

## ***John of Shmoun and Coptic Identity***

After the Council of Chalcedon in ad 451 and in particular after the Arab conquest of Egypt in ad 641, the need to demonstrate Coptic self identification became more important than before.[1] Usually, there is the need to stress one's identity and define or form its features when one feels that one's cultural or ethnic existence is threatened and association with other groups of different ethnic or religious origin leads to the loss or distortion of one's identity. Such feelings are to be found in particular among persecuted or ignored minorities.

Coptic literature preferred to deal with the theme of identity in an indirect way. In Coptic and [Copto-Arabic](#) writings, we find some hints and allusions that emphasize the superiority of Egypt and its Church. These hints are not limited to post-Chalcedonian Coptic literature but are also found in pre-Chalcedonian texts that were reworked or re-edited by interpolating passages to demonstrate Coptic identity, as we can see in the *Life of Patriarch Peter* (300—11).

John of Shmoun (Hermopolis Magna), now al-Ashmunayn in Middle Egypt, is a special case regarding this theme.[2] Very little is known about him. He was contemporary with Patriarch Damianus (578—604), as John himself mentioned in his *Panegyric on Saint Antony*. [3] Before his consecration as bishop of Shmoun, he lived as a hermit monk and priest in the same region. The *Arabic History of the Patriarchs* mentions John among the prominent [bishops](#) in the time of Damianus (the blessed John the Hermit) without saying anything about his person.[4] In addition, there is a papyrus found in Hermopolis Magna (P.Rainer Cent. 79) and dated to the sixth century (Maehler 1983). It contains a private letter in Greek signed by Bishop John, who could be the same John under discussion. However, it does not provide any further information concerning him.[5] It is not known when and by whom John was consecrated as bishop, but it was probably by Patriarch Damianus. From his literary writings, it can be concluded that John received a good

education and was familiar with the writings of the Church Fathers in Greek and Coptic as well.[6]

From the literary writings of John of Shmoun, we have only two works in Sahidic Coptic: one panegyric on the Apostle Mark and another on St. Antony the Great.[7] Both were written when John was still a monk, before his consecration as a bishop, as the prologue of his [panegyrics](#) reveals. It is not clear whether John wrote other works besides these two panegyrics. However, his choice of these two famous saints, Mark and Antony, shows his tendency to emphasize the superiority of the [Coptic Church](#). This tendency remains limited to John of Shmoun and cannot be generalized to describe Coptic literature in that period in general, since there are no other Coptic writings entirely dedicated to this purpose (Mikhail 2004:135—38 n. 366).

Unfortunately, the panegyric on Mark is fragmentary. However, the remaining text suffices to suggest how John of Shmoun dealt with his theme. First of all, John demonstrates how Egypt before Mark lived in the darkness of paganism. He speaks very clearly about “our worshipers of the vain idols in that time.”[8] He identifies the beginning of the real history of Egypt with the coming of Mark when he says, “Before Mark came, there was in Egypt no morning at all, but a continuous night. But when Mark, the light, came, the morning began.”[9] After that, John mentions the famous Egyptian monks, such as Pachomius, Pijoul, Shenoute of Atripe, and others.[10]

These short citations from the *Panegyric on Mark* draw our attention to two important points, which will be discussed in the following pages in some detail: the Coptic view of the pre-Christian history of Egypt and the role of St. Mark in the formation of the Coptic identity.

## **Copts and the View Back to the Pre-Christian Past**

Although Copts descend from the ancient Egyptians and in modern times

are often considered their successors,[\[11\]](#) we do not find any trace of this blood relationship in their Christian-oriented writings. The historical works of Copts in Coptic as well as in Arabic do not mention the pharaohs in the lists of the rulers of Egypt. Despite some chapters in the *Chronicle* of John of Nikiou in which he mentions some data concerning the history of Egypt, he does not mention the ancient Egyptians as his own ancestors. He sees Egypt before Christianity as a pagan land that worshiped idols and demons.[\[12\]](#) The first time that John relates himself to 'Egyptians' is when he speaks about "the prayers of our Egyptian Fathers."[\[13\]](#) He shows respect and pride for Egyptians when he speaks about "the holy fathers, the Egyptian monks, who were clothed with God."[\[14\]](#) He relates himself only to Christian Egypt, the Egypt of martyrs, saints, and monks.

