Traders on the Margins: The Resilience of a Fourth-Century Trading Community in Roman Egypt

Abstract

The contribution aims to shed light on economic relations between cities and hinterland in the antique world by examining papyrological material from Ismant el-Kharab (ancient Kellis) in Egypt’s Dakhleh Oasis. This material provides evidence for a village community in the Oasis and its trade relations with distant urban areas in the Nile Valley. The study draws on recent research into the ancient textile trade to situate the community’s economic strategies. In turn, it examines how these strategies facilitated trade with cities in Upper Egypt, employing the notion of capabilities drawn from communal resilience theory. In conclusion it is argued that the Kellis material demonstrates how rural communities could attain a high degree of agency within the late antique economy, although it also highlights vulnerabilities to which they were subjected.

Introduction

This contribution presents a micro-historical study of a trading community documented by papyri from western Egypt and active in the fourth century CE. This community was marginal in several ways. It originated in a minor settlement on the periphery of the Roman world named Kellis (modern-day Ismant al-Kharab in the Dakhleh Oasis), separated from the political centres of the Empire and the densely populated Nile Valley by a harsh desert landscape. Its members were not from among the Roman-Egyptian elite, but village-based artisans and traders. Many were, moreover, adherents of Manichaeism, a religious minority regularly persecuted by Roman authorities. And yet, the papyri indicate that this community was relatively successful: their trade network stretched all the way from the Dakhleh Oasis to the Nile Valley and lasted for the better part of the fourth century.

Below we aim to explore this conundrum by identifying the economic strategies that the community relied on and to analysing them using communal resilience theory. Some remarks are therefore in order concerning both ‘community’ and ‘resilience’. We employ the term ‘community’ to denote people tied together by different networks of interaction: kinship,
locality, economic activity, and/or religious practice. Communities are not static, which brings us to the concept of ‘resilience’, often defined as the capability of a system to adapt successfully to pressure, a concept that has seen a flowering of theoretical development in recent years. Within the human and social sciences, it has taken the shape of communal resilience theory. Rather than approaching humans as victims of fate, at the mercy of environmental or systemic processes beyond their control, scholars within this paradigm explore human agency in the face of adversities: their ability to deal with changing conditions and successfully recuperate after periods of stress or crisis.

The present paper focuses on the economic resilience of the Kellis community, exploring how its members were able to form and maintain a viable trade venture between Oasis and Valley in the face of socio-economic obstacles and harsh environmental conditions. The first part of the study examines the papyri to address questions of organisation. How did these traders organize production and distribution? What sort of strategies did they rely on? The second part addresses its resilience, drawing on the work of Tamara Lewis to analyse the organisation’s adaptability in terms of four key capabilities.

Environmental pre-conditions

The Dakhleh Oasis lies some 630 km southwest of Alexandria as the crow flies, and about 280 km from the Nile Valley in Upper Egypt, surrounded by the Sahara desert. It was not an easy place to settle. Annual rainfall averages are today often effectively nil, temperatures can reach up to 49°C, while dust- and sandstorms, and occasional torrents of heavy rain, cause difficulties for human inhabitants. However, the area also held attractions. Agriculture here depends on ground water, and in the Roman period settlements were centred on artificial wells and natural springs. Fruit crops are better suited to the Oasis conditions, with continuous access to water, than the periodical inundation of the Valley and its inhabitants seem to have specialised in cultivating crops such as olives, dates, figs, jujubes, and cotton, as shown by Roger S. Bagnall.

Ismant el-Kharab, ancient Kellis, is located in the south-eastern part of Dakhleh. Excavations began in the mid-1980s: notable finds include a large temple to the god Tutu, a bath, three churches, and opulent villas. Its population has been estimated at c.1500 in the third century CE, while the site was probably abandoned around 400 CE. It was somewhat larger and well-furnished than the typical Egyptian village, although it still fell well short of Dakhleh’s chief centres, Mothis and Trimitthis. A wooden codex dating to the early 360s CE, the

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1 For recent criticism of the use of this term within the study of early Christianity, see Stowers 2011; for an extended discussion of the nature of the Kellis community, Teigen 2021a.
3 Lewit 2020, 53.
5 Kleindienst et al. 1999.
6 Bagnall et al. 2015, 190-194.
7 For an up-to-date survey, see now Hope and Bowen (eds.) 2022.
8 Davoli 2011, 70, has pointed out that Kellis belonged to a category between village and city, i.e. a ‘small town’. However, the term κώμη, by which Kellis is designated in the papyri, is most frequently translated as ‘village’, and I have retained that term here.
Kellis agricultural account book (KAB), shows that Kellis was a centre for storage of produce from surrounding settlements.9

