

## **AYYUBID DYNASTY AND THE COPTS**

The situation of the Coptic community in Egypt under the rule of the [Ayyubid](#) dynasty (1171-1250) was controlled by the progress of the Crusades and the Muslim reaction. With the [death](#) of the last Fatimid caliph, al-'Adid, on 25 September 1171, and the termination of Fatimid rule in Egypt, Saladin, a young Kurdish soldier who had gone to Egypt in the train of his uncle Shirkuh, was invested with the power of the state in Cairo, under the titular control of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. On 15 May 1174, Nur al-Din died in Syria, and Saladin was able to seize his throne. Saladin consequently became sultan of the whole area extending from Mosul to Aleppo in the north and Egypt in the south. In this way, Saladin extended his borders around the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, and confrontation with its forces became inevitable.

In Jerusalem, the Latin occupants, who were lenient with most of the Eastern Christian communities, took a rather different position with regard to the Orthodox Copts in Egypt, whom they considered heretics, and kept them away from the holy places. Thus, the Copts were forbidden the performance of pilgrimage to the [Holy Sepulcher](#) in Jerusalem, which they regarded as the fulfillment of their religious duties. Consequently, they looked forward to the liberation of the Holy City from Catholic occupation and watched the following events with the greatest of interest.

On 1 May 1187, Saladin defeated the Templars outside Nazareth and proceeded to lay siege to the important city of Tiberias. This proved to be the beginning of the end, since it led to the battle of Hittin, in which on 4 July 1187 he destroyed the crusading hosts beyond repair. With his triumph, the way to [Jerusalem](#) became clear. After a short siege of twelve days, on 2 October the Holy City surrendered. The chivalrous behavior of the sultan in his benevolent treatment of the departing Latin population contrasted with the massacre that attended the conquest of the city in 1099. This proved to be a welcome event for the Copts, who were allowed

to resume their interrupted pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulcher.

Of course, Saladin's attitude toward the Copts was different from that of the majority of the tolerant Fatimid caliphs. In fact, his dismissal of Copts from his [government](#) on his accession could only be explained as a movement to rid the state of the vestiges of Fatimid influence in the administration rather than outright hatred for Coptic functionaries, who were replaced by other members of the same community. Furthermore, Saladin suppressed a number of subsidiary taxes that he had inherited from the Fatimids, and this must have pleased his subjects.

During reigns subsequent to that of Saladin, the Crusades were directed toward Egypt, as the key to the submission of the Holy Land. Consequently, two expeditions took place; one reached Damietta, and the other, al-Mansurah. The first was conducted by Jean de Brienne in the year 1218, and the other by Louis IX of France in 1249. Apparently Damietta had a considerable Coptic population that was strongly Melchite. This explains why they had ties with the Crusaders and spied for them. The result of this situation was a wave of hostility against the Copts that made no distinction between the Melchites and the Jacobites, and within Damietta and outside it massacres were carried out by both [Christians](#) and Muslims.

That situation also provided the administrative authorities with a pretext for the levy of financial imposts on the Copts to help in the defense of the country. This movement extended to Alexandria, where the [Ayyubid](#) sultans decided to raze the Cathedral of Saint Mark, which overlooked the harbor and could furnish an invader with a fortified position in the city. This project was carried out in spite of the objections of the Copts, who to no avail offered a handsome ransom for saving it. The situation of the Copts in that decade became so precarious that word reached the Ethiopian emperor, Lalibella, who expressed his willingness to receive ten thousand refugees from the Coptic community in Egypt.

In 1249-1250, toward the end of [Ayyubid](#) rule, the Crusade of Saint Louis of France, aimed at the occupation of Damietta, which presented no problem, and the French forces penetrated the [eastern Delta](#) to the city of al-Mansurah. Here their progress was arrested, for the Egyptians opened the dikes of the Nile at a time of flood, and the French were marooned in an impassable pool of water. The king and his nobles virtually became prisoners and could gain freedom to leave Egypt only by payment of a heavy ransom. In the circumstances of the discomfiture of the Crusaders, it is doubtful whether the Copts fared as badly as in other situations, more especially as the administration of the sultanate was in a state of confusion and transition to [Mamluk](#) rule.

The idea that the Copts provided the Crusaders with a network of spies is not easy to confirm from the [contemporary](#) Arabic sources. It is true that such informants existed, but these were probably Melchites and Catholics. One name, however, is quoted by the author of *Aqbat wa-Muslimun*. This is Abu al-Fada'il ibn Dukhan, whose surname appears to be foreign to the native Jacobite Copts.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Atiya, A. S. *Crusade, Commerce and Culture*. Bloomington, Ind., and Oxford, 1962.
- [Lane](#)-Poole, S. *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages*. London, 1901.
- Runciman, S. *A History of the Crusades*, 3 vols. Cambridge, 1951-1954.
- Tajir, J. *Aqbat wa-Muslimun Mundhu al-Fath al-Arabi ila 'am*. Cairo, 1951.
- Wiet, G. "L'Egypte arabe." In *History de la nation egyptienne*, Vol. 4, ed. G. Hanotaun. Paris, 1931-1940.

**AZIZ S. ATIYA**

Tags: [History](#)

