

FEAST OF THE MARTYR

The one of the most popular feasts in Coptic and medieval Egypt, especially for its association with the Nile flood, apparently inherited from remote antiquity, when the [Egyptians](#) devoted a period of fifteen days to lavish festivities in honor of the river. The Copts celebrated it just before the occurrence of the annual flood of the Nile on 8 Bashans (16 May). The feast was one of the great national occasions on which both Copts and Muslims held festivities on the bank of the Nile, drinking, dancing, and singing.

The fourteenth-century Arab [historian](#) al-MAQRIZI gave a lively account of the feast in his own day at Shubra al-Khaymah, a suburb of [Cairo](#) bordering the Nile. The Copts began the occasion with a procession, bringing with them a reliquary containing the finger [bones](#) of one of their martyrs for the blessing of the river. The legend runs that the flood would begin to rise at that moment.

Al-Maqrizi told of the immense quantities of wine consumed during that day and mentioned the example of one merchant who sold wine to the enormous amount of 100,000 silver dirhems or the equivalent of 5,000 gold dinars. Debauchery resulted, and the governor of [Cairo](#) suspended its celebration from 1303, though it was reinstated by order of the Bahrite Mamluk sultan al-Nasir Hasan in the year 1354. It is said that later, al-Malik al-[Salih](#) Salah al-[Din](#) Hajji (1381-1382) seized the reliquary, burned it, and cast the cinders in the Nile. From that time, the practice stopped, though the commemoration of the flood persisted in a different fashion.

An event known as *Jabr al-Khalij* (the Opening of the Canal) became the substitute for the older custom by building a dike across the Nile below the Nilometer at [Rodah](#) Island. As soon as the flood reached its annual maximum height, the dike was broken in the presence of the chief judge,

or *mufti*, who would testify that the flood had reached its legal limit for purposes of taxation, and an official celebration subsequently took place by sailing a gaily decorated ship on the river surrounded by a multitude of other, smaller boats all gaily painted and lighted. In Ottoman times, the celebration was accompanied by fireworks and the firing of canons.

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