The KAB was found in a complex of domestic structures designated House 1-3, built in the late-third century CE and inhabited until the end of the fourth, and a major papyrological findspot in the village. In addition to the KAB, this complex yielded a sizable quantity of texts written on papyrus, wood, and ostraca, in Greek and Coptic (and some Syriac). Most were found in structure House 3. They include both ‘literary’ religious texts, mostly of a Manichaean persuasion, and documentary texts, the majority of which form part of the archive of a single, extended family that we for convenience’s sake refer to as the ‘Pamour family’. This family is at the centre of the community that we explore below, with members based in both Dakhleh and the Valley. They engaged in a range of economic activities, in which textiles held a prominent place.

Textile Production at Kellis

Material evidence for textile production at House 1-3 is relatively abundant.10 The textual evidence is even more bountiful, and it has been argued that they show the workings of a small, local textile business.11 However, the model on which we are to envision this business, and its relationship to the regional trade network, has not hitherto received proper attention. It is a complex issue, bound up with the larger debate concerning textile production and commercial distribution in the Roman world. Weaving and spinning were ubiquitous crafts in antiquity; yet textiles were also important trade goods, easy to transport and potentially quite valuable. Exports could reach high totals.12 Still, scholars have long considered production to be domestically based, organised through the so-called ‘Verlag’ or ‘putting-out’ system.13 Weavers, per this model, worked chiefly in their homes, serving professional middlemen or ‘merchant-entrepreneurs’ who took the risks and reaped the rewards: procured raw materials and equipment, paid for work, and collected and sold the clothes. This mode of organisation, dominant in early modern Europe, could facilitate relatively large-scale production while requiring little in the way of technology or skilled labour.

Re-evaluation of the papyrological evidence has caused recent scholarship to move away from this model, however.14 In particular, Kerstin Droß-Krüpe has argued forcefully for a ‘workshop model’: that the papyri rather point to a high degree of specialisation, skilled weavers working in small- to medium-sized workshops selling their own goods, and work being solicited and raw materials furnished by consumers.15 She concluded that “small work-

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9 Cf. Teigen 2021a, 31-52.
10 See Bowen 2001; 2002. Although not directly tied to House 3, two professionally spun tunics were found in the early Christian cemetery; Livingstone 2012, 323.
13 First argued by Theodor Reil (1913), the modern standard reference is Wipszycka 1965, esp. 98-102. It has remained influential, see e.g. van Minnen 1987, 56-60; Horden, Purcell 2000, 360; Liu 2009, 84.
15 Droß-Krüpe 2020, 130.
shops and a system of vertical disintegration dominate, placing the customer, and not an entrepreneur, at the centre’.¹⁶

How does the House 3 evidence fit into these models? Five Coptic accounts, *P.Kellis Copt.* 44-48, constitute a particularly important body of evidence. They date c.355-373 and contain a mix of account entries and reports on textile work. Most were written by the same person, a woman, and addressed to a male colleague or ‘supervisor’. The author can probably be identified as Tehat, a woman known from several letters belonging to the same period and involving the same activities.¹⁷ Six other associates are mentioned, most of them women. The accounts provide a relatively detailed picture of the tasks performed by the author and her associates.¹⁸ Their work involved fulling, dyeing, spinning, cutting fabric, and weaving garments, including tunics, cowls, headscarves, and blankets. The author acted as both weaver and manager, often selling textiles herself, while her supervisor also engaged in weaving, and the two shared financial responsibilities.¹⁹

Their relationship, then, was not one of merchant-entrepreneur and domestic producer, as in the putting-out model. Nor is the relationship between the author and her subordinates congruent with this model: while it conceives of weavers as paid per piece, those in the accounts are paid per number of workdays.²⁰ Wages seem to have been sufficient, and can be calculated at c.65-70 T./workday, or about two artaba of wheat (c.60 kg) per month for a weaver in continuous employment.²¹ This compares favourably with the monthly rations estimated by Dominic Rathbone for workers at the Appianus estate, although it is unlikely that the weavers had continuous work.²² As to where work took place, whether at home or in a workshop locale, the accounts are not explicit. Use of a separate locale may find support in the inference that the author would presumably have liked to supervise work, given that wages were paid per diem. More decisively, documentary letters refer to a ‘place’ associated with textile work, and an entry of the KAB appears to feature a payment for ‘in the clothes-weaving shop’ (ἐν τῷ ὑφανθ(ει) ᾴῳ(ν)), pointing in the same direction.²³

