządców, o tyle istotną, gdyż z ich zdaniem, w odróżnieniu od stanowiska władzy świeckiej, z reguły liczyli się mieszkańcy. Drugą kwestią, którą w tym przypadku należy zaakcentować, jest silna pozycja patriarchów aleksandryjskich nie tylko w mieście, gdzie Jan był biskupem, ale również w całym regionie. Ich polityczne i gospodarcze znaczenie w połączeniu z popularnością charyzmatycznych jednostek, jak to było w wypadku Jana Jałmużnika, dawały olbrzymie możliwości działania, w tym również wyręczania czy wręcz zastępowania lokalnej władzy świeckiej w sprawnym administrowaniu miastami.