

SHAMS AL-RI'ASA ABU AL-BARAKAT IBN KABAR (?-1324)

A Priest, encyclopedist, scholar of Coptic. The writer known to contemporaries as al-Shams ibn [Kabar](#) provides one of the last great examples of the flowering of Arabic-language Coptic Orthodox [literature](#) in the 13th and early 14th centuries. Ibn [Kabar](#) served for a time as [scribe](#) to the Mamluk Emir Baybars al-Mansuri (d. 1325) and is reported to have helped him to write his multivolume narrative of Islamic history, *Zubdat al-fikra fi tarikh al-hijra* (The Quintessence of Thought in Islamic History).

Although the precise dates of this secular service are unknown, in 1300 Ibn [Kabar](#) was ordained priest with the name of Barsum (probably after the great **saint** of the day, [Barsum](#) the Naked) and served at the **Mo'allaga** Church in Old Cairo. Many of his sermons (in rhymed Arabic prose) have been preserved. He escaped pursuers unharmed during the anti-*dhimmi* disturbances of 1321, but he died a few years later in 1324.

Ibn [Kabar](#) is especially remembered for two works. His Bohairic-Arabic vocabulary *al-Sullam al-kabir* (The Great Ladder or Scala Magna) is a high point of Coptic lexicography, much used and preserved in many manuscripts. It has played a huge role in European Coptic studies, thanks to its publication (in Rome, 1648) with a Latin translation by the Jesuit scholar **Athanasius Kircher**. Ibn Kabar's other great work is the ecclesiastical encyclopedia *Misbah al-zulma wa-idah al-khidma* (The Lamp of the Darkness and the Illumination of Service).

Wadi Abullif points out (Wadi, "Abu al-Barakat," 242) that this title reflects the work's content: It moves from dogmatic and canonical considerations (chapters 1-6, a "lamp" in "the darkness") to practical and **liturgical** matters of importance to deacons and other servants of the Church (chapters 8-24, an "illumination of service"). The break between these two major sections comes at chapter 7, "Eminent Christians and Their Writings," which is a catalogue of Christian books known to Ibn



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[Kabar](#) from the Church Fathers to the Arabophone theologians of his own day—and a [precious](#) resource for all students of Arabic-Christian [literature](#) down to the present time.

[**GAWDAT GABRA**](#)

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