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¹⁶ Droß-Krüpe 2020, 136.
¹⁷ *P.Kellis V.*, 253. Of the five accounts, *P.Kellis Copt.* 45 is perhaps more likely to be written by someone else.
¹⁸ See especially *P.Kellis Copt.* 44 and 48.
¹⁹ For sales, see e.g. *P.Kellis Copt.* 46, 47; for communal funds, *P.Kellis Copt.* 48 (l.32) and see *P.Kellis V.*, 270.
²⁰ Contrast here also Droß-Krüpe 2020, 133.
²¹ In *P.Kellis Copt.* 44, the author writes: ‘You have cut a cowl for Kame: Heni spent three days, Kame spent three, while they were weaving. I have received 200 talents and 2 maje of wheat (i.e. for their wages)’ (ll.4-5). On a price of c.100 T. per maje (mation/mat.), documented for Kellis in this period, the wages in *P.Kellis Copt.* 44 total 400 T., or 67 T./day per weaver. Similarly, *P.Kellis Copt.* 48 (ll.22-24) has a sum of 800 T. for 13 workdays, giving comparable wages of 62 T./day. This text also features a wage payment of either 200 nummi or three mat. barley for three days’ work for one weaver (ll.19-20, 42-44). As the nummus was valued at a bit more than one T. ( *P.Kellis Copt.* 15, ll.17-20), this too gives wages of c.67 T./day. *P.Kellis Copt.* 15 has a slightly higher wheat price, 120 T./mat., instead giving wages of c.73 T./day in *P.Kellis Copt.* 44. Cromwell 2020, 146, estimates 50-60 T./mat. wheat, and totals wages at c.50 T./day, but does not consider the full range of evidence for prices, see also Bagnall (ed.) 1997, 52 (*P.Kellis IV*); Bagnall, Worp 2000, 506.
²² One artaba and four drachmas, according to D. Rathbone 1991, 106-116. Rathbone also notes (citing L. Foxhall and H. A. Forbes) that a single artaba of wheat, c.30 kg, would suffice ‘for an adequate though not generous subsistence diet for an active adult male’. Rathbone 1991, 109-110. See also Goldsmith 1984, 266.
²³ See *P.Kellis Copt.* 95 (l.120): KAB 1264-65. Bowen 2001, 26, assumes that the term denotes a larger institution, but this does not seem necessary.
The workshop model, then, seems the more appropriate for understanding these features. It was not a large-scale endeavour: of the six ‘employees’, only a few were apparently active at any one time. Some differences from Droß-Krüpe’s workshop model are also evident, however. The level of specialisation was low – the author supervised work, spun, fulled, and cut fabric. Moreover, it was not entirely customer-dominated, nor only locally oriented: the author not (only) received wool from customers for ad hoc production, but had a larger reserve of materials at hand, and she paid for the freight of textiles over longer distances and kept garments in storehouses located outside of Kellis. Some of her handiwork even reached the Valley, through the traders to whom we now turn.

A Trading Family in the Valley

The traders that dominate the House 3 archive are centred on the Pamour family, whose prominent members included Psais II, his sons Pamour III and Pekysis, and a senior relative named Philammon II, documented by a range of texts. Their personal letters paint a particularly vivid picture of everyday life. Most of them can be placed c.360-380 and were sent from the Nile Valley, more specifically the village of Aphrodito, where Psais II had taken up residence by 363. Family members made regular treks between Oasis and Valley, a trip of perhaps eight days along the Darb al-Tawil, a desert road leading directly from Dakhleh to Lycoopolis, north of Aphrodito. The mobility of these people led Klaas A. Worp, editor of P.Kellis I, to suggest that they worked professionally as camel drivers. Philammon II is indeed titled ‘camel driver’ (δρομαδάριος) in a memo, P.Kellis Gr. 79, and the Coptic letters contain many references to pack animals and freight-wages. However, most pertain to freight conducted within a network of close associates. Camel driving was only part of and an aid to their business interests in the Valley, among which textile trade is especially prominent in our sources. Of the private letters that can be clearly attributed to Pamour III, Pekysis, and Philammon II, about 20 in all, at least 13 relate to clothes or cloth production.

