

MATTHEW I

The eighty-seventh patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (1378-1409) (feast day: 7 Kiyakh). Matthew I is better known by the title of Matta al-Miskin, or Matthew the Poor. He was a native of a small village called Bani Ruh in the district of al-[Ashmunayn](#) in Upper Egypt. His life is better known than that of his immediate predecessors, and the [HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS](#) contains ample material on his actions and movements. He also appears in the [Islamic](#) sources of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Born in a family of meager means whose vocation was agriculture, he spent his early years as a shepherd looking after his parents' sheep. He had a religious temperament, and as a child, he liked to play the ecclesiastical game of investing other children with the ranks of deacon and presbyter, while laying his hands on them and pronouncing the blessing *axios* (worthy) three times. This story is reminiscent of young ATHANASIUS I, the Apostolic, when he was discovered by [ALEXANDER I](#) baptizing other children on the seashore.

At the age of fourteen, Matthew left home and went to one of the neighboring monasteries in Upper Egypt, and there he continued to act as a shepherd for their sheep. Those who knew him at the time admired his courage and his spiritual ability to prevent the wild beasts and hyenas from harming his flock. He was sparsely dressed and was girdled with a simple rope. But he was a young man of great charm and was admired by a girl who praised his eyebrows. In order to get rid of her, he shaved his eyebrows and, feigning madness, presented them to her.

It was not long before his bishop discovered his qualities and anointed him in the priesthood at the age of eighteen years. When the bishop was criticized for doing this, his answer was that the young man was fit to become not only a priest but also a patriarch. As priest, Matthew decided to go to the Monastery of Saint Antony (DAYR ANBA ANTUNIYUS),

where he acted as a deacon, concealing his priesthood. After some time in that wilderness, he moved to Jerusalem, where he spent his time in ardent prayer and [fasting](#) as well as in rendering service to others. Returning to Egypt, he headed for Qusqam and the Monastery of Our Lady, better known as DAYR AL-MUHARRAQ.

Although affiliated with that monastery, he lived as a solitary in a neighboring cave, where he was subjected to many trials and exposed to the company of wild beasts that he managed to tame. Despite his seclusion from society, his fame began to spread; and after the death of GABRIEL IV, it was decided by the community of the faithful to recruit him for the patriarchate. Matthew was reticent in accepting this nomination. But when pressed beyond his power, he proposed going back to the old Monastery of Saint Antony and asking for the verdict of its elders, hoping that they might deter the congregation from his recruitment. However, the elders confirmed the proposal and he was forcibly carried to Alexandria for his investiture on 16 Misra, which happened to be the commemoration day of the Virgin.

As patriarch he served the community in every way imaginable, and he retained his humility by participation with others in the most menial tasks, although this never diminished his respectability in the eyes of others. All his income was spent in helping the needy, the poor, the monks, and the nuns. He helped all who were in need, whether they were Copts, Muslims, or Jews. Individual stories of his generosity are enumerated in detail in the *History of the Patriarchs*.

In 1365 Egypt had sustained a great defeat by the crusaders at Alexandria. Pierre de Lusignan and the hosts of Cyprus had descended on the city and wreaked havoc within its walls; they withdrew carrying with them not only tremendous loot but also many prisoners and captives. Egypt had to pay a heavy [price](#) for the liberation of those captives, who were primarily Muslims.

Matthew participated with all the means at his disposal in buying the freedom of these prisoners, which must have courted the sympathy of the [Islamic](#) administration of the country. In the meantime, he acted as a forceful liaison between the sultans of Egypt as well as the crusading Franks and the sovereigns of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. Valuable gifts were exchanged between the two sides, one of the most highly valued presents to the religious kings of Ethiopia being a fragment of the true Cross.

