

## ***AL-SAFI IBN AL-'ASSAL (?-ca. 1265)***

A Canonist, theologian, apologist. The reputation of al-[Safi](#) Abu al-Fada'il Majid ibn al-'Assal has long rested on his magisterial canonical collection, the Nomocanon of 1238 commonly known even today as *al-Majmu' al-Safawi* (al- Safi's Compilation); this has allowed brief characterizations of the **Awlad al-'Assal** to refer to the accomplishments of al-[Safi](#) in the canonical field alongside those of his brothers **al-As'ad** in the biblical field and **al-Mu'taman** in the theological. Recently, however, the work of Samir Khalil Samir (see the bibliography) in particular has shown us that al-[Safi](#) must be remembered for much more than his work in [canon](#) law, however important that work was to the future functioning of the Egyptian and (as the *Fetha Nagast* or *Law of the Kings*) Ethiopian churches.

Surprisingly little is known about al-Safi's life; he was a lay theologian who may have worked in one of the [government](#) bureaucracies. He had dealings with Patriarch [Cyril III ibn Laqlaq](#), writing discourses in honor of the latter's election in 1235 and upon his death in 1243, and serving as secretary at the Synod of Harat Zuwayla in 1238 that sought to reform the **patriarch's** simoniacal practices.

What is best known about al-[Safi](#) is the course of his research in the 1230s and 1240s. Al-[Safi](#) excelled at making epitomes (*mukhtasarat*) of texts, editing them to a fraction of their original length while sacrificing little of their meaning (and sometimes, particularly in the case of treatises by Yahya ibn 'Adi, making the [meaning](#) plainer!). His epitomes include works of monastic spirituality, exegetical homilies of St. John Chrysostom, works by Iraqi Arabophone (Arabic-speaking) theologians (including 'Ammar al-Basri, Iliyya al-Nasibini, and especially Yahya ibn 'Adi), and works by Muslim controversialists.

The climax of al-Safi's literary career consists of a set of about a dozen apologetic treatises, including responses to well-known *mutakallimin*

such as [Fakhr al-Din](#) al-Razi, al-Nashi' al-Akbar, and 'Ali al-Tabari. While these have not yet been adequately studied, indications are that al-[Safi](#) should be considered “the greatest Coptic apologist of the Middle Ages” (Samir, “Safi,” *CE*, p. 2079).

**[GAWDAT GABRA](#)**

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