24 For a perhaps similarly-sized workshop, see SPP XX 53 from Herakleopolis (246 CE), which was limited to three looms for commercial weaving Gibbs 2012, 43.
25 Per P.Kellis Copt. 47, the author possessed one centenarium (100 mna) of plain wool, six mna of dyed wool, and ten mna of dye. The amount of plain wool would suffice for c.20 stikharia. Cf. P.Kellis Copt. 12, 75.
26 For storehouses outside of Kellis, see P.Kellis Copt. 44, 46, 50. For contacts further afield, note Horion’s remarks concerning a journey ‘to the Oasis’ in P.Kellis Copt. 58, and see below.
27 Teigen 2021a, 55-61, 63-64.
28 Paprocki 2019, 219. They may also have passed through Hibis, where they had contacts. Teigen 2021a, 268.
30 P.Kellis Copt. 44, 50, 78, 79. An exception may be provided by P.Kellis Gr. 29, a receipt for freight to Alexandria on behalf of an ex-logistes found in House 3, but the agent who undertook the journey is unfortunately not named. In terms of scale, material from the Fayyum indicates that camel caravans were ‘generally small … [i]nstances of up to 4 animals are fairly common.’ Adams 2007, 242.
31 Despite his prominent position (see below), only one letter, P.Kellis Copt. 110, seems attributable to Psais II. The letters of the others are P.Kellis Gr. 71-73 and P.Kellis Copt. 64-82 (excluding P.Kellis Copt. 69, a contract, and 74, whose contents are lost). Of these, textile concerns occur in P.Kellis Gr. 71-73; P.Kellis Copt. 66, 70, 71, 75-79, 81, and 82. More letters probably concerned textile matters even though explicit terms are not preserved: e.g. a fragmented line of P.Kellis Copt. 65 mentions an ‘iron ring’ (ςαλακ ραθμος), likely relating to the use of a loom. See Gardner, Alcock, Funk (eds.) 2014, 51 (hereafter P.Kellis VII).
bers in the Valley regularly sent wool and dyes to associates in Kellis, who in turn sent finished garments back to the Valley. They were greatly concerned with quality, and willing to spend lavishly on it. Pekysis, in particular, took the task of procuring wool and dye seriously; they feature in almost all of his letters. His interest is, perhaps, related to his own engagement with weaving.

Despite this extensive interests, sales are rarely mentioned explicitly and shipments are generally small. Jennifer Cromwell has therefore questioned the centrality of textiles, broaching the possibility that ‘textile production was supplemental to other trade, for example, with the individuals producing textiles also involved in the production of other commodities’. She suggested that the textiles sent to the Valley could have been intended primarily for private consumption, while goods such as olives may have been more important economically. The Pamour family does appear to have had interest in olive cultivation, yet evidence for retail of olives and olive oil is also sparse and pertains to the Oasis, not the Valley. There is evidence that another fruit crop, jujubes, was sent for retail in the Valley. The evidence for textile trade is stronger than Cromwell allows for. It includes a request for five tunicas in P. Kellis Copt. 81, retail-work likely involving textiles in P. Kellis Gr. 73, and sales of textiles in P. Kellis Copt. 26 and P. Kellis Gr. 66. While shipments are not large, they are frequent. One may also note P. Kellis Copt. 94, although not explicitly set in the Valley, where the unnamed author is selling a robe and sending the payments to the recipients over a distance. The export of jujubes shows that textiles were not the only good in the traders’ repertoire, and they may have varied their stocks. As Cromwell points out, this would have given them a larger set of economic strategies to draw on. It does not exclude extensive involvement in textile retail, however.

Another such strategy was itinerancy. Itinerant traders are a well-known feature of trade in antiquity, described for instance in an excerpt from the third-century jurist Ulpian found in Justinian’s Digest: “it has also seemed reasonable to give the name of business-agent to the people to whom clothes-dealers and linen-merchants give clothing to be carried round and

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32 For concerns with quality, see P. Kellis Copt. 37, 48, 75, 76, 95, 103, and P. Kellis Gr. 72. Moreover, in P. Kellis Copt. 18 (l.12), Horion specifies that the wool he sent is ‘white wool’, probably to indicate its high quality. Wipszycka 1965, 27. In P. Kellis Copt. 81, Philammon II relates that he has purchased an unspecified amount of dye at ‘Egyptian price’ of 30 000 talents (l.17-18).

