

## ***PISENTIUS, SAINT***

A seventh-century bishop of Qift who was noted as a preacher, letter writer, administrator, and servant of the poor (feast day: 13 Abib). He is among the most outstanding personalities of the Coptic church.

### **Sources**

Texts written about Pisentius date from the seventh to the eighteenth centuries. They include three Sahidic Coptic texts of the seventh (Crum, 1926; Abdel Sayed, 1984), ninth (Till, 1934; Abdel Sayed, 1984), and eleventh centuries (Budge, 1913; Abdel Sayed, 1984). Another document in Bohairic is dated in the tenth century (Amélineau, 1889). The oldest Arabic text on Pisentius is included in the Copto-Arabic SYNAXARION (Meinardus, 1963-1964). We also possess three Arabic versions of the life of the saint.

The shortest Arabic version is from the fourteenth century (Simaykah and 'Abd al-Masih, 1939-1942, Vol. 2; Abdel Sayed, 1984). Copies from the eighteenth century preserve a longer recension, which goes back to an earlier medieval tradition (e.g., [MS](#) History 26, fols. 94-36r, of the Coptic Patriarchate [Simaykah and 'Abd al-Masih, 1939-1942, Vol. 2], and [MS](#) Arabic 4794, fols. 122v-163v [Graf, 1944]). The longest text on the life of Pisentius was copied for E. C. Amélineau from an unknown source in the National Library, Paris (arabe 4785, fols. 97r-215r; see O'Leary, 1930). The [Arabic Life](#) of Pisentius has its origin partly in Coptic texts (Abdel Sayed, 1984).

Although the correspondence of Pisentius is scattered in various museums, the majority of it is preserved in the Louvre, Paris. E. Revillout published these Coptic letters (1900, 1902), but they should be republished. The life and correspondence of Pisentius are important for the light they throw on the background and activities of a bishop of the sixth and seventh centuries (Crum, 1926; Abdel Sayed, 1984).

## Life

Pisentius was born in 569 in the district of Hermonthis (Armant) to a prosperous family. At the age of seven he entered DAYR APA PHOIBAMMON, where he stayed for sixteen years, during which time he became well versed in various disciplines.

Pisentius spent most of his monastic life at the Gebel al-Qasas, north of Thebes on the western bank of the Nile, opposite the district of Coptos. He also was at the monastery of Epiphanius in western Thebes (Luxor). When he was thirty years old, he was consecrated bishop of Coptos by Saint DAMIAN, [patriarch](#) of Alexandria. He died in July 632, after thirty-three years of episcopal activity. It is probable that Pisentius met BENJAMIN I, a later patriarch of Alexandria, when the latter fled from Alexandria to Upper Egypt (Abdel Sayed, 1984).

We know from his Life that Pisentius memorized the Psalms, the Minor Prophets, and the Gospel according to John. Further, it was his habit to meditate on the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Some texts speak of his “knowledge and wisdom.” It can also be deduced from accounts about Pisentius that he knew the canons of the church. In this connection, his correspondence shows that he had to deal with judicial affairs.

All of the Coptic and Arabic versions of his Life describe support and help to the poor as an important part of the activities of Pisentius. As bishop, he also sent letters to the communities of his diocese exhorting them to repent. He inspected the churches of his diocese and fulfilled the desires of the people during his tours of inspection—for example, he blessed the cow of a peasant. Also in his episcopal role, Pisentius observed the clergy celebrating the liturgy, and himself celebrated the commemoration of SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH.

Many sick people came to the bishop to be healed. He also had the reputation of being able to release people from demons. Pisentius was

obliged to deal with social problems, such as whether to allow a young man to marry the girl who had become pregnant by him. A certain Locianus sent a letter to the bishop asking him to send a notary to sign contracts. A clergyman named [Antonius](#) referred to the bishop in his letter to a woman whom he had forbidden to receive communion.

As an administrator and a man of good judgment, Pisentius organized his clergymen effectively. Together with all other Christian virtues and practices, he encouraged solemn observance of fasting periods throughout his diocese.

From time to time, Pisentius continued to practice the monastic way of his order by retiring to a secret place, where, as a recluse, he sought strength and guidance from God. At such times only his pupils knew his whereabouts.

Pisentius was famous as a preacher (Abdel Sayed, 1984). An Encomium of Saint ONOPHRIUS (London, British Library, [MS](#) Oriental 6800) has been assigned to him (Crum, 1916). Because a church dedicated to Onophrius stood not far from Qift, Pisentius wrote this homily for the celebration of his feast. In it he urges the emulation of the exemplary way of life of Saint Onophrius as the prototype for every Christian. This homily is considered one of the best of its kind, not only in Coptic letters but in the whole range of Christian literature.

A papyrus fragment (London, British Library, [MS](#) Oriental 7561, no. 60) contains the beginning of a homily attributed to Pisentius (Crum, 1926). A pseudepigraphic Arabic [pastoral](#) letter also has been assigned to him (Graf, 1944; Abdel Sayed, 1984).

In addition to his literary efforts, Pisentius was a prolific letter writer. Much of his correspondence still exists, although in fragments. In it he discusses the practical problems of his times. He relates difficulties encountered by the Egyptians during the Persian invasion of 619 to 629.

He deals with the ageless problems of matrimony, inheritances, rape, and death. The letters also reveal the concern of the believers for their bishop. It is recorded that a certain Gennadius offered the bishop a plant purported to aid him in overcoming his difficulty with urination.

Many pieces of evidence testify to the strength of Pisentius in popular memory (Crum, 1926; Abdel Sayed, 1984). At one time monasteries in the districts of Hermonthis, Jeme, and Gebel al-Qasas bore his name. In Hajir Naqadah there is still a monastery of Anba Bisinta'us. On a wooden cross from between the seventh and ninth centuries, the name of Pisentius is invoked directly after that of Pachomius and Shenute. Lamps inscribed with the name of Pisentius, probably dating to the ninth century, have been found in Upper [Egypt](#) and at Faras in Nubia. In the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* the name of Pisentius is mentioned in the context of the "Priesthood of Christ" (Seybold, 1904). Moreover, the Synaxarion and the Difnar, which are used in the current liturgy of the Coptic church, both commemorate him. It is no wonder that Pisentius came to be considered a saint.

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