Above all, in a letter from Ammonius to Apollonius (I-II cent. AD) we see most clearly the strained operation of reciprocity within the Egyptian bureaucracy and the sensitivities aroused in professional relations as individuals and groups of differing status interact with each other. Ammonius is writing to his patron (δέσποτα) and his patron’s wider retinue (τούς ἀδελφούς) within the bureaucracy. The patron, Apollonius, has recently sent Ammonius some gifts of poor quality: inferior reeds (οὐ καλὰς) and old cloaks. This has surely rankled Ammonius. The problem is further complicated by the recent fracas among his patron’s retinue. In some unspecified manner, Ammonius—or his representative(s)—had provoked internal division within the bureaucracy of the Oxyrhynchus nome over the issue of a key to the single room. Moreover, Ammonius admits that his previous letter to his patron was inelegantly worded (over the issue of the wool from Salvius or perhaps something else?) and this blunder too needed to be overlooked by his patron. Given the tense situation, the letter—reproduced in full below—affords us an intriguing insight into how a social inferior construes his obligations within the reciprocity system.

Ammonius to Apollonius his brother, greetings. I received the crossed letter and the portmanteau and the cloaks and the reeds, not good ones—the cloaks I received not as old ones, but as better than new if that's possible, because of the spirit (in which they were given). But I don't want you, brother (ἀδελφε), to load me (βαρύνει με) with these continual kindnesses (φιλανθρωπίας), since I can't repay them (ἀμείβομεν) – the only thing we suppose ourselves to have offered you is (our) feelings of friendship (προκαίρεσθαι φιλικὴς διαθέσεως). Please, brother (ἀδελφε), don't concern yourself further with the key of the single room: I don't want you, my brothers (τούς ἀδελφούς), to quarrel for my sake or for anyone else's; indeed I pray for concord (Δυναίον) and mutual affection (συναλλαξάν) to maintain itself in you, so that you can be beyond the reach of gossip and not be like us: experience leads me to urge you to live at peace and not to give others a handle against you. So try and do this for my sake too—a favour to me (χαρισμένοι μοι), which in the interim you'll come to recognise as advantageous to you as well. If you've received the wool from Salvius to the full amount, and if it's satisfactory, write back to me. I wrote you silly things in my previous letter, which you'll discount: the fact is my spirit relaxes when your name is there—and this though it has no habit of tranquillity, because of its pressing troubles. Well, Leonas bears up (?). My best wishes to you, master (δέσποτα), and all your people. Good health, most honoured friend.

(Address) To Apollonius …., surveyor, his brother. (1)

How does Ammonius chart a path through this diplomatic Scylla and Charybdis? First, as regards the acceptance of inferior gifts from a patron, Ammonius construes the ‘old’ cloaks as ‘better than new’ because of the beneficent spirit in which Apollonius had given them. Clearly it is not worth insulting one’s social superior. Ammonius tactfully airs the burden of being overloaded with kindnesses which he cannot repay—not only because of the inherent difficulties of the reciprocity system itself, but also perhaps to forestall any further gifts of an inferior kind from his patron. Instead, Ammonius asserts that his ethical ‘choice’ (προκαίρεσθαι) is one of ‘friendly disposition’ (φιλικής διαθέσεως). Thus, in Ammonius’ view, notwithstanding the demands of the reciprocity system, a relationship of friendship (φιλία) among nominal equals would better facilitate relations in the bureaucracy.

Second, Ammonius is not backward in asking an additional favour (χαρισμένοις) of his patron. Apollonius should maintain concord (ὁμόνοιας) and mutual affection (φιλαλληλίας) among his retinue in the Egyptian bureaucracy. Only in this way can Ammonius extricate himself, through his

---

1 P.Oxy. XLII 3057. For discussion, see G.W. Peterman, op. cit., 80-82. The possibility that this is a Christian letter—for discussion in the scholarly literature, see ibid., 81 n. 91—is highly unlikely. There are no clearly identifiable Christian papyrus letters until the III cent. AD. Moreover, the terminology used in the letter is in any case not (as has been suggested) favoured by the Christians. See also our discussion of βαρύνειν in 7.4.1 n. 153.
patron’s favour, from the fracas which his recent actions have caused. Ammonius also cleverly appeals to the personal advantage to Apollonius in doing this.

Third, Ammonius unashamedly flatters Apollonius. Why is Ammonius so confident that he will not be held accountable for his imprudent remarks? His answer glides as smoothly as the ink over his papyrus: the very presence of his patron’s name on the letter brings tranquillity to his troubled spirit. In sum, we are witnessing here the complex social tensions which the reciprocity system, as it found expression in the Egyptians bureaucracy, spawned. It is clear that Ammonius is an adept player of the system. Ammonius trades on his patron’s good-will in order to extricate himself from various blunders, cajoling his patron with flattery and obsequiousness, while at the same time trying to distance himself from some of the implications of social inferiority.