The same attitude is also to be found in an undated homily preserved in Arabic and attributed to Theophilus of Alexandria (385—412). The anonymous author of this homily sees in Egypt before Christianity nothing but sinners and pagans. According to his view, the land of Egypt was full of impurity and a dwelling place for Satan, but after its Christianization it became the place of God and his angels.[\[15\]](#)

Coptic historians were not interested in their own ancient Egyptian history, not only because they wanted to distance themselves from paganism, which ancient Egypt embodied, but also because they lacked the necessary information to write about this era. It was a coincidence that Egypt changed its religion and its written script at the same time. In the fourth century, Christianity became the religion of the majority of Egyptians, and about the same period or a little bit earlier, Coptic developed into a standard language with a markedly different grammar and orthography from its past. This fact was enough to cut off any connection with the past. Coptic historians were not able to read and understand the ancient Egyptian script and considered ancient Egyptian religion to be satanic worship.[\[16\]](#)

The new situation led the Copts to see themselves as spiritual descendants of the holy men of the Old Testament more than as successors of the heathen pharaohs. They adopted the view of the early Christian generations, who were predominantly of Jewish origin, and saw in the pharaohs a symbol of [evil](#) and an embodiment of [Satan](#) himself, as, for example, in the first canticle in the Coptic [psalmody](#) book. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Origen (185—254) considered the Christians to be the spiritual Israel.[\[17\]](#) In Coptic literature and particularly in the monastic tradition, the word 'Israelite' became a positive description for saintly monks.[\[18\]](#) Egyptian Christians considered Jerusalem a symbol of spirituality, in contrast to Egypt and Pharaoh, both of which symbolized [evil](#) and earthly life (Frend 1982: 24).

A fragmentary homily, which Shenoute of Atripe (ca. 347-465) preached at an ancient Egyptian temple converted to a church, makes Shenoute's opinion of pharaonic temples clear. For him, it was a place for unclean spirits where the people sacrificed to and worshiped Satan. To clean and purify it, it had to be transformed into a church.[\[19\]](#) For Shenoute, the temple symbolized heathenism and aberrance, which everyone must leave to come to the knowledge of Christ. The temple that had been transformed into a church became an example of repentance.[\[20\]](#)

Shenoute's depiction and explanation of the hieroglyphic script on the temple's wall show his ignorance of the ancient [Egyptian language](#) and religion and his disgust with everything related to this pagan Egyptian past.[\[21\]](#) This is in contrast to Clement of Alexandria (d. 220), who shows a good understanding of the Egyptian script and how it functions.[\[22\]](#)

It is true that some pre-Christian funerary customs and habits, such as mummification and caring for the body of the dead, survived in Christian Egypt, even in monastic and clerical circles (Baumeister 1972: 58-63, 73-86). However, we cannot consider this continuity to reflect a survival of the belief upon which ancient Egyptians established their funerary rituals.

The continuity of these practices was due to the perfect compatibility of Christian dogmas with ancient Egyptian religion concerning the resurrection of the body. Some customs and habits were practiced not only in Egypt but also elsewhere in the Byzantine world. Thus, it is not correct always to prefer an Egyptian explanation when other factors could play a role (Papaconstantinou 2006: 66—67, 73—75).

Coptic identity was based primarily on Christian fundamentals. In Coptic identity, there are no traces of ancient Egypt. Coptic Christians rejected the glories of pre-Christian Egypt and did not seek national identity. Coptic Christians did not understand Christianity as a national movement, but rather as a way of life and thinking. Thanks to Christianity, Copts gained a new cultural awareness and a sense of identity. They became [adherents](#) and members of a culture that could challenge Greek (pagan) philosophy (Frend 1982: 23—24).

With the passage of time, this feeling of cultural superiority increased, particularly after the Arab conquest, as Copts believed that the Muslim conquerors had no culture to offer and that their [Arabic language](#) was not worthy to be spoken. As we can see in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Samuel of Qalamun*, Copts found no point of resemblance between the Coptic language of the saints and the [Arabic language](#) of the Bedouin (Papaconstantinou 2007: 292).

Despite the disappearance of any positive connection between Christian and ancient Egypt in literary sources and particularly in historiographical writings, Coptic art offers enough evidence for such a connection. Copts adopted some ancient Egyptian elements into their art after Christianizing them. Some ancient Egyptian elements and motifs survived in Coptic art and show the continuity of ancient Egyptian art in the early Coptic period. The scene of the raising of Lazarus is a good example to demonstrate how Coptic art was influenced, technically, ideologically, and religiously, by the pre-Christian art of Egypt. This scene was painted on various materials and in different ways.

Among the variants is one where Lazarus is coiled like a mummy in an aedicula while Jesus stands before him and holds his rod upon the head of Lazarus. The Coptic version of Lazarus's scene is reminiscent of an old Egyptian ritual, namely the Ritual of Opening the Mouth, which derives from the legend of the Egyptian god Osiris. The parallels between the two illustrations demonstrate how Coptic artists were influenced by ancient Egyptian art (Hermann, 1962; Meurer 1971; Galal 1986:201-203).

