

COPTIC EDUCATION

The origins of Coptic education may be traced to the period of the introduction of [Christianity](#) in the second half of the first century, when ancient educational traditions in the temples became colored with the doctrines and traditions of the new religion. According to Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, written in the fourth century, Christian dignitaries established Christian schools wherever they settled in their hierarchical dioceses.

Most luminous of these educational bodies in the earliest centuries was the CATECHETICAL SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA. Its leaders, such as PANTAENUS, CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, ORIGEN, and DIDYMUS THE BLIND, proved to be the great Christian mentors, not only of Egypt but also of the rest of the Christian world. It was here that the religious and moral culture of the Copts flourished and left its indelible influence on all future generations.

The Catechetical School began to dwindle from the fourth century, followed by the rise of Coptic MONOPHYSITISM as against Chalcedonian diophysitism from the year 451 and ending up with a wave of Byzantine persecutions in Egypt. However, Coptic educational policies were persistently retained in the native churches, and more especially in monastic institutions. In fact, the heritage of the Catechetical School was preserved or perhaps concentrated in subsequent centuries at the monastery of Saint Macarius (DAYR ANBA MAQAR) in the desert of Wadi al-Natrun.

It was here that the Alexandrian religious traditions found a permanent home and where they flourished. In the Nile Valley, however, the educational tradition persisted near the churches in more modest institutions, the equivalent of the medieval scriptoria or writing places. These new establishments were founded by both Copts and Muslims.

While the [Muslims](#) concentrated their procedures on the Qur'an under the leadership of a Muslim *shaykh*, generally a blind scholar who had memorized the holy book, the Coptic *kuttab*, or scriptorium, was principally run by the church cantor, or *'arif*, who taught the children the church liturgies while training them in the [art](#) of penmanship. Some cantors were blind, in which case the art of writing and the training in mathematics and accounting was confided to another person hired by the community of Coptic families.

Coptic education in the *kuttab* revolved primarily around religious instruction beginning with readings from the Bible, particularly the Psalms, and church hymnals. However, it was in the secular subjects such as arithmetic and accounting that the [Coptic scribes](#) later excelled; they virtually monopolized all the related activities in the Egyptian state, especially in the fields of finance and agriculture. All training in the *kuttab* was conducted on metal plates or slate tablets owing to lack of paper material.

Parallel to the instruction practiced in the *kuttab*, technical training in various professions played a prominent part in the educational process. Coptic artisans excelled in all manner of trades, notably those associated with the building and adornment of their churches. Exquisite woodwork, ivory inlay, and all manner of artistic accomplishments were executed by skilled laborers whose training as children must have taken place over the years in the workshops of master artisans. This kind of training extended to the fields of agriculture and commerce, where the children usually followed their parents in hereditary vocations throughout the Middle Ages.

The history of modern and contemporary education in Egypt extends from the termination of the French Expedition in 1801 to the outbreak of the revolution of July 1952. This century and a half witnessed a multitude of radical changes in education, and may be roughly divided into three periods.

The first period covers the years from the departure of the French in 1801 to the end of the reign of khedive Sa'id, son of Muhammad 'Ali, in 1863 (see MUHAMMAD 'ALI DYNASTY). The year before had seen the death of the 110th patriarch, CYRIL IV, who was recognized as the father of Coptic church reform, especially in the field of education. Though the *kuttab* or scriptorium system persisted in Cairo and the provinces, the educational reforms that took place during this period at the hands of Cyril IV were significant.

It would, however, be wrong to minimize the contributions of the scriptoria, which produced some eminent personalities who occupied high ranks in the government administration. In fact, Cyril IV himself was the product of those scriptoria, as was the *hegumenos* PHILUTHAWUS IBRAHIM who first headed the CLERICAL COLLEGE at its foundation in 1893.

The fee for attending a *kuttab* varied from five to ten piasters per month, although the teacher usually received the more substantial reward of a gold sovereign at the completion of a boy's education. There was, of course, no limit to age for acceptance in a *kuttab*. On the subject of Arabic grammar, the Coptic *kuttab* supplemented its activities by nominating an Islamic *shaykh* who taught children in Coptic homes for a fee. Among the notable Coptic *kuttabs* in Cairo were those of Harit al-Saqqayin, Harit al-Nasara in the Azbakiyyah district, and others in Old Cairo and al-Ghuriyyah as well as in the provinces.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, during the reign of Viceroy Sa'id, the foreign missionary schools began to emerge with an impact on the antiquated *kuttab* system. Asyut College took the lead of these institutions under the leadership of American and British missionaries. Owing, however, to Protestant doctrinal differences taught in these schools, the students began to have second thoughts about participation in their religious activities. A solution to this situation was soon found in the educational reforms carried out by Cyril IV.

In 1853, Cyril IV founded in Azbakiyyah the patriarchal primary school for boys, which was inaugurated in 1855 and later supplemented by a secondary section. Another primary school was established in Harit al-Saqqayin and two girls' primary schools were started in both the Azbakiyyah district and Harit al-Saqqayin. The pope made sure to introduce progressive programs and foreign languages such as English, French, Italian, and Turkish, in addition to Arabic and Coptic as major disciplines. He appointed teachers, both foreign and native, to take charge of teaching all subjects. The disappointed heads of the old *kuttab*s were conciliated by the offer of a pension.

