

COPTS UNDER THE UMAYYADS

The Umayyads (661-750), named after the Banu Umayyah, a merchant family of Mecca, following a civil war established the first dynasty to rule the Islamic world. Under Umayyad rule the Islamic empire attained its greatest extent, reaching as far as France in the west and India in the east. The Umayyads moved the capital of the Islamic world, and therefore the center of gravity, from Mecca to Damascus, whence Egypt was ruled as a province of Syria by ethnic Arab governors appointed by the caliph.

Umayyad rule has been most fully examined as it affected Syria, Iraq, and the Persian-speaking East. There, Umayyad favoritism toward ethnic Arabs resulted in discrimination against non-Arab converts to Islam, hence the literature often refers to the Umayyad empire as the “Arab Empire.” Discontent among converts led to the overthrow of the Umayyads and their replacement by the Abbasid dynasty (A.H. 132-656/A.D. 750-1258), which brought in its wake increasing ethnic Persian influence.

Under the Abbasids not only were the Umayyads physically hunted down and eliminated but also the history of the Umayyads was written as propaganda justifying their overthrow. With the beginnings of European historiographical interest in Egypt in the nineteenth century, Abbasid depiction of a cruel and tyrannical Umayyad reign in Egypt was accepted and compounded by an imperial mind-set that saw Islam as the cause of the decline of Egypt’s fortunes following the decline of the Roman world.

As a corrective to this double distortion of Umayyad rule in Egypt, the *Qurrah Papyri* (written in Arabic and Greek) contradict the later Abbasid narrative sources, which misrepresent the character of Umayyad administration in Egypt. These provincial Egyptian documents indicate, for example, that the governor Qurrah ibn Sharik (ruled 709-714) was a careful and effective administrator and not the godless tyrant portrayed by Abbasid historians.

Agrarian Administration and Land Tenure

From Greek, Coptic, and Arabic [papyri](#) we know that following the Arab conquest Egypt was administered largely through the [Coptic church](#) and provincial Coptic notables. This was of necessity as no Arabs, other than a few high-level personnel, settled in Egypt until a half century later. Egypt's agrarian wealth was legendary. Umayyad interest in Egypt was fiscal, the wealth yielded by [agricultural](#) taxation as well as the poll tax levied on non-Muslims. Fiscal interest in agricultural taxation led the Umayyads to interfere in Coptic-Arab (Arab and [Muslim](#) are synonymous in Umayyad Egypt) administrative and ultimately social relations.

From about 715 to 740 the Umayyad administration took a radical step to increase tax remittance to the fisc. It changed the tax status of the land of Egypt from treaty to nontreaty (Noth, 1984). This change reputedly doubled the tax rate. The precise juridical term used to indicate land conquered without treaty, *kharaj*, is unknown in the Umayyad papyri. This change in tax status probably accounts for the endemic tax revolts by, first, Copts, then both Arabs and Copts, which began in 725 and continued periodically into the Abbasid period.

At about the same time as the change in the tax status of the land, intrusion of the central government at the local level was felt in two other, interrelated ways. The government began to assess peasant farmers individually, and it launched an effort to replace Coptic administrative personnel with Muslims beginning around 717. This was a very slow process, according to the testimony of documents, which indicate that Coptic officials continued in place well into the eighth century, and long after that according to narrative sources.

Previously, Arab officials of the central government determined a gross assessment figure for each of the various agrarian administrative districts. Then, at the local level, a native Egyptian notable, often a churchman, apportioned the district's assessment by assessing the

individual villagers in his district. This same native Egyptian [notable](#) collected the individually assessed taxes from the local population and remitted them to the Arab officials of the Umayyad administration.

The documents show that reliance on native Egyptian administrators had its shortcomings. At the village level the fisc was sometimes [confronted](#) with group noncompliance, or only partial remittance of the tax assessment by the native Egyptian notables. Lack of control over [agricultural](#) assessment and collection perhaps accounts for the comparatively high levels of poll tax in the first century and a half of Islamic rule in Egypt and the later inclusion of poll tax as an incidental element of agrarian assessment and collection.

The change in administrative personnel who assessed taxes at the local level, from third-party native Egyptian notables to [Muslim](#) bureaucrats appointed by the Umayyad government, was intended to address noncompliance and partial remittance. Previously, the individual who had worked the land had been liable to the local, native Egyptian notable, and the [notable](#) had in turn been liable to the central government. Now the individual who worked the land was directly liable to the central government's official and, therefore, to the Umayyad government itself.

This establishment of individual liability was tantamount to a change in land tenure from group to individual tenure. As far as the state was concerned, whoever was directly liable for taxes held tenure to that land. In addition, Arabs liable for taxes on land begin to appear in the documents dating from this period. This entirely new group of landholders resulted from subsidized Arab immigration into Egypt from Syria, which began in 728.

