

COPTS UNDER THE OTTOMANS

With the lapse of Mamluk rule in Egypt and the conquest of the country by the Turks under Sultan Selm I in 1517, the Copts entered a new chapter in their history of painful survival. Their community had been depleted by recurrent persecutions, during which a considerable number perished. Many others converted to Islam because of great pressure from the authorities and the desire to continue earning a respectable livelihood.

It is said that their total number around the end of the eighteenth century sank to a mere 150,000 out of a total Egyptian population of 3 million. While 600,000 had paid their tithe to the Coptic patriarch immediately after the ARAB CONQUEST OF EGYPT, at this period only 15,000 are known to have done this. According to the European travelers visiting the country in the seventeenth century (Tajir, 1951, pp. 202-203), the number of [bishops](#) had dropped from seventy in the seventh century to twelve, mainly posted in Upper Egypt, in 1671.

[Coptic monks](#) were limited to four monasteries, of which the most important were DAYR ANBA MAQAR in Wadi al-Natrun and DAYR [ANBA ANTUNIYUS](#) in the Eastern Desert. Though extremely pious, their religion was restricted to the reiteration of the liturgies; the high theological scholarship of the fathers of the church had disappeared.

Nonetheless, in general, the Copts retained their scribal skills and their acumen in matters of finance and taxation, which rendered their services necessary for the Mamluk beys remaining under an Ottoman governor, whose title was *pasha*. It is doubtful whether the sultan's court at Constantinople was even aware of the existence of the Coptic minority in so distant a colony as Egypt. All the governors of the country cared about was sending the land and [poll](#) taxes to Constantinople and filling their own pockets with substantial additional taxes forcibly levied on the helpless subjects, of whom the Christians were an easy prey.

On the whole, however, the neglect of the reduced Coptic community had a positive aspect, for it enabled the Copts to lead a relatively peaceful life within their churches, unobserved and unimpaired in the period extending from 1517 to 1798—that is, from the Ottoman invasion to the advent of the French expedition under Napoleon.

It should be noted that the Copts were deeply rooted in their native country and hated emigration or even temporary absence from their birthplaces. Thus, when, in September 1699, the consul general of France, M. de Maillet, offered scholarships for three Coptic youngsters to go to France for their education, he found it most difficult to find candidates, even among the poorest families.

During this period, the relations of the Copts with Europe centered on the advent of Catholic missions to work on attracting the Coptic church to Roman obedience. Though it looked at times as if the project of reunion could succeed, in the end it failed. Perhaps the only positive outcome from this movement was the establishment of mission schools, which offered young Copts European education long before the reform movement of CYRIL IV (1854-1861).

In the early years of Ottoman rule, one finds no illustrious names of Copts who occupied significant positions in the administration. Nevertheless, prior to the French expedition, a few names of great eminence emerged among the Copts and were reported by Muslim chroniclers. Most significant among these was IBRAHIM AL- JAWHARI, who became head of the administration of the offices of the powerful Mamluk amir Ibrahim Bey, who depended on Jawhari in expediting all his finances and grieved for his death; al-Jabarti (1941, Vol. 2, p. 262) said that the amir condescended to attend his funeral at Qasr al-Ayn in 1797.

In fact, the Copts, who were restricted to the routine scribal functions in the secondary offices of the surviving Mamluk beys, began once more to shine under the French occupation on account of their education and

proficiency in the French language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Jabarti ('Abd al-Rahman), al-. *Al-Tarikh al-Musamma 'Aja'ib al- Athar fi al-Tarajim wa-al-Akhbar*, 4 vols. Cairo, 1941.
- Thévenot, J. de. *Relation d'un voyage fait au Levant*. Paris, 1665.
- Vansleb, J. M. *Nouvelle Relation en forme de journal d'un voyage fait en Egypte en 1672 et 1673*. Paris, 1677. Translated as *The Present State of Egypt*. London, 1678.

[AZIZ S. ATIYA](#)

Tags: [History](#)