

BENJAMIN II

The eighty-second patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (1327-1339). Benjamin's life before taking the monastic vow is utterly unknown beyond the fact mentioned by the HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS that he was a native of the town of Dimiqrat south of Armant in Upper Egypt. Apparently his nomination was supported by a prophecy of one of the greatest saints of the day. Before his death in 1320, BARSUM THE NAKED (al-'Iryan) from his solitary cell in the hills adjacent to the city of Turah predicted the accession of the monk Benjamin. Thus, his selection and consecration found no opposition from the clergy or the laity.

He was a contemporary of Sultan al-[Nasir](#) Muhammad ibn Qalawun (1310-1341), during his third tenure of the Mamluk sultanate, when the tempestuous wave of persecution and pressures on the Copts began to subside. One factor that helped the return to peaceful coexistence between the Muslims and Copts was the advent of an embassy from the Ethiopian sovereign. The [monarch](#) pleaded on behalf of the Copts and requested permission to let them rebuild and restore their ruined churches. He threatened to destroy the Muslim mosques within his own kingdom if the Copts were not allowed to restore their churches.

Apparently al-[Nasir](#) responded to that call and renewed the original terms of the Covenant of 'Umar ibn al- Khattab, which guaranteed the survival of existing churches at this time, but forbade the construction of new ones. Benjamin started diligently to restore the churches that the mobs had destroyed in what the Islamic historian al-MAQRIZI and others described as the "battle of the Christians" (*Waqi'at al-[Nasara](#)*).

Benjamin oversaw the speedy restoration of the damaged churches and resumed the preparation of the CHRISM, which had been suspended during the patriarchate of JOHN IX. This operation was performed at the Monastery of Saint Macarius (DAYR ANBA MAQAR) in Wadi al-Natrun, in a full ecclesiastical assembly attended by twenty bishops from Lower and

Upper Egypt. There, the bishops celebrated [Easter](#) after the completion of this important ecclesiastical function.

While in the wilderness of SHIHAT in Wadi al-Natrun, the patriarch was able to inspect the neighboring monasteries, and concentrated his attention on the ancient DAYR ANBA BISHOI, which he restored using his patriarchal funds. Further, he supplied its depleted residents with a new group of monks from other quarters.

During Benjamin's reign, Sultan al-[Nasir](#) appointed an Islamized [Copt](#) to the highest office in his court. This was Sharaf al-Din 'Abd al-Wahhab ibn al-Taj Fadl Allah, known in Islamic sources as al- Nushu'. It was expected that such an appointment might give the Copts favors or at least relief from repression. On the contrary, al- Nushu', according to the *History of the Patriarchs*, was very hard in his treatment of his former coreligionists, probably to prove the sincerity of his apostasy to the Muslim administration.

The *History* records that al-Nushu' was able to amass immense wealth and that he imposed many hardships on the Copts and abused their women, monks, and nuns. It is said that the Lord punished him for these crimes. In fact, the Muslim sources and chroniclers such as al- Maqrizi and Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani paint an eloquent picture of the downfall of al-Nushu'. He managed to infuriate the Mamluk amirs by his arrogance and his heavy-handedness to such an extent that they worked hard to poison al-Nasir 's mind against him.

The sultan dismissed him from office and killed him and his family, while confiscating the vast wealth he had accumulated. As additional humiliation, his body was buried in the Jewish cemetery in a shroud costing only four dirhams. However, his tomb was guarded by officers for a week to prevent the mob whom al-Nushu' had oppressed from desecrating his remains and stealing them for burning in the open. The *History of the Patriarchs* ascribes this sorry ending to his unforgivable

treatment of the Copts.

Although the *History's* biography of Benjamin is only ten lines, the Islamic sources contain numerous details on the events of his age, including the names of many Copts who feigned apostasy to the Islamic faith. Benjamin II died after a reign of continuous struggles that lasted eleven years, seven months, and twenty-six days. He was buried in DAYR SHAHRAN, and the patriarchal see remained vacant for a year after his death.

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