BASHMURIC REVOLTS

In the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries Copts revolted a number of times against the Arabic administration in different parts of Egypt and were rapidly crushed. Only in the Bashmuric region (see BASHMUR, AL-) were Copts able to resist for a relatively long period against repeated attacks of the Arabic army by land and by sea and to inflict heavy losses on their oppressors while enduring lengthy sieges.

Though Arabic geographers are not consistent in their delineation of the borders of al-Bashmur, it appears that the Bashmurites lived in the marshy regions that lay near the Mediterranean coast in the northern part of the Delta between the Rosetta and Damietta branches of the Nile close to the lake of Idku. The region had a history of intransigence; through the centuries its inhabitants had revolted against their Egyptian, Roman, and Byzantine masters. This was also the last region in Egypt to submit to the Arabs, years after the rest of the country had been conquered.

The marshy land of al-Bashmur with its low-lying sandy banks offered two major advantages: security and economic self-sufficiency. Access to the inhabited parts of the region was through sandy banks that were sometimes too narrow to admit the passage of more than one person, and the marshes with their thickets of reeds served as cover for revolutionary operations. Thus nature offered this region protection from intrusion and natural cover, elements denied all other parts of Egypt where the flatness of the land afforded easy access to inhabited places, with no forests or hills to hide insurgents. The Bashmuric region was the only part of Egypt where the Arabic authorities could not apply their policy of settling Arabic tribes among the native population to prevent revolts.

The economic infrastructure of the region also aided the Bashmurites. While they did not possess the kind of fertile fields that gave rise elsewhere in Egypt to widespread civilization and later to foreign occupation, they did have space for limited agriculture, which, in combination with the region’s richness in fish and fowl, provided enough food to withstand any siege. These conditions rendered the Bashmurites
far less vulnerable than the fellahin in other parts of Egypt, who depended on an intricate irrigation network that could be easily cut by the army in case of revolt.

Arabic historians viewed the Bashmuric uprisings as a reaction to the heavy fiscal demands placed on the Copts, a view that seems to have influenced the conclusions of quite a few modern historians. However, one can discern a relationship between an increase in Arabic intolerance and the beginning of the Bashmuric revolts. One notes a difference between the attitude of the Bashmurites and the passive acquiescence of other Copts in the face of this growing intolerance.

The difficulty in defining the exact limits of the region occupied by the Bashmurites makes it impossible to date precisely the beginning of the series of Bashmuric revolts. The recorded anti-Arab revolts that were a reaction against the growing hardening of the Arabic policy from the second part of the seventh century began to occur as early as the close of that century, first in the eastern part of the Delta and later extending to the whole Delta as well as to Upper Egypt. The topography of the Bashmurite region and the reluctance of the army to operate there suggest that the revolts may have begun in this area before extending to the neighboring areas of the Delta. One should also bear in mind that it was in the northern part of the Delta that Byzantines landed for a short time in 720, which could mean that the area was already in agitation or even in open revolt.

Revolts flared up in the last years of the Umayyads, perhaps because the caliph Marwan could not tolerate trouble in Egypt, his last stronghold. SAWIRUS IBN AL-MUQAFFA provides precious information about the dramatic last operation against the Bashmurites before the arrival of the Abbasids in Egypt. It seems that Hawthara, Marwan’s governor in Egypt, had already failed to end the revolt, in spite of his repeated expeditions by land and by sea. When Marwan arrived in Egypt to deal with the uprising personally, he proposed an armistice, probably to consolidate his position in front of the advancing Abbasids.

When the Copts refused the treaty, Marwan joined the army he had
brought from Damascus to the troops already fighting the Copts in Egypt. As further pressure upon the Copts, Hawthara took KHA’IL I (744-767), the Coptic patriarch, hostage, transported him to Rashid (Rosetta), which was a government stronghold, and threatened to kill him if the Bashmurites did not end the hostilities. Far from being intimidated by this step, the Copts avenged it by not only attacking the besieging army, which had to evacuate its positions, but also by destroying Rashid. Marwan responded by ordering his troops to sack the villages, churches, and monasteries they encountered.

The arrival of the Abbasids did not improve the situation, as the political disorder between them and the Umayyads encouraged revolts by the Copts and by the Arabic settlers. Arabic historians speak about the Bashruds (a corruption of Bashmurites), who joined the revolt of 767, which flared up in the Delta. The expedition sent by the governor Yazid ibn Hatem against them was defeated, his local high officials were killed, and the army retreated to al-Fustat (Old Cairo).

In 830, the caliph al-Ma’mun, desiring to quash the rebellions in the Delta, sent a strong army to the area under the command of the Turkish general Afshin. The army destroyed the rebels in the eastern part of the Delta and in Alexandria, but was helpless against the Bashmurites. Afshin approached the patriarch and asked him to use his influence to stop the revolts. The patriarch agreed to intervene, but his letters to the insurgents were fruitless and his envoys achieved no success.

Finally Afshin asked the caliph to come in person. Al-Ma’mun arrived in Egypt accompanied by Dionysus of Tell Mahre, the patriarch of Antioch, who was to help in negotiations with the Coptic patriarch. When the two patriarchs were unable to obtain any positive results, the caliph took command of the army and launched a systematic attack on the rebels. Losses were great on both sides. To stop the slaughter, the caliph offered the Bashmurites an armistice. The insurgents accepted the offer. The temporary success of this rebellion did not achieve any amelioration of the conditions that had made the Bashmurites revolt. Some of them were deported to Iraq; others were sent to Syria and were sold as slaves in Damascus. The army destroyed and burned the entire area to wipe out all
possibility of further revolts.

Thus ended the last revolt of the Copts in Egypt. Without any real political plan or any national leadership, without any organized armed force, and in the face of a strong, experienced army, these spasmodic revolts were an indication of desperate courage. Not only did they achieve nothing but they drained the force and pride of the Copts. Nonetheless, these revolts are important for Coptic history, as they shed light on the character of the Coptic masses.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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