The pope himself took to attending some of these classes and participated in their discussions. As to girls, whose education in schools seemed a novelty at the time, he instructed the heads of girls' schools to visit Coptic homes and encourage families to enroll their daughters in their institutions. He started a boarding arrangement to accommodate students from the country.

In the provinces, he established a similar school at al-Mansurah along the same pattern of the one he had founded at Bush during his primacy at Saint Antony's monastery (DAYR ANBA ANTUNIYUS). All his schools were open to [Muslims](#) as well as Copts, without distinction. Ultimately, on graduation, students were subjected to the state public examinations, which gave them the right to pursue their higher education in the high schools preparatory to the university.

On the cultural level outside of education, the great patriarch established the first Coptic printing press and secured permission to have Coptic youths receive training in the [art](#) of printing at the old government Bulaq printing press. He started with the publication of a Coptic grammar, and soon a flow of religious publications poured out of this press. He founded numerous libraries, which helped many authors in the publication of their works.

Khedive Sa'id (1854-1863) was impressed by the patriarch's achievement and granted Cyril IV land in the al-Wadi area of the Sharqiyyah province to help him cover the expenses incurred in his schools. The pope offered free education and even paid students, both Coptic and Muslim, a stipend to help them with their living expenses. And for the first time in the history of modern Egypt, a great deal of attention was accorded to female education.

The second period dates from the accession of the khedive Isma'il, in 1863, and extends to the era of the establishment of the new constitution of independent Egypt in 1924.

The most significant feature of this second phase was the open discussion of the educational system in the parliamentary meetings of August 1866. Among the members who conducted the discussions was Mikha'il Athanasius, a Copt. The problem of religious education was amicably settled on a nonsectarian basis, allowing the [Muslims](#) to study the Qur'an and the Copts the Bible under the guidance of a Coptic priest. In the end, special legislation was issued on 7 November 1867 under the minister of education, 'Ali (Pasha) Mubarak, in forty articles organizing education under three categories: primary, secondary, and higher. Candidates from Cyril IV's Coptic schools were permitted to take public examinations on a par with government school students.

Owing, however, to the British Occupation of 1882, the number of government schools became limited; they were supplemented by the emergence of national schools where the Copts displayed tremendous efforts, notably in regard to technical education both for boys and for girls. [Pope CYRIL V](#) sponsored the foundation of a technical college at Bulaq in 1903, while the Tawfiq Coptic Society founded another in the Fajjalah district in 1904. Schools for girls were opened by al-Jami'yah al-Khayriyyah al-[Kubra](#) at Azbakiyyah and the Tawfiq Society at Zahir (see BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES, COPTIC). Of more permanent stature was the establishment of a secondary girls' college in 1911 in 'Abbasiyyah by the

same Tawfiq Coptic Society. Other schools followed in Alexandria, Tanta, and the Fayyum, as well as in other cities in the valley.

The third period deals with more recent times. Apart from the continuous progress in the realm of general education, perhaps the main feature in the development of Coptic education was the fostering of the CLERICAL COLLEGE for preparing a cultured generation of priesthood. Conceived originally by [Pope Cyril V](#) in 1874, this college was developed into an institution of true religious scholarship in 1893. Its organization was entrusted to Philuthawus Ibrahim, to Yusuf (Bey) Manqariyus, and to archdeacon HABIB JIRJIS, who assumed its headship in 1918 and improved its stature of enrollment from primary graduates to secondary. He further adopted many progressive programs from similar institutions in Europe and founded in 1931 the Church of Our Lady at the College, where he conducted practical liturgical training. In 1945, he inaugurated special night classes for the benefit of university students and graduates who intended to take holy orders.

A parallel feature in the spread of religious education among the Coptic youth in schools was inaugurated by the Holy Synod as early as 1898. This movement was later known as the Sunday School Movement. In fact, its role expanded and its labors multiplied among Coptic children, and it became one of the landmarks of the Coptic church.

To this movement must be added the establishment of the Coptic Education Society in Giza and of the Diaconate of the Rif (Rural Areas) in the 1950s by Bishop SAMUEL. The diaconate consisted mainly of volunteers in many segregated villages, where Coptic families had lived in complete oblivion of their church for generations and oftentimes remained unbaptized. Under the leadership of Bishop Samuel, these volunteers broke the solitude of such families and extended to them the religious education that they needed as active members of the Coptic church.

Finally, and on a secular level, mention must be made of the establishment of the Coptic College for Girls in Cairo in 1932. It provided an alternative to the numerous Catholic and Protestant foreign mission schools in the country.

After 1932, the Ministry of Education established public schools throughout Egypt. These were, of course, open to the population in general. On 21 January 1954 the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies was founded with the approval of the Community Council. Although nondenominational in enrollment, it has been for the most part sponsored and supported by the Coptic church.

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