

MARK III, SAINT

The seventy-third patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (1167-1189) (feast day: 6 Tubah). Mark's secular name before his investiture in the patriarchate was [Abu al-Faraj](#) ibn Abi al-Sa'd ibn Zar'ah. He was a layman of Syrian origin, related to the sixty-second patriarch, Abraham.

He was a bachelor known to all his neighbors, both Coptic and Muslim, for his chastity, his virtue, and his charity. It appears that his predecessor, [JOHN V](#), referred to him in the presence of others as a monastic personality, considered by them as a first step toward his investiture. His selection by the congregation of Misr was unanimously approved by the bishops and the clergy in recognition of his religious qualities and his knowledge of Coptic church traditions.

He was a contemporary of the latter years of Fatimid rule under Caliph al-'Adid (1160-1171) and he saw the inauguration of the Ayyubid dynasty. He was a witness to Salih Salah al-Din's (Saladin's) victories over the crusader kingdom, which were crowned with the reconquest of the city of Jerusalem (1187).

In the early years of Saladin's rule, the Copts suffered heavy calamities, for Saladin decreed that their role in the financial administration of Egypt should be ended by their dismissal and their replacement by Muslims. On the other hand, the establishment of the feudal system under the Ayyubid dynasty and the appropriation of land estates by the leading aristocracy offered the Copts the opportunity to serve in this new field, where their expert knowledge was sorely needed. In other words, the Copts left the government positions to control the growing feudal system established by the Ayyubid sultans.

On the religious scene, the situation of the Copts was worsened by the issuance of new decrees by Saladin, which mandated the removal of all crosses from churches as well as painting the churches black. Bells were

also silenced, and the Copts were forbidden to conduct their religious processions in the streets as they were accustomed to do, especially during the holy week, when they moved between churches carrying olive branches and candles.

Saladin reinstated previous orders that required Copts to wear distinguishing dark clothing, blue turbans, and girdles (*zunnars*). He forbade the Copts to ride horses or mules, thus restricting them to the use of donkeys. Wine was forbidden, and this implied interference with their use of sacramental wine on their altars, although it was stated that this restriction was confined to the open use of alcohol. The decrees also prevented prayers from being said loud enough that the public could hear them.

The Islamic sources of this age record the particulars of this fresh wave of persecution, especially the works of the Muslim historian of the Copts, Taqiy al-Din al-MAQRIZI. The repression was so intense that Copts feared that the Muslim authorities harbored ideas of exiling them from Egypt and laying hands on the dwellings of all the people of the Covenant (AHL AL-DHIMMAH). This action did not come to pass, because the authorities feared that such a measure might lead to collapse of the economy of the country, which was controlled by the Copts.

The immediate consequence of such trials and tribulations was the enhancement of the process of Islamization, and the patriarch looked upon these developments with alarm, taking solace in prayer.

Nevertheless, the skills of the depressed Copts were directed toward the vocations of commerce and agriculture, where they were able to build up their wealth and recover their economic prosperity. In addition, their active penetration into the Ayyubid feudal system gradually helped them recover what might be considered the equivalent of their lost places in the state administrative system. It is unclear when the humiliating measures imposed by Saladin began to disappear. But with the patience

and fortitude of the Copts, their position began to improve even before Saladin's death. It appeared that the forces of nature collaborated with these factors in the amelioration of the situation of the Copts. The Nile flood resumed in its fullness, and that together with the return of rain made the crops produce, and the increasing commodities created a world of [plenty](#) in place of former famine and pestilence.

The return to peace and prosperity after a period of hardships and humiliation to the Copts was associated with a curious event, which was regarded as a moral and religious triumph for Mark III.

This event was the conversion of a [prominent](#) Jew to Christianity at the hands of the patriarch in the eighth year of his reign. His name was Abu al-Fakhr ibn Azhar, and he was made a deacon of the church by Anba Gabriel, bishop of Misr, at the [church of Our Lady](#) known as al-'Adawiyah.