Matthew's [contemporary](#) Mamluk sultans included 'Ala' al-Din 'Ali (1377-1381), Salah al-Din Hajji (1382), Barquq (1383-1389), al-Nasir Faraj (1398-1405), 'Izz al-Din 'Abd al 'Aziz (1405), and al-Nasir Faraj (second reign 1406-1412). Sultan Barquq requested Matthew to write to the Ethiopian sovereign on his behalf in order to establish peaceful and friendly relations between their two countries. It is interesting to note that the patriarch's letter was addressed to Dawud, brother of the reigning sovereign, and that Dawud had deposed his brother and seized the crown by the time the letter reached the Ethiopian capital. Because of this, Matthew was considered to have prophetic qualities.

Matthew's reign was not free from local troubles, not only from the Muslim amirs but also from the members of his own church. In one case, two Coptic monks sought to join the priesthood and were refused by the patriarch because of their unfitness. They decided to vilify the patriarch and poison the minds of the administration against him. When their report was discarded, they attacked the patriarch in person and told him that one of them should replace him as patriarch and that the other should be a bishop. Matthew smiled and asked them to wait forty days, after which they could come and take his seat. He even prayed for them and gave them holy communion.

Within thirty days, the dissident monks died, and this was regarded as a miracle of a holy man. Another monk rebelled against the pope and apostatized to Islam, and even enlisted in the Muslim army. The

congregation requested the pope to curse him, but instead, Matthew prayed for him and his return to the faith. The monk recanted and suffered martyrdom, the fate of those who withdrew from Islam. This was also regarded as a miracle. Cases of those who recanted from Islam and returned to Christianity in Matthew's reign became numerous, and all suffered martyrdom. The [Islamic](#) historian al-MAQRIZI mentions a number of specific cases and the *History of the Patriarchs* says that forty-nine martyrs suffered decapitation as the penalty for their withdrawal from Islam after their conversion to it.

Matthew's relationship with the Muslim administration was sometimes precarious. He was in the good [graces](#) of Barquq, who was defeated by a Mamluk amir by the name of Mintash, after which Matthew retired to the Karak. Then a dissident member of the Coptic community fraudulently informed Mintash that Barquq had left his treasure in the custody of the patriarch. Consequently, Mintash summoned the patriarch and demanded the treasure, which he did not possess. The patriarch was subjected to torture, but was freed after the truth became evident. Another Mamluk by the name of Yalbogha al-Samiri once threatened the pope with decapitation, but the fearless pope extended his neck to his persecutor, who withdrew his sword upon seeing such unusual courage.

In fact, Matthew displayed this unusual courage on [numerous](#) occasions when defending the church and his community. When some dissidents and the Muslim mob wanted to destroy DAYR SHAHRAN, the pope stood fast against them. The case reached the attention of Barquq, who sent the judges of the four Muslim sects with an explicit order to find the truth about the allegations that the structure was [renewed](#) against the stipulations of the COVENANT OF 'UMAR. When it was found that these reports were fraudulent, the case was dismissed and the monastery saved. The *History of the Patriarchs* mentions another instance where Matthew succeeded in stopping an act of humiliation to Coptic women. The Mamluk amir Sudun once decreed that Coptic women dress in dark blue robes. Matthew objected and argued against this innovation and

won.

Perhaps the last memorable episode of the patriarch's long reign was the one associated with the strong Mamluk amir Jamal al-Din, detailed in the *History of the Patriarchs*. He accused Matthew of complicity in a scheme with Ethiopia to destroy Mecca and the Muslim holy places. The penalty for such a crime was death. Matthew prayed for a natural end before Jamal al-Din should inflict the punishment on him; his prayers were answered. Matthew died at the age of seventy-two on 22 Tubah. Of these years, he spent forty as a bachelor and a monk, and thirty-two as patriarch. Apparently his funeral was a turbulent occasion in which innumerable people congregated from all walks of life. He was buried in the tomb he had prepared for himself at DAYR [AL-KHANDAQ](#) in Cairo.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ibn al-Sayrafi, 'Ali ibn Dawud. *Nuzhat al-Nufus wa-al-Abdan fi Tawarikh al-Zaman*. Cairo, 1970.
- Lane-Poole, S. *History of Egypt in the Middle Ages*. London, 1901.
- . *The Mohammadan Dynasties*. Paris, 1925.

SUBHI Y. LABIB

Tags: [Eminent](#)