### **John of Shmoun and Praising Egypt**

In his *Panegyric on Saint Antony*, John of Shmoun used the opportunity to praise Egypt as a holy land that bore saints and where prophets lived or were buried. He says: "Antony, said Athanasius, was Egyptian by origin. Where will the sunrise except in the east? And where do you wish Antony to shine forth except in Egypt? ... For most of the saints who have ever lived have been from Egypt or Egypt has attracted them from other places." [23] After that, John mentions some prophets of the Old Testament who visited Egypt or were buried there, such as Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. Then he turns to remind his audience that the famous monastic leaders were Egyptian.

In the same way, the leaders of all the monks practiced [ascetic](#) discipline in Egypt. . . . The land of Egypt is fertile not only for growing fruits that perish but also for people who bear fruit according to God. . . . Other lands bring different kinds of fruit to us, and we find enjoyment in them, but our pride is in our own (fruit), in particular, in what belongs to us and in what existed here, the Ekes of which are not elsewhere. For it is said concerning papyrus or paper that it is made only in Egypt and does not grow in other countries. In the same way, Antony lived in this country, and there is no other Antony like him. [24]

Here, it is clear how proud of Egypt John was. Other literary sources tell us the same about Antony and ennoble him over all other monks, since he symbolizes Egyptian monasticism. Shenoute of Atripe believes that "even

if all the monks of this time came [together] in a single place, they would not make a single Antony!”[\[25\]](#) This and other writings are quoted by John of Shmoun in his panegyric.[\[26\]](#)

Also, the *[Life of Dioscorus](#)* attests that only the [bishops](#) of Egypt can endure pains and punishment for their belief. The author of this Life says to the Chalcedonian bishop of Gangra: “Who but he could endure what you do against my father.... I attest before you that there is no other bishop equal to him except only in Egypt.”[\[27\]](#)

### **St. Mark and the Coptic Identity**

When John of Shmoun decided to write a panegyric on St. Mark he did it not only because Mark was the preacher of Christianity in Alexandria and the first martyr in Egypt, but also because he became a symbol of legitimacy for every Coptic patriarch who is, first of all, considered the successor of St. Mark. It is true that the struggle for primacy among the great patriarchates, that is, Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople, began in the fourth century. However, after the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and the establishing of the Melchite (Chalcedonian) Church in Egypt, the need to stress the relationship between the Coptic patriarchs and the memory of St. Mark became more important than before to confront those who put the legitimacy of the Coptic patriarchs in question.

From that time on, the [Coptic Church](#) not only had to prove the correctness of its faith before the Christian world, but also had to defend the legitimacy of its patriarchs and hence its existence. During this struggle, the memory of St. Mark played a considerable role. Coptic and [Copto-Arabic](#) sources offer some hints that refer to the interest of Coptic historians in demonstrating the role of St. Mark in the process of establishing and forming the Coptic collective identity.

The martyrdom of Patriarch Peter I (300-11) offers an interesting passage in which Peter prays at the tomb of St. Mark before his martyr's

death.[28] In his prayer, Peter follows the succession of the Alexandrian patriarchate in order to assert the apostolic origin of the Alexandrian Church and the legitimacy of its patriarchs. The prayer of Peter of Alexandria at the tomb of Mark thus serves to demonstrate the unbroken continuity between Mark and Peter of Alexandria, and to assert the foundation of the [Coptic Church](#) by Mark.[29]

Although this visit of Peter to the tomb of St. Mark may not have a historical basis (Davis 2004:41 n. 87), it later found high popularity among the Copts by its inclusion in the Arabic *History of the Patriarchs* and the Arabic *Synaxarion* under 29 Hatur. In his prayer, Peter demonstrates the apostolicity of the [Coptic Church](#) that was founded not only by Mark but also by God himself, since God chose Mark to preach the gospel in Egypt. For Peter—or, more precisely, for the author of the martyrdom—it was important to mention the late patriarchs of Alexandria by name to demonstrate the apostolic succession in the see of Alexandria and thus to legitimize them and their successors as well. Although it is not clear when exactly the *Martyrdom of Peter* was expanded, it can be assumed that the additional parts had been interpolated after 451 since other post-Chalcedonian Coptic sources have the same tendency, as we will see.

A very similar passage is to be found in the so-called *Life of Dioscorus*.[\[30\]](#) On the ship from Alexandria to Constantinople to attend the Council of Chalcedon, Dioscorus prays to God and mentions his predecessors from Mark to Cyril.[\[31\]](#) The [Life of Dioscorus](#) never ceases to accent and highlight this close relationship between St. Mark and Dioscorus as his legal successor (Moawad 2011:165—75).