The patriarch also felt free to attend to the restoration of ruined churches and the consecration of new ones with the help and financial assistance of the members of his enriched congregation. Thus the patriarch himself took charge of rebuilding the outer wall of the Monastery of Saint Macarius (DAYR ANBA MAQAR), which was vulnerable to the accumulation of sands from the desert in Wadi al-Natrun. The active work of restoring religious houses spread over the country and was not confined to the major cities of Cairo and Alexandria. The Coptic patriarchate also recovered a number of other churches that had previously been appropriated by the Armenians during the reign of Badr al-Jamali who, being of Armenian extraction, encouraged the Armenians to settle in Egypt. Badr al-Jamali was instrumental in the transfer of [Coptic churches](#) to his old countrymen, despite his Islamization. These included a noted church in the district of al-Basatin in the region of Cairo, which was incorporated in the diocese of Misr under the direct possession of the patriarchal seat.

Al-[Shaykh](#) Abu al-Barakat ibn Abi Sa'id, a famous Coptic scribe, used his fortune in the restoration and beautification of the chapel of Saint [John](#) the [Baptist](#) within the structure of the [cathedral church](#) of Abu Sayfayn (Saint Mercurius), which had suffered greatly in the burning of Cairo under the Fatimid minister Shawar. He personally funded the [reconstruction](#) of its timber domes and vaults on four [marble](#) columns.

An artistic renaissance was also seen in the iconography in these churches. The names of Coptic painters of sacred icons of the period include Abu Sa'id ibn al-Zayyat and Abu al-Fath ibn al-Aqmas, known as Ibn al-Hawfi.

It is also noteworthy that Mark III abolished the long-established simoniacal practice known as CHEIROTONIA, by which former patriarchs had offered vacant episcopates to the best bidders. Thus, patriarchal remuneration was left open to the free gifts generously offered by the bishops.

In Mark's time, the Nestorian population became depleted, and the Coptic church was able to recover the Nestorian monastery in Cairo, which became part of the possessions of the patriarchal diocese. The patriarch also acquired the Church of Saint George at Turah, which the Armenians had appropriated from CYRIL II during the vizierate of Badr al-Jamali.

Perhaps the most significant events on the international scene were those associated with the name of Saladin and the recovery of Jerusalem from the hands of a tottering Frankish kingdom. The reconquest of the Holy Land by the Ayyubid sultan was a major event in Coptic history because it allowed the resumption of the pilgrimages to the holy places, a privilege they had lost under Latin rule.

Issues regarding Ethiopia and Nubia also figure prominently during the patriarchate of Mark III. Al-Maqrizi makes a special mention of the

successive embassies of the Abyssinian sovereigns to the caliphs and sultans of Egypt, beginning with the Fatimid caliph al-'Adid, to whom the usual gifts accompanied the Abyssinian missions. This was in order to cement the good relations between the two countries and to request the investiture of a special Coptic archbishop to take care of the religious welfare of a country that was directly under Coptic religious hegemony.

The situation was somewhat different when it came to the southern Christian kingdom of Nubia. Clashes took place between the [Jacobite](#) kings of that territory and the neighboring frontier districts of the province of Aswan. It is said that Nubian soldiers took the initiative by raiding a number of [villages](#) in the Aswan province. Consequently, Saladin commissioned his brother, Turanshah, to launch a defensive campaign in the south, which resulted in the capture of the region of Qasr Ibrim and its fortifications within the frontiers of Nubia. Turanshah returned with considerable booty, including many prisoners and cattle, and granted the conquered territory as a feudal estate to one of his followers named Ibrahim al-Kurdi, who ruled it from Aswan. The vanquished king of Nubia tried to cultivate peace with Egypt by sending a substantial gift to the sultan, but the situation between the two countries remained one of uncertain and shaky peace. The enfeeblement of the Nubian monarchy vis-à-vis the sultanate of Egypt opened the door to the progressive penetration of Islam into that Christian country.

By virtue of his Syrian origin, Mark was interested in strengthening the already existing good relations with the patriarchate of Antioch. Synodical letters were exchanged between the two patriarchates. Missions that were previously interrupted by the crusader kingdom and Saladin's conquest opened the road for communication between Antioch and Cairo.

After a reign of almost twenty-two years, Mark III died in relative peace, a few years before the precarious reign of Saladin came to an end.

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