

SHENUTE I

The fifty-fifth patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (858-880). Shenute, or Sanutios in Coptic and Shinudah in modern Arabic, was a native of the village of al-Batanun, today a village in the governorate of Shibn al-Kom, the capital city of the Minufiyyah province in Lower Egypt. Little is known about his early [secular](#) life, and even his date of birth is unknown. However, he could have taken the monastic vow at the monastery of Saint Macarius (DAYR ANBA MAQAR) during the patriarchate of YUSAB I (830-849), which would make him a contemporary of three patriarchs, Yusab, [KHA'IL](#) II (849-851), and COSMAS II (851-858). In his monastery, he was elevated to the rank of HEGUMENOS, or archpriest, in recognition of his sanctity, Christian humility, and the devotion with which he served his brotherhood.

His fame must have extended beyond the walls of his convent, for when his predecessor, Cosmas II, died, the bishops, the clergy, and the leading Coptic archons automatically and unanimously thought of him as a worthy successor to the throne of Saint Mark. At a meeting in Misr (al-Fustat) they decided to hasten to his monastery to bring him to the valley for his nomination. But one archon, Abraham, knowing that he would be unwilling to accept their call, suggested that he himself should go and ask Shenute to come only to help them in finding the right candidate for that dignity. Once he was present, the council would force him to go to Alexandria with them for consecration, even against his will. And this is exactly what happened. Ultimately the [bishops](#) laid their hands on him on 13 Tubah, and he had to face the heavy responsibilities of his office.

He began his reign with the usual attempt to secure good relations with the sister church of Antioch by the issuance of a synodical epistle to its patriarch, John (Yuhanna). He dispatched his epistle with a delegation of two bishops, Malunulas of Dawikh and John (Yuhanna) of Dusia, together with some Coptic clergymen.

Having performed this international function, Shenute began to devote his energy to local matters in need of special attention. One of his first acts was to forbid the use of simony (CHEIROTONIA), which his predecessors were prone to practice in order to help them in meeting the financial imposts of the Muslim administration. Then he directed his attention toward helping the monasteries of Upper Egypt, which were situated too far from Alexandria to claim papal care. He also gave much of his time in the early years of his patriarchate to the improvement of the material welfare of his flock. Within the region of Alexandria, he dug a special canal to bring Nile water within reach of the inhabitants. This was a new branch of the canal known as the *Khalij*, which had been established by [Caliph](#) al- Mutawakkil (847-861) and which poured in the Mediterranean outside the city limits. He was also responsible for building a subterranean sewage system in the city to ensure sanitation and constructing fountains of drinking water in public squares.

All this did not stop him from watching over the religious orthodoxy of his flock. In Upper Egypt he managed to stifle a heretical movement that had arisen in the district of al-Balyana, in which some people said that the divinity of Christ could be considered dead with the death of his humanity. He rectified the theology of others, such as the bishop of Samannud and the bishop of Minyat Tanah, who resided in the monastery of Saint Macarius.

The HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS (Vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 23) states that the children of Ilyas (Ibn Yazid), who was the governor of Alexandria during the patriarchate of Jacob (819-830), rendered to Shenute money that their father had extorted from Jacob, and that this must have made Shenute's reform projects possible. However, this atmosphere of peace and security did not last long. With the murder of Caliph [al-Mutawakkil](#) in 861 and the accession of al- Muntasir (861-862), the situation changed drastically, for the new [caliph](#) dismissed all his predecessor's governors and replaced them with others from his realm. The new governor of Egypt was Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Mudabbir, a man known for his

greed and brutality from when he was posted in Palestine. In Egypt, Ibn al- Mudabbir laid a heavy hand on its population—Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike, without discrimination. But the condition of the [Christians](#) was probably the worst, for he tripled the poll tax (JIZYAH) to three dinars and imposed it on both laymen and clergy alike, including the monks, who were numbered and registered for strict payment of the imposts. He imposed the KHARAJ tax on all possessions, including not only cattle but also beehives and fruit trees on private lots. He gave his agents explicit orders to spare nobody and to arrest and chain any defaulter.

Thus, it may be assumed that the year 861 began a period of great trials for Shenute, who was pursued by the governor's representatives and ultimately took to flight from his new persecutor for a period of six months. When he saw no means of escape from his oppressor, however, accompanied by his assistant, Mina, he decided to plead for justice and mercy. The harsh governor told the patriarch that he owed him 2,300 dinars for the monasteries, 7,000 dinars for the *kharaj* tax, and 6,000 dinars poll tax. When the Coptic archons heard that the pope was held responsible for payment of these tremendous sums of money at the risk of his freedom, they started allotting these debts to all the people. Many Copts apostatized to Islam to save themselves from rendering money they did not possess.

A breathing space, however, came when al-Muntasir died and [Caliph](#) al-Musta'in (862-866) succeeded him. With the blessings of the patriarch, two Coptic archons, Ibrahim and Sawirus, decided to go to Baghdad to complain to the new caliph about the injustices and cruelty of Ibn al-Mudabbir, such as his excessive financial imposts and the abuse of Coptic religious institutions. The result was a decree of relief from injustice for the oppressed Copts, which allowed them to start restoration of their ruined churches. But ensuing warfare between caliphal pretenders, al-Mu'tazz (866-869) and al-Muhtadi (869-870), plagued the later [Abbasid](#) period, and Egypt became easy prey to bedouin marauders who stormed

some of the monasteries in the desert and descended on the valley in Upper Egypt, pillaging and burning churches throughout a defenseless countryside. Even the replacement of the fierce Ibn al-Mudabbir by more lenient governors, such as one named Muzahim, did not help very much. One of them was [Yahya](#) ibn 'Abdallah, who seems to have been aided by collaborators from within the Christian community, such as a certain Stephen (Ustufan) ibn Andunah.

This state of confusion seems to have persisted until the caliphate of Ahmad ibn Tulun (870-881), during whose reign Shenute died after a tempestuous reign lasting twenty-one years and three months.

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SUBHI Y. LABIB

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