COPTIC CHRISTIANS IN OTTOMAN EGYPT:  
RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW AND COMMUNAL BELIEFS  

DISSERTATION  

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By  

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the beliefs and worldviews among the Coptic Christian community living in Egypt under Ottoman rule (1516-1798 CE), predominantly through the use of Coptic Church documents. Research in this topic has ultimately isolated three groups of Arabic Christian manuscripts which are closely considered here. These sources, written by Copts themselves, show Copts to be major actors rather than groups “marginalized” by the Islamic society at large. The first sources are chronicles that record communal events, noting momentous occasions such as pilgrimages or “miracles” performed by Coptic patriarchs. An example of this material is found in a discussion of the Coptic pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the Ottoman period, a ritual that reflects insight into the construction of spiritual meaning among Ottoman-era Copts. Two other categories of sources characterize the massive literary output which was a hallmark of this era. These are hagiographies and sermons, which were read out loud to sizable audiences and which document the performative dialogue between the church hierarchy and its congregation.

A hagiography, that of Saint Šalīb, is considered here as a text of “communal remembrance” from the late Mamluk and early Ottoman periods, a time of political transition in Egyptian society. Another, that of the Coptic female martyr Saint Dimyana, illustrates ascetic values reflected in her legend that were popular among Coptic
believers. The sermons which are examined in this dissertation were written to instruct the community in appropriate moral codes and behavior during the late eighteenth century. They reveal the Coptic clerical hierarchy’s concerns with the encroachment of “non-Coptic” morals into the community and provide clues to widespread practices among the community in this era. Ultimately, this dissertation speaks to the need to recognize and document the Coptic contribution to Egyptian society and religious life, and it addresses Coptic popular religious practices in relation to other communities; the gendered nature of religious participation; and tensions between clergy and laity within the Coptic community.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

COPTIC CHRISTIANS IN OTTOMAN EGYPT:
RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW AND COMMUNAL BELIEFS

As I studied Carlo Ginzburg’s work, The Cheese and the Worms (1980), about a sixteenth-century Italian miller named Menocchio, more specifically about his religious “cosmology” and “worldview,” I was intrigued by Ginzburg’s approach to recovering Menocchio’s unwritten story from Catholic inquisition records that were self-consciously distorting the miller’s words. In attempting to accomplish this task, Ginzburg asks the following question: to what extent might the written record of Menocchio’s testimony reflect aspects of his multiple selves rather than the dominant discourse of the Catholic Church? Ginzburg’s answer is that “popular” culture in the early modern period was neither completely isolated from nor totally dependent upon “high” culture, and in the performative exchange between them, one can catch a glimpse of this reciprocal relationship. Indeed the works of scholars such as Ginzburg, Peter Brown, Natalie Davis, and Eve Levin illustrate that a dichotomous model which stresses the difference between “low”/“popular” and “high”/”elite” practices leaves little space for the possibility of overlap between the two categories.¹ This approach redeems documents that might

¹ “Popular” religious practices, as historian Peter Brown affirms in his work The Cult of the Saints, transcend class and in that sense, the experience of the holy was made accessible to all believers. Natalie
otherwise be dismissed as unrepresentative of tendencies, worldviews, and beliefs expressed within a broader religious community.

The attempt to recover beliefs and worldviews among the Coptic Christian community living in Egypt under Ottoman rule (1516-1798 CE), predominantly through the use of “official” church documents, is the main focus of this dissertation. It is, in addition, a relatively unusual starting point for the history of a little-studied non-Muslim community. As a primarily rural population, the Copts were far less active in urban commerce than other Christian minorities living in the Ottoman Empire; this, combined with their thoroughgoing assimilation within Egyptian society, made them less visible than their coreligionists both to the Ottoman government and to later historians. In general, the question of where to begin writing the history of a non-Muslim community has been answered within the boundaries of the following hypothetical construct: were

Davis questions the inclination to divide religious behavior into sanctioned and unsanctioned, rational and irrational, popular and elite. Davis maintains that we might instead consider the breadth of people’s relationship to the sacred and supernatural, its manifestation in practices of piety, and how this was utilized by individuals and communities in order to construct a worldview (or, to use Carlo Ginzburg’s term, a “cosmology”) of the unexplainable in life. In this way, religious practices may be viewed not only as manifestations of societal views, but also as class-transcending, creative encounters at different historical moments. Likewise helpful here is Eve Levin’s critique of the often-derogatory usage of the term dvoeverie in the context of the Russian Orthodox Church; the term designates the existence of pagan beliefs and popular practices that are carried out under the guise of Christianity. Levin has questioned the use of a diametric model that places an excessive tension between pagan and Christian, popular and elite -- a tension that has left little space for the possibility of overlap between these categories. Moreover, she maintains that scholars must take into consideration the effect of the local/global context in their narration of the history of piety. In this specific case, the Russian Orthodox worldview (and that of other Eastern Orthodox Churches) poses a different set of questions regarding religious practices, ones which are often distinct from preexisting models in the literature on the Western Catholic Church. See Peter Brown, The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity ( Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Natalie Zemon Davis, “Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion,” in The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion, ed. Charles Trinkaus (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), pp. 307-336; and Eve Levin, “Dvoeverie and Popular Religion,” in Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia, ed. Stephen K. Batalden (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), pp. 29-52.
non-Muslims “tolerated” or “persecuted” by the broader Islamic society?2 With its
impetus usually being current political dilemmas and conflicting nationalist agendas, this
line of questioning has been restrictive in its insistence on an uncomplicated answer.3