33 See P. Kellis Copt. 103, whose author (Pamour III) asks him to cut a garment ‘by your own hand’ (l.21).

34 Garments were often shipped only a few at a time (see e.g. P. Kellis Copt. 75, 78). Wool shipments are often specified as ‘thirty minus one’ mna, c.9.3 kg (one mna = c.0.3 kg), enough for c. six stikharia tunics. In P. Kellis Copt. 78, this is referred to as a ‘small amount’ (ⲗⲏⲯⲉ, l.41). See Teigen 2018, 183-189.

35 Cromwell 2020, 147 n.48.

36 Cromwell 2020, 145 n.41.

37 Most mentions of olives or oil shipped to the Valley involve a chous or two (three-six litres), probably for the traders themselves (see P. Kellis Copt. 22, 24, 72). Indeed, in P. Kellis Gr. 65, the author requests the recipient to sell olives in the Oasis and send the money to him (probably in the Valley).

38 A sale of jujubes in the Valley occurs in P. Kellis Copt. 65, and a load of jujubes sent to Aphrodito in P. Kellis Copt. 77. The latter amounted to two arataba (c.60 kg). See, furthermore, Teigen 2018, 195-198.

39 Featuring in at least seven of the Pamour/Pekysis letters: P. Kellis Copt. 71, 75, 76, 78, 79, 81, 82.

40 Cromwell 2020, 145.

41 See Jones 1960, 192; McMullan 1970, 335; Holleran 2012, 194-231.
disposed of – the people that we colloquially call travelling vendors (circitores). Such traders travelled regularly between markets or customers. The scale of their activities varied. The profession itself was held in low regard, and the vast majority probably catered to the poorer segments of the population. But not everyone: one merchant in the early fifth century CE sailed regularly from Athens to Ptolemais (in Egypt) in order to sell fine boots and clothes. With regards to the Pamour family, they were present in Aphrodito and owned a house there by the 360s. They also had longstanding ties to the ‘twin cities’ Hermopolis and Antinoopolis, documented already for the generation of Pamour I (c.300-325 CE). In the mid-fourth century, a circle of relatives centred on a man named Makarios resided in Hermopolis-Antinoopolis, while Pamour III and Pekysis went on frequent business trips there. The typical length of trips to the Valley could be indicated by P.Kellis Gr. 73, where an associate named Psais Tryphanes asks Pamour III to help his son, Tryphanes, with trade in the Valley: “if you spend ten or twenty days together with him, while you are selling my goods … Don’t keep (κατέχῃς) my son with you; go with him in view of the season of the sweet new wine” (ll.15-23, abb.). Including travel time, this suggests a stay of perhaps 26-36 days in total for Tryphanes. We do not know the specific venues or clientele to which the Pamours catered – whether they stood in temporary market stalls, walked the streets, knocked on the doors of the wealthy, or perhaps even owned a fixed shop or camel-stall in Hermopolis, maintained by Makarios and used by visiting family members.

The Ulpius extract cited above describes such vendors as agents working for clothes-dealers ‘proper’. The papyri provide insight into how the family divided responsibilities. While the junior members, Pekysis and Pamour III, did much of the legwork, the ‘fathers’ Psais II and Philammon II had overall responsibility in financial matters. Thus, Philammon II writes concerning Pamour III that: “He is diligent, doing his work well, so much so that I said to him: “As long as you perform your work, nothing I do makes a loss”” (P.Kellis Copt. 82, II.33-36). But not all junior members worked in the Valley. Pamour III and Pekysis frequently address ‘brethren’ back in Kellis, such as Theognostos and Partheni II, who undertook tasks of producing clothes and shipping them to the Valley.

It is from letters to these ‘brethren’ that we glean how the traders related to the textile workshop. On the one hand, they indicate that the workshop had a separate hierarchy. The traders seem to have paid for work in advance, and could not presume that weavers were

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42 Ulp. Dig. 14.3.5.4-5, cited and translated in Horden, Purcell 2000, 359-360.
43 For the low status of such traders in Rome, see Holleran 2012, 201-203; for the itinerant sea merchant (mentioned in a letter of Synesius of Cyrene), see Jones 1960, 192.
44 See P.Kellis Gr. 52, 66, 71, 77; P.Kellis Copt. 21, 25, 26, 29, 81, 116. Note P.Kellis Copt. 19 (I.44) and the comments in P.Kellis V, 164-165. See also Teigen 2018, 79-80.
45 For the use of camel stalls as trade venues, see Adams 2007, 88.
46 Philammon II supplied a large sum of money for the purchase of dye in P.Kellis Copt. 82. Psais II received the profits from a sale made in the Valley in P.Kellis Copt. 65, supplied money for weaving wages in P.Kellis Copt. 81, and settled the terms of a contract in P.Kellis Copt. 77 and 108. See Teigen 2018, 159-161. For camel-owners involved in small-scale trade, see Adams 2007, 244-245.
47 Admittedly, some letters show Pamour III to have had financial responsibilities, e.g. in P.Kellis Copt. 72. It seems likely that he was the oldest of Psais II’s sons, and so was preparing to take over the role of his father.
48 See P.Kellis Copt. 82 (ll.20-23) and 76 (ll.29-30), where money for wage payments are discussed, and perhaps the account P.Kellis Copt. 48 (ll.25-26), where ‘father’ Shai pays wages for the preparation of wool.
always available. In *P.Kellis Copt.* 81, Philammon II asks for garments and comments: “If you know that there is someone with you who will do my work: write to me and I will send you 10 mna of dye” (ll.46-47v). The traders were also at times paid by the workshop: in *P.Kellis Copt.* 44, the account author records a payment of ‘freight wages’ (@Getter) to Psais II and of unspecified ‘wages’ (Getter) to Pamour (III?)). The leaders of the Pamour family, then, do not seem to have been in charge of the textile workshop. In this respect, they rather operate as a type of ‘Verleger’, supplying raw materials, paying for finished items, and undertaking transport and retail.49

Yet the workshop was a more active partner than the putting-out model permits. These payments, and ties to storehouses outside of Kellis, show that it was not insulated from trade. Conversely, the traders were themselves intimately involved with textile production.50 Pekysis was capable of working textiles, and his wife, Partheni II, often did. In fact, all the named workshop ‘employees’ can be identified with members of the Pamour family, Partheni II among them. As I have argued elsewhere, Tehat’s circle probably formed part of the extended Pamour family.51 Traders and workshop formed an intimate partnership, even if its exact nature remains unclear. What is clear is that familial bonds played an important part.

The Kellis Trading Community

The House 3 papyri pertain chiefly to the (extended) Pamour family. Yet, they also show that the family was not alone, but belonged to a wider network of Kellis villagers. The letters feature many recurring associates – Lammon, Papnouthes, Tapshai (II), Horion, Psais Tryphanes, Timotheos, Loudon II, and Ammon, to name only a few. Several were prominent villagers, more or less equal in status to the Pamour family.52 Many cooperated closely with the Pamour family in business matters outside of Kellis. Timotheos and Loudon II were involved in work relating to storehouses at a place called ‘the border’. Ammon seems to have been from Psbtnesis, a minor settlement somewhere in Dakhleh, where he had a warehouse that Tehat employed. In *P.Kellis Gr.* 73, partly quoted above, Psais Tryphanes requested Pamour III to assist his son with selling goods in the Valley, offering wages in return.53 Other associates appear frequently in the Pamour/Pekysis letters helping out with transportation, their close affiliation indicated by the lavish use of kinship terms: thus, we find the ‘son’ Lammon, ‘brother’ Papnouthes, ‘sister’ Tapshai II, ‘father’ Psais Tryphanes, and so on. The documents even provide evidence for villagers who, like Pamour family members, had moved to Aphrodito. Contracts written in Aphrodito on behalf of members of the Pamour family feature several actors described as “from the village of Kellis … now living in the

49 Compare van Minnen 1987, 58.
50 *P.Kellis Copt.* 71, 75, 76, 94. That their textile concerns were longstanding is clear from *P.Kellis Gr.* 19.
51 Partheni II, wife of Pekysis, with ‘Heni’; Tapollo, mother of Pamour III/Pekysis, with ‘Lo’; while Kame is found as assistant (slave?) of the family in *P.Kellis Gr.* 71 and *P.Kellis Copt.* 95. See Teigen 2018, 91-94.
52 Teigen 2021a, 89-94, 101-106.
53 Similarly, in *P.Kellis Gr.* 50, Psais Tryphanes pays Psais II for transport, while in *P.Kellis Copt.* 78, ‘father’ Psais Tryphanes is himself travelling to the Valley, offering to carry goods on their behalf.
village of Aphrodito (Ἀφροδίτης)54 – including the scribe who drew up most of the documents, Pebos son of Tithoes, himself a Kellite of some importance.55

The strong ties and shared business interests of the Kellites could even suggest a degree of coordination. Matt Gibbs has noted that certain villages housed a large concentration of craftsmen engaged in a specific trade, indicating “centralized production carried out in community workshops”.56 Such a situation at Kellis may be supported by the possible existence of another workshop in the village linked to the people of House 3, although it is not made explicit that these workshops cooperated, nor is there direct evidence for any formal village trade association.57

While familial bonds may explain the ties between Tehat and the Pamours, another type of tie must have held this wider network together. One factor was certainly local identity. Colin Adams has pointed out that local identities helped facilitate migration within Roman Egypt, through mutual assistance between fellow-citizens out of town.58 The letters indicate that ‘Oasites’ considered themselves, in some respects, different from ‘Egyptians’, and there is some evidence for an identity tied specifically to Kellis.59 But village identity was not the only type of knot that bound them. Religious identity, more specifically affiliation with Manichaeism, played an important part, at least in the circles visible in our evidence. This religious movement, which drew on Christian traditions, had established a separate ‘Church’ that experienced some success in the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE. Manichaean affiliation was of great importance to the Pamour family, as the religious language employed by figures such as Pamour III and Makarios attests to.60 Some evidence attests to this religious affiliation extending beyond the family. A prominent example is ‘brother’ Ammon. He does not appear to have been a Kellite – he is labelled ‘of Psbtnesis’ (P.Kellis Copt. 46), – but he did share religious affiliation with the Pamour family, as evinced by a letter where he employs a Manichaean greeting.61 Coupled with shared occupation, such overlapping categories of identity – familial, village, and religious, – shaped the network into a distinct community.

Network Resilience

Finally, we turn to the matter of resilience. As previously broached, the desert was not an easy clime to travel in, and climatic conditions may have worsened in the later part of the fourth century. Conflict between sedentary and nomadic populations, the ‘Blemmyes’, may

54 P.Kellis Gr. 32, 42, 43, 44.
55 See P.Kellis Gr. 23 and 24; and Teigen 2021a, 92-93.
56 Gibbs 2012, 42.
57 A letter to Tehat (P.Kellis Copt. 58, l.18) refers to textiles produced by the daughter of another weaver named Talaphanti (or perhaps explicitly a ‘workshop’ belonging to her; see P.Kellis VII, 24). Talaphanti (or her daughter) was presumably head of a separate team of textile workers in the village. That Talaphanti was, to some extent, affiliated with the Pamour family, is clear from greetings to her found e.g. in P.Kellis Copt. 19. For the question of a trade association, see Teigen 2021a, 95-96.
58 Adams 2016, 277-278.
59 See P.Kellis Copt. 90, 105.
60 Teigen 2021a, 115-126.
61 P.Kellis Copt. 46 (l.11v) and 37, respectively. See further Teigen 2021a, 148-152.
have added to the difficulties, as the late fourth century is generally also thought to have seen a rise in tensions, culminating in the sack of Hibis, capital of Khargeh, in 373 CE. Can we say anything about how this community may have tackled stress? This question is particularly relevant in light of the abandonment of Kellis itself around 400 CE.

In a recent article on the Eastern Mediterranean countryside, Tamara Lewit discusses why villages in this region seem to have prospered despite the crises faced by the Roman Empire in late antiquity. Drawing on Community Resilience Theory, Lewit highlights four key capacities on which to evaluate communal resilience communities: economic development, communication, social capital, and community competence. She argues that the archaeological evidence indicates that villages in the eastern Mediterranean exhibited a high degree of competence in these capacities. For economic development, she points to a diversification of business strategies and absence of extreme social inequality in these village communities; for communication, the infrastructure maintained by the Roman government and the networks developed by the Christian Church; for social capital, the communal role of churches, population growth, and presence of networks disseminating new agricultural technologies; and for community competence, the effective collaboration between villagers as indicated by the quick adaption of such technologies.