The *Panegyric on Macarius of Tkow*, another anti-Chalcedonian Coptic text, uses the memory of St. Mark to prove the correctness of the Alexandrian faith. After the Council of Chalcedon, a troop of soldiers tried to force the monks of Apa Longinus to sign the decisions of the council. When Apa Longinus found out that Dioscorus did not sign, he also refused

to sign it. He told the commander that one of his monks saw a vision in which the Apostle Peter was weeping because the things he planted through the whole world had been plucked out, but the things which Mark planted (in Egypt) took root.[\[32\]](#)

The *Panegyric on Macarius* does not discuss any theological details to support the correctness of the Alexandrian faith. It lets St. Peter himself confess this truth and praise St. Mark and his successors for keeping the Christian faith intact. This scene is a clever attempt by the anonymous author to grant the Egyptian Church infallibility.

The usage of the memory and the figure of St. Mark in the formation of the Coptic identity is not limited to Coptic literature but extends also to Coptic art. In an early seventh-century ivory relief, we see St. Mark seated on a throne and holding his Gospel. He is surrounded by his thirty-five immediate successors, the patriarchs of Alexandria, from Anianus (d. 85) to Anastasius (605–19). In the background, we see the city of Alexandria. This relief comes from Alexandria and is now preserved in the Musee du Louvre in Paris (Davis 2004: 1–2). Here, the stress on the apostolic origins of the [Coptic Church](#) and the legitimacy of its patriarchs is explicit, and not implicit as in the written texts. In the period from the second half of the fifth century to the seventh century, the need to present collective self-identification among Copts increased to face the power and the authority of the Melchite Church, which enjoyed the financial and military support of the Byzantine state.

Literature and art were instruments to keep the memory of St. Mark alive among Coptic believers. However, there was another more important way to keep his memory immortal, namely the [relics](#) of St. Mark himself. With the passage of time, the veneration of the head of St. Mark became an important part in the consecration of a new patriarch. On the day after his consecration, according to Ibn Sabba', the patriarch should visit the head of the apostle where it is preserved and bow before it. After that, he prayed with incense and read the beginning of the Gospel of St. Mark.

After the prayer, he exchanged the old covering of the head with a new one, took it in his arms, and let the assembled people kiss it. Ibn Sabba' ends his chapter with the following phrase: "With this ceremony his consecration as a patriarch is completed because he is the one who sits on the throne of the apostle Mark."<sup>[33]</sup> The *History of the Patriarchs* by pseudo-Yusab of Fuwwa mentions two patriarchs by name who practiced this ceremony, namely Mark III (1167-89) and Cyril III (1235-43).<sup>[34]</sup>

As we see, John of Shmoun is not the only Coptic author who is interested in praising and ennobling his land, Egypt, but he may be the only known author who expresses this tendency explicitly in his works. Other Coptic authors preferred to refer to their pride in their homeland and in their [Coptic Church](#) implicitly, using key figures. However, the figure of St. Mark remains by far the most often used and the most effective figure.

### Samuel Moawad

<sup>[1]</sup> I am deeply indebted to my colleague Dr. Christian Askeland (Munster) and to Connie Sletto (Elgin, IL) for correcting the first draft of the English version.

<sup>[2]</sup> For Shmoun/al-Ashmunayn, see Timm 1984—92: 1:198—220.

<sup>[3]</sup> John of Shmoun, *Panegyric on Antony* §35, ed., with French translation, Garitte 1943: 344-45; Italian translation, Orlandi 1981: 262; English translation, Vivian, Athanassakis, and Greer 2003: 31; modern Arabic translation, Moawad 2013: 367.

<sup>[4]</sup> *The History of the Patriarchs*, ed. Seybold 1912:92. Later manuscripts of the *History of the Patriarchs*, the so-called vulgate recension, omit "the blessed John" and mention only "the Hermit (r.YK/.sioroq)" as a proper name. Cf. *The History of the Patriarchs*, ed. Evetts 1904:477.

[5] In Sahidic Coptic with Bohairic influences there is a private letter by a certain Bishop John of Shmoun. Because the letter is written on paper, it cannot be dated before the ninth century and hence it deals with another John. See Steindorff 1892:38.

[6] John of Shmoun, *Panegyric on Antony* §34, Garitte 1943: 344–45; Orlandi 1981: 261-62; Vivian, Athanassakis, and Greer 2003: 30; Moawad 2013:365-66.

