

ABSTRACT

Social Networks in Byzantine Egypt

Giovanni Roberto Ruffini

This work is an exploration of the papyrological evidence from sixth-century CE Egypt within the theoretical framework of social network analysis, and an attempt to use network analysis to challenge scholarly orthodoxies of the period. I argue that the behavior of the elites in both Oxyrhynchos and Aphrodito can best be explained by reference to network analytical concepts first employed by sociologists and anthropologists in analyses of modern social groups. Specifically, I draw attention to the high degree of network centrality in Oxyrhynchos, and the high degree of multiplexity, or strong ties, in Aphrodito. I attempt a rough population estimate of the lands under the fiscal jurisdiction of the Apionic family in Oxyrhynchos, and also present a network analytical technique for tracking that family's growth. By extension I am able to chart the shape of the Oxyrhynchite social pyramid and the disproportionate role of the aristocratic, absentee landlord in it. In contrast, network analysis of Aphrodito provides quantitative evidence of a society much more interconnected and less hierarchical than we would have expected. Moreover, network analysis draws our attention away from the elite members of that village. In their place, we see quantitative evidence demonstrating the unexpected centrality and importance of migrant shepherds and understudied priests, whose presence in our analysis renews hope in the possibility of uncovering the day-to-day experiences of society's non-elites. We also see evidence highlighting the important role literacy played in fostering social connectivity, and even in fostering rather pronounced upward social mobility.