In key respects, the Kellis community scores well in these competences. For one, it was composed of social equals. The Pamour family, Psais Tryphanes family, and the others seem for the most part to belong to a similar social stratum. They employed a range of business strategies. One was diversification, as they engaged in production of textiles, cultivation of certain fruit crops, and camel-driving, combined with retail both local and at urban markets. Another was itinerancy, which may have allowed them to diversify their customer base and shift rapidly from one market to another. This mobility, moreover, created lines of communication that would have helped them gauge prices and marked conditions, and gather information about political affairs and events of relevance to their associates back home. Bonds of mutual cooperation and trust provided a safety net. The intertwined Manichaean network would have reinforced both communication capabilities and social capital, providing communal rituals to strengthen internal ties as well as facilitating ties to other Manichaens outside the main trading families. This is vividly demonstrated by the Pamour family’s close links to Manichaean religious officials, the elect, who were themselves itinerant and who maintained bond with other communities as far afield as Alexandria.

At the same time, difficulties can be gleaned. Despite their extensive contact network, they sometimes struggled with finding trustworthy messengers or agents. Collaboration was not a given: violent conflict sometimes rocked the village, as the judicial documents attest to. Even familial ties did not always ensure harmony, as indicated by a brother-in-law who seems to have broken with the Pamour family. There are references to economic losses, and

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63 Lewit 2020.
64 For a summary, see Lewit 2020, 74-75.
65 The community also had links to local notables; see Teigen 2021a, 85-89. But while they were likely subject to such powerful figures in certain contexts, there is no evidence that the latter involved themselves in trade.
66 Teigen 2021b.
67 See P. Kellis Copt. 82, 91.
68 Teigen 2021a, 46-48, 61.
perhaps other difficulties. In one letter, the close associate Theognostos writes ominously to Partheni II: “the place is disturbed now and we are afraid. Let nothing evil (ⲡⲉⲑⲁⲩ) happen whilst the place remains disturbed”. (P.Kellis Copt. 83, ll.7-8) Whether this ‘evil’ pertained to economic trouble, political turmoil, or (to my mind more likely) religious tensions remains unknown. Certainly, the community’s religious affiliation was not only an asset, but potentially also a source of tension. An instance of religious violence is documented in the letter by ‘brother’ Ammon, who expresses great sorrow because someone “shook those of this word (ⲁⲩⲕⲓⲙ ⲣⲉⲕⲗⲉⲓ ⲫⲉ ⲡⲉⲑⲁⲩⲡⲓⲃⲉ)”. (P. Kellis Copt. 37, ll.19-20).

These snapshots indicate a degree of vulnerability. To what extent the community managed to recover from such stresses is difficult to gauge. That Kellis itself was abandoned not long after these documents were written could indicate that the community, in the end, failed to adapt. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that the abandonment of Kellis may not have been fatal to the trading network. The strong links to other locations in Egypt could, potentially, have enabled these families to maintain contact even in the absence of their hometown. As we saw, some members had changed residence already by the 360s. This raises questions of to what extent the resilience of the village as a whole can be equated with that of its subgroups, such as the trading network of the Pamours. Unfortunately, this issue cannot be explored further here, and will have to await further study.

Conclusions

The Kellis material sheds light on a variety of strategies that locals in the hinterland could make use of in order to assert themselves and prosper through interaction with urban centres. To be sure, Kellis was not among the poorest settlements of the Empire, nor was the Pamour family among its most disadvantaged inhabitants. Nonetheless, the community’s position necessitated the adaption of a range of different strategies to enable them to interact profitably with the cities in the Valley. They established close cooperation and intimate bonds between textile producers and traders, diversified their goods, practiced itinerancy, and maintained a far-reaching network of business associates, augmented by a partly overlapping Manichaean religious network. The evidence provides insight into the creativity and effort that went into maintaining commercial ties between hinterland and urban centres and suggests that the relationship between them was closer than sometimes allowed for. So, for instance, the rejection of the putting-out model has led some to conclude that the countryside played no role in the cities’ textile supply. The Kellis material illustrates that it was possible for villagers to participate in urban markets even without this system. Twenty years ago, Richard Alston wrote concerning the cities in Roman Egypt that they “were not simply solar central places but were part of a complex network of urban and rural communities stretching several

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69 See P.Kellis Gr. 65.
70 See, furthermore, the discussion in Teigen 2021a, 171-176.
71 For social fault lines and tensions in villages as documented by the papyri, see Ruffini 2008, 238-239; 2011.
72 Menten-Plesters 2017, 125.
hundred kilometres along the Nile⁷⁵. As the present contribution has shown, such networks could also cross the desert and reach into distant oasis villages.

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FIG. 1 – Map of Egypt. Credit: Anna L. Boozer (drawn by M. Matthews).