[7] *Panegyric on Mark*, ed., with Latin translation, Orlandi 1968: 7-52; modern Arabic translation, Moawad 2013:371-78. *Panegyric on Antony*, Garitte 1943; Orlandi 1981: 249-64; Vivian, Athanassakis, and Greer 2003: 1-35; Moawad 2013: 341-70. For a literary analysis of both writings, see Sheridan 2011: 448-53.

[8] Orlandi 1968: 16a.

[9] Orlandi 1968: 16a.

[10] Orlandi 1968: 16b.

[11] For a detailed discussion, see van derVhet 2009.

[12] John of Nikiou, *Chronicle* 19, 2; 31, 1; 30, 6–11; English translation, Charles 1916: 21,28-29.

[13] John of Nikiou, *Chronicle* 89,1; English translation, Charles 1916: 121.

[14] John of Nikiou, *Chronicle* 56, 24; English translation, Charles 1916: 46.

[15] Pseudo-Theophilus, *A Homily on the Honor of Saint Peter and Saint Paul*, ed., with French translation, Fleisch 1935-36:381,383.

[16] The *Bohairic Life of Pesynthios* (ed., with French translation, Amelineau 1887: 141–44; English translation, Budge 1913:326-27) tells that Bishop *Pesynthios* of Coptos (598-632) was in a cave full of mummies. He found a scroll including the names of the dead. He unrolled it and could read it. It is unclear in what language the scroll was written. While Amelineau and Muller believe that it was written in Demotic, Lee refutes this opinion and is “sure that it was in Coptic.” See Muller 1964: 298;

[17] Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* I. 1.1-5, ed., with French translation, Blanc 1966: 56-59; English translation, Menzies 1912: 297.

[18] Antonius, *Ep.* V 1; VI. 2,78,93;VII. 5, 58<sup>b</sup>; English translation, Rubenson 1995: 212, 216,221,223,225,229; *The Life of Pachomius* 133, ed. Lefort 1952:183–84; English translation, Veilleux 1980–82, vol. 1: 190-91.

[19] Shenoute of Atripe, *Acephalous WorkA6*, ed.Young 1981:349a,,English translation: 353.

[20] Young 1981:350, English translation: 354.

[21] Young 1981:349b, English translation: 354.

[22] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* V 4, ed. Stahlin 1960: 339; English translation, Roberts and Donaldson 1885: 449.

[23] John of Shmoun, *Panegyric on Antony* §6, ed., with French translation, Garitte 1943: 118–19; Italian translation, Orlandi 1981: 252–53; English translation,Vivian, Athanassakis, and Greer 2003: 12; modern Arabic translation, Moawad 2013:

[24] Garitte 1943:120–23; Orlandi 1981:253–54; Vivian, Athanassakis, and Greer 2003: 14; Moawad 2013:352.

[25] *Life of Shenoute* §69, ed. Leipoldt 1906: 35; English translation, Bell 1983: 62.

[26] John of Shmoun, *Panegyric on Antony* §34, Garitte 1943: 344-45; Orlandi 1981: 261-62; Vivian et al. 2003: 30; Moawad 2013: 365-66.

[27] *Vita Dioscori*, Arabic version, ed. Moawad 2013: 303. The Syriac version varies; cf. Nau 1903: 84, French translation 292.

[28] The martyrdom of Peter is preserved in three versions, different in length, in various languages. See Vivian 1988: 64–68; Davis 2004: 41–42.

[29] *The Martyrdom of Saint Peter* 12, ed. Devos 1965: 171-72; English translation, Vivian 1988: 75. See also the Coptic version in Hyvernat 1977:274–75; the Arabic version in Seybold 1912: 54, and Evetts 1904: 397-98.

[30] For more details on this source and its versions, see Moawad 2011.

[31] *Vita Dioscori*, Arabic version, ed. Moawad 2013: 280-81; Syriac version, ed. Nau 1903: 37-39, French translation: 255-57.

[32] *The Panegyric on Macarius of Tkoou* IX.1-3, Sahidic version, ed. Johnson 1980, vol. 1: 72–73, English translation 2: 56; modern Arabic translation, Moawad 2013: 239; Arabic version, ed. Moawad 2010: 87–88, German translation 129–30. A similar episode in the Pseudo-Theophilus, *A Homily on the Honor of St. Peter and St. Paul*, ed. Fleisch 1935-36:391,393.

[33] Ibn Sabba', *al-Jawhara al-nafaa* 86, ed. Mistrih 1966: 284,287; Latin translation 541, 543.

[34] Pseudo-Yusab of Fuwwa, *The History of the Patriarchs*, fols. 148r, 152v, ed. al-Suriany and Daoud 1987:158,163.



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