The transfer of tenure based on the change from indirect to direct liability vis-à-vis the Umayyad government implied a social revolution. The local Egyptian notable, frequently a churchman, had formerly exercised influence over the community by apportioning the district's tax

assessment among the peasants, who were then liable to him for individual assessments. With individual assessment by the state, and individual liability directly to the state, the Egyptian [notable](#) and the [Coptic church](#) began to lose their influence with the peasant population. The notables and churchmen no longer occupied the same position of economic and political influence over the villagers. This transfer of tenure from church to tenant farmer, on paper as it were, also was to lead to the church physically losing some of its land.

The change from native notables to Arab personnel in local administration did not solve the problem of partial remittance. The root cause lay in the fact that, under both personnel systems, the administrator who collected taxes directly from the peasants was the very same official who had assessed the taxes on those individuals. Transferring this dual power to assess and collect from native administrators to Arab officials had a devastating effect on the individual peasant, and ultimately the fisc.

Previously, the local notable, through his role as an agrarian administrator, had not only been able to exercise considerable influence upon the peasantry but had also acted as an intermediary between the peasant and the Umayyad state. Local Egyptian notables had stood as a buffer between the peasant and taxation. With the change in personnel, the individual landholder, whether Coptic peasant or Arab immigrant, now had to deal directly with the state's local tax official. Whereas the local Egyptian [notable](#) had been a member of the community with long-term interests within that community, the Arab official was often an outsider who was only on temporary assignment from his home in Syria. The individual landholder now stood defenseless against the potential for abuse, which was inherent in the tax official's dual powers of assessment and collection.

It is well attested in narrative sources, and alluded to in the documents, that in dealing directly with the peasant farmer, first Copt and later Arab

as well, tax officials abused their authority. By the middle of the eighth century we hear that the state's local tax officials pocketed taxes that they collected from peasant farmers, while alleging that the peasants were in arrears or that [crops](#) had failed. Tax assessors also "shortened the measuring rod" (overmeasured) or were bribed to "measure gently." Arbitrary taxes were levied. Much of this fraudulently assessed tax was collected but not reported, again ending in the tax official's pocket rather than in Umayyad coffers.

When tax officials succeeded in extracting excessive taxes, peasants stood to be abused to the point of abandoning the land. Officials reputedly deliberately overassessed landholders in some instances in order to dispossess them and then take over their lands. In the case of tenant farmers on church lands, it led to the church's loss of that land.

Conversion

Coptic church [sources](#) viewed their loss of tenure and the loss of their position as intermediaries between the state and the peasant as religious persecution. While many historians have focused on the emphasis on religious persecution in Coptic sources as the likely reason for conversion, it has been suggested that the church's weakening economic and social status was a more demonstrable and likely factor. In this interpretation, conversion can be seen as a means of joining the new ruling class in an attempt to protect one's property. Whatever the motives for conversion, its progress is remarkable for its glacial pace.

[Parties](#) to published Arabic legal documents dating from as late as the eleventh century continue to be Copts overwhelmingly, by the [evidence](#) of their names and genealogies. These documents also provide an indication that the means of conversion among the provincial population, too humble to have come to the attention of [Muslim](#) biographers resident in capital cities, was intermarriage. According to Islamic jurisprudence, witnesses were required to be Muslim.

Some of the witnesses who signed the contracts referred to may have been recent converts, or from families recently converted. Some have [Muslim](#) patronymics and non-Muslim first names, suggesting intermarriage between Muslim men and Christian women. Similarly, the [parties](#) to contracts indicate intermarriage; for example, a woman with a Coptic patronymic marries a man with a [Muslim](#) first name and patronymic. A state functionary bears a Muslim name and patronymic, while his mother's name and patronymic are both Coptic.

Arabization and Law

Documents indicate a lack of arabization in provincial Egypt as much as three centuries after the Arab conquest, well beyond the Umayyad period. First, private documents continued to be written in Coptic in the eighth century. In legal documents, [parties](#) to contracts had a choice of language in which to have their documents recorded, and they opted for Coptic. Tenth-century documents from the Fayyum expressly state that the contract in question had been “read to the seller in Arabic and explained to him in the “foreign language.” The fact that even oral Arabic had to be “explained” to the parties to these contracts suggests the slow pace of arabization in Egypt.

According to a body of documentary litigation dating from the eighth century, Muslims adjudicated between Christians on the basis of contracts written in Coptic and in Greek. Significantly, as mentioned above, Umayyad officials continued to give the option of having a contract written in Coptic as late as fifteen years after their assumption of judicial authority around 718, thus demonstrating not only their familiarity with the Coptic formulary but also its acceptance as valid before [Muslim](#) jurists.

Such acceptance, along with the chronological overlap in the practice of the two systems, Arabic and Coptic, suggests commonality between the two. While there are many parallels between the Coptic and Arabic

formularies, as well as between the Greek and Arabic, they are not identical. Arabic contracts from Umayyad Egypt contain unique clauses as well as modification of phrases making earlier Egyptian formularies conform to Islamic norms.

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