

## **CYRUS AL-MUQAWQAS**

A Byzantine bishop of Phasis in the region of the Caucasus until 631, when Emperor Heraclius decided to assign him the more important diocese of Egypt, with the express command to curb the obstinate Coptic community and bring its members to [Chalcedonian](#) obedience. In 451 the [Copts](#) had opposed the [Council](#) of CHALCEDON and were never reconciled to its deposition of their native patriarch DIOSCORUS and his exile.

In order to enable Cyrus to force the religious unity of the empire on the dissident Monophysite sect in Egypt if an attempt at a peaceful resolution failed, the new bishop was appointed in a triple capacity that would allow him to use force to attain his aim: [besides](#) being Byzantine patriarch of Alexandria, he was made civil viceroy of Egypt and military commander of the imperial forces in the country. With combined powers, Cyrus became a virtual dictator, abusing his authority in the treatment of the Coptic hierarchy and the Coptic people in his attempt to force [Chalcedonian](#) obedience upon them, while the Arabs were gathering at the gates of Egypt in readiness for their invasion of this Byzantine colony.

Apparently Cyrus was mistakenly thought by the Arabs to be a Copt. They corrupted his name in Arabic sources as al-[Muqawqas](#) and regarded him as the head of that nation, *'azim al-Qibt*, the great one of the Copts. The details of this corruption in the sources have been accumulated by A. Grohmann (1987, Vol. 6, pp. 712-15). The Prophet Muḥammad is said to have addressed him a special epistle, possibly apocryphal but recorded by Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam, whereby he invited him to espouse his new religion even before the ARAB CONQUEST OF EGYPT.

Contrary to Arab understanding, Cyrus was, of course, no Copt, but rather one of the worst oppressors of the [Copts](#) throughout his tenure (631-642). Though it is doubtful whether Heraclius condoned the brutality of his agent, Cyrus knew no limits in his persecution of the Copts to attain

the unity of the church. Here he failed miserably to bridge the gap between Constantinople and Alexandria. With the support of Sergius, the Byzantine patriarch, and the approval of [Pope](#) Honorius of Rome, Heraclius devised a new edict in a final attempt to persuade the [Copts](#) to obedience.

This edict is known as the Ecthesis, whereby all churches in the eastern empire were forbidden to use the term “energies” in speaking of the Person of [Christ](#) and asserted that the two natures of the Lord were united in a single will; it thus substituted MONOTHELETISM for MONOPHYSITISM. But the imperial ruse for rapprochement with the [Copts](#) did not work. As a result, the exasperated Cyrus inaugurated one of the fiercest persecutions of the Copts in history.

The native [pope](#) Benjamin I, thirty-eighth patriarch of the Coptic church, seems to have anticipated troubles with the advent of Cyrus in 631, for he took refuge in the Coptic monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun, moving continuously from one monastery to another to dodge his pursuers. In the meantime, the Coptic hierarchy, to quote the HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS, became subjected to infinite harassment by Cyrus, who was like “a wolf devouring the flock and never satiated.”

In his description of this sordid situation, Alfred Butler says “that the Coptic Church was smitten and torn asunder, but it never yielded” (1978, p. 191). Mina, the patriarch’s brother, was seized and tortured to make him divulge the hiding place of Benjamin, to no avail. When they failed either to make him talk about the patriarchal concealment or accept the [Chalcedonian](#) formula, they bundled him in a sack full of stones and cast him in the middle of the Nile, where he drowned.

While these humiliations and tortures were in progress, the Arabs were starting their invasion of Egypt under the leadership of ‘Amr ibn al-‘As. In the circumstances, the [Copts](#) could do nothing but stand aside and watch the invaders annihilate their persecutors in a series of battles from

Bilbeis to Aeliopolis, to the siege and surrender of the fort of Babylon, thus opening the road across the Delta for a speedy march toward the capital, Alexandria.

On the way, the Coptic farmers furnished the Arab hosts with sorely needed provisions, which ensured their unopposed progress. The bewildered and powerless Cyrus, who managed to escape to the capital, decided to negotiate a treaty of peaceful surrender to save [Alexandria](#) from total destruction; it was signed on 8 November 641. The terms of the treaty have been preserved in the chronicle of JOHN OF NIKIOU and may be summarized here as the final chapter in the life of Cyrus, who was permitted to leave the country with his Byzantine troops.

The first article of the treaty concerned the payment of a tribute by able-bodied persons at the rate of two dinars, thus yielding a total of approximately 12 million gold dinars (Butler, 1978, p. 321). Other articles stipulated the cessation of all resistance and gave permission for the Byzantine army to depart by sea with its possessions, on condition that no Byzantine forces should return to Egyptian shores or attempt the recovery of the country.

Other articles decreed that the Arabs should desist from interference with Christian churches and that Jews should desist from interference with Christian churches and that Jews should be allowed to remain unharmed in Alexandria. Finally, a fixed number of Byzantine hostages were to be retained by the invaders until the complete evacuation of the Byzantine forces and the fulfillment of the terms of the treaty.

It was then that 'Amr reported to the caliph the seizure of the great capital in the following terms: "I have taken a city of which I can but say that it contains 4,000 palaces, 4,000 baths, 400 theaters, 12,000 sellers of green vegetables and 40,000 tributary Jews" (Butler, 1978, p. 368).

Nevertheless, the treaty was broken in 645 when a Byzantine general by

the name of Manuel succeeded in the temporary recapture of the city. In the following year, the Arabs, perhaps with the help of treachery inside the walls, were able to force their way through an open gate and exterminate its military occupants, who failed to escape by sea. In this way, the fate of Egypt was sealed for all time and the [Copts](#) became separated from Western Christendom by a permanent Islamic occupation of Egypt.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Butler, A. *The Treaty of Misr in Tabari*. Oxford, 1913.
- . *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, ed. P. M. Fraser. Oxford, 1978.
- Caetani, L. *Annali dell'islam*, Vol. 4. Milan, 1911.
- Grohmann, A. "Al-Mukawkas." In *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. 6, pp. 712-15. Leiden, 1987.
- Lane-Poole, S. "The First Mohammadan Treaty with Christians." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 24 (1902-1904).
- . *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages*. London, 1925.

**AZIZ S. ATIYA**

Tags: [Eminent](#)