

SAWIRUS IBN AL-MUQAFFA' (ca. 915-ca. 1000)

A Bishop, theologian. Despite Sawirus' great reputation as the first major Coptic Orthodox theologian to write in Arabic, we know surprisingly few details about his life. We do not know the exact date of his birth (or even his name at birth!), but before becoming a monk—where and when we do not know—he was known as Abu Bishr ibn al-Muqaffa' ("Son of Shriveled-Hand") and worked as a professional scribe, a position for which facility in [Arabic](#) was necessary.

At some point he was consecrated Bishop of al-Ashmunayn, began to produce books (his *Commentary on the Creed* is dated to 950 and 955), became a theological counselor to at least two **patriarchs** (Abraham ibn Zur'ah, 975-978, and Philotheus, 979-1003), and gained renown as a theologian capable of debate, in Arabic, with representatives of any religious tradition.

The [History of the Patriarchs](#) records examples of Sawirus in debate, but these examples are anything but theologically subtle. One Friday, we are told, Sawirus turned the tables on some Muslims who challenged him to pronounce on whether a passing dog was Christian or Muslim by asking them to place meat (from which Copts abstained on Fridays) and wine (forbidden to Muslims) before the dog, to see which it would consume!

Another time, we read, Sawirus defeated a Jewish scholar in debate at the court of the Fatimid, caliph al-Mu'izz, simply by quoting Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but [Israel](#) does not know. . . ." These stories may have delighted Christian readers; still, a better intimation of Sawirus' theological capacities is provided by the list of 20 titles recorded in [History of the Patriarchs](#), a list expanded to 26 in Shams al-Ri'asa Abu al-Barakat **ibn Kabar**'s ecclesiastical encyclopedia *The [Lamp](#) of the Darkness*. Many of Sawirus' works have survived.

They show us a theologian with a strong grounding in scripture and the Church Fathers (especially **Cyril of Alexandria**), a sophisticated command of the [Arabic](#) language, and a sense of fairness in debate that, if not precisely “ecumenical,” presages the openness of spirit that would characterize the **Awlad al-‘Assal** and other great theologians of the 13th century. Like them, he was prepared to learn from Arabophone theologians outside Egypt. In his *al-Bayan al-mukhtasar fi al-iman* (Concise Exposition of the Faith), he refers to and draws extensively from an [Arabic](#) work coming out of the Syrian Orthodox Church, *Kitab Ustath al-rahib* (The Book of Eustathius the Monk).

Such was Sawirus' reputation as the father of Coptic Orthodox ecclesial [writing](#) in [Arabic](#) that anonymous texts (or texts by suspect or insufficiently well-known authors) were regularly attributed to him in the manuscript tradition. In one [notable](#) case, credit for the collection and translation of what became the [History of the Patriarchs](#) (by Mawhub ibn Mansur ibn Mufarrij of Alexandria, who embarked upon this project in 1088) was assigned to Sawirus. Recent scholars have struggled to give credit where it is due, but this means assessing Sawirus as a theologian and apologist rather than as a historian.

GAWDAT GABRA

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