

SIMON I

A saint and forty-second patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (689-701). His nomination came at a difficult time. His predecessor, ISAAC, had died in the midst of the fury arising from his meddling in the conflict between Ethiopia and Nubia without consulting the Umayyad governor of Egypt, 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Marwan. In addition, there was local strife in Alexandria between the clergy of Saint Mark's Cathedral and those of the formidable Angelion church, whose clergy numbered 140.

Whereas the former supported the nomination as patriarch of a certain Yuhanna from the ENATON monastery for his learning, the latter promoted another monk by the name of Victor (Buqtur) from Dayr Taposiris, for his sanctity rather than his scholarship. In the end, the balance was tipped in favor of Yuhanna by the archon Tadrus, secretary of the *diwan* in Alexandria. Tadrus wrote to 'Abd al-'Aziz. The amir requested the presence of the nominee, who came with his favorite disciple Simon, a Syrian from the DAYR AL-SURYAN in Wadi al-Natrun.

In an audience with Yuhanna and the bishops, a voice was raised proposing Simon for the patriarchate, and curiously the others applauded him. Thus Simon was brought before the governor. When asked about Yuhanna, Simon meekly declared that Yuhanna was the fittest for the position of patriarch. Nevertheless 'Abd al-'Aziz gave his approval of Simon's candidacy.

Simon's parents had brought him to Egypt when he was a child, during the patriarchate of AGATHON, and he ultimately joined Dayr al-Suryan, where he received intensive religious training in the Coptic tradition. He displayed unusual talents, and he was elevated from deacon to the position of presbyter. After his consecration as patriarch, his mentor Yuhanna died, and Simon transported the body to Dayr al-Suryan where he also built his own [tomb](#) beside that of his spiritual father.

Returning to Alexandria, he had to face the difficult task of his new office. But instead of attending to the daily [requirements](#) and responsibilities of his office, he retired to a life of strict asceticism and secluded prayer. The clergy, whose routine affairs were neglected, were exasperated by this behavior and began to contemplate the elimination of the patriarch from the scene.

It is recorded that four members of the clergy in conjunction with a magician poisoned the patriarch's food, which caused him much suffering but miraculously did not kill him. 'Abd al-'Aziz, who happened to visit Alexandria at the time, was informed about the conspiracy and at once issued an order for burning the four clerical conspirators and the magician who had participated in the preparation of the poisoned food. As a good Christian, the patriarch appealed for the release of the guilty priests, who recovered their freedom, but the magician suffered death.

Simon decided afterward to confide the affairs of the monasteries to the more experienced JOHN OF NIKIOU. Although John administered satisfactorily for a short period, a group of monks from Wadi al-Natrun were disenchanted with his governance and organized a plot for disgracing the community under his surveillance and embarrassing the church by means of secretly seducing a nun for intercourse with one of the monks.

The story reached John of Nikiou, who consequently brought that monk for correction and beat him so severely that he died after ten days. The other bishops, on hearing the news of the death of the monk, held a [synod](#) and decided that the bishop of Nikiou had gone beyond reason in his corrective methods and suspended him from his office. They then chose a successor by the name of Menas from DAYR ANBA MAQAR.

A more calamitous issue was brewing in the whole church when a general movement arose among men who wanted to obtain the right to leave their legal wives in favor of taking concubines and still adhering to the church

as Christians. They appealed to the governor to legalize this behavior, and consequently 'Abd al-'Aziz convened a special council, which was attended by sixty-four bishops in Alexandria, to look into this strange matter.

This council included the [orthodox](#) Coptic bishops as well as the [Melchite](#) bishops Theophylact, the Chalcedonian; Theodore, the [Gaianite](#) follower of Eutychius; and George, the Barsanuphian, who were not recognized by Simon. Apparently no concrete result was reached from that meeting, although the Coptic church adhered to the principle of the sanctity of its matrimonial policies.

Public attention was distracted from this local movement by the news of developments in the international realm. In the Byzantine empire, Justinian II was murdered and Leontius (695-698) followed him on the throne of Constantinople, thus threatening more trouble by inciting unrest within Egypt. 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Marwan wanted to be assured about the loyalty of the Egyptians.

He called for the reunion of Coptic and Muslim leaders to declare their loyal views, at the same time forbidding the practice of church offices to avoid doubtful conglomerations under the cover of religion. The governor was reassured about Coptic loyalty to Arab rule when Simon announced that he anathematized the Chalcedonians, the Gaianites, and the Barsanuphians as heretics, since these were the doubtful elements who harbored Byzantine leanings.

The last important episode in Simon's patriarchate was the advent of a delegate from the Indian church of Saint Thomas on the Malabar coast to request the consecration of a bishop for that church. Simon refused to answer this request without the explicit authorization of the Umayyad authorities.

Therefore, the Indian delegate went to the [Gaianite](#) enemies of the

patriarch, who took him to the heretical sects in Alexandria. His request was fulfilled there by the consecration of a bishop and two priests from Mareotis for him, and the group departed in secret from Egypt only to be intercepted by the caliph's bodyguard in the Eastern Desert. They were returned to 'Abd al-'Aziz in Egypt with a caliphal verdict to punish the patriarch Simon for his indiscretion. The patriarch's innocence was not hard to prove when the Indian delegate confessed his actions to the governor.

'Abd al-'Aziz continued his friendly relations with Simon, to whom he granted land in Hilwan to build two churches and the monastery of Saint Gregorius (DAYR ABU QARQURAH).

Simon spent the remainder of his life in peace with the Umayyad administration of the country. He managed throughout his reign to steer out of trouble with the Muslim government, as he aimed at the establishment of a peaceful coexistence between the [Copts](#) and their Muslim neighbors.

Simon was buried in the church of the Angelion in Alexandria instead of the [tomb](#) he had prepared for himself beside that of Bishop Yuhanna in Dayr al-Suryan.

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SUBHI Y. LABIB

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