In the past and as a consequence of this ideological debate on tolerance versus
persecution, oversimplifications have inundated the study of Christian and Jewish
communities, particularly with reference to their history in the Ottoman period. As a
whole, the topic has been limited to two main viewpoints.4 On the one hand, Islam and
Muslims are depicted as being oppressive and intolerant, and on the other, Islamic
societies are seen as fostering a utopia in which Muslims, Christians and Jews lived in
harmony and balance.5 Temporally and geographically, it is difficult to imagine that a

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2 The most recent study engaging in this approach is the work by Minna Rozen titled *A History of the

3 Bruce Masters makes a succinct critique of this model in his monograph on Christians and Jews in
Ottoman Syria, writing that, “The question of the conditions under which Jews and Christians lived in
premodern Islamic societies remains contested. It is unfortunately not solely an issue of arcane academic
interest. History, or more often only a half-remembered myth, informs nationalist ideologies prevalent in
the successor states to now-vanished Muslim empires across Eurasia from Sarajevo to New Delhi. The
dispute over the writing of the past is perhaps the most strident in the territories of the former Ottoman
Empire where competing, endogenously selective memories of former defeats and atrocities serve to
validate violence directed at those deemed to be outside the boundaries of ‘the nation.’ Political activists
who seek a return to an Islamic golden age add further urgency to the debate with their call for the
establishment of authentically Muslim governments in nation-states that are also home to non-Muslim
minorities….That such a call for the return to an idealized past can provoke fears in one religious
community and fervent optimism in another is testimony to the stark difference with which a common
history can be remembered by Muslims, Christians, and Jews.” Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the

4 See Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., “Introduction,” in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman

5 In the study of Jewish history in the Islamic context, the former argument has been dubbed the “neo-
lachrymose theory” and the latter the myth of the “interfaith utopia.” However, both views have been
criticized for oversimplifying the writing of Jewish history. For the case of Jews living under medieval
Islamic rule, historian Mark Cohen proposes that neither perspective tells the whole story; while the Islamic
system of governance inherently favored Muslims over non-Muslims, a situation which often left the latter
vulnerable to violent attacks, on the whole both groups lived in relative peace. Incidentally, the term “neo-
lachrymose” has been coined by modern Jewish historians in countering what they observe from their
perspective to be a “myth of interfaith utopia” utilized mostly by Arab historians. It is an elaboration of the
real consensus could be reached on how non-Muslims were treated at any given moment during the centuries-long Ottoman period. More importantly, the inherent limitations of this polarized discussion have furthered the idea that since the rise of Islam, non-Muslim groups existed only in relation to a broader, “dominant” Muslim culture, which either “tolerated” or “persecuted” them.

Consequently, from the start of this project, I was uncertain as to whether a study of the Coptic community carried out according to this customary theoretical orientation would shed any new light on the topic of tolerance versus persecution, a topic which for the Coptic case has arguably already been examined. This traditional historical account generally begins on the eve of demise for the “much-hated” Byzantine rule of Egypt. After describing the Islamic conquest in 641 CE and the gradual Arabization and Islamization of Egypt, the narrative usually pauses to ask whether Mamluk rulers were the most intolerant of the Copts, whether their Fatimid predecessors were generally ambivalent towards Christians, or whether the Ottoman conquest in 1517 CE affected

“lachrymose” view of the modern history of European Jewry which adapts arguments against Western anti-Semitism by depicting Islam as an inherently and relentlessly persecutory religion. Seeing as this is an adaptation of terminology utilized in the context of European history, one should be cautious in applying this theory to the Islamic context. See Mark Cohen, “Islam and the Jews: Myth, Counter-Myth, History,” The Jerusalem Quarterly, no. 38 (1986): 125-137.

This type of history, specifically for the Ottoman period, has been well-covered by historians such as Muḥammad ʿAffī, Al-Aqbāṭ fī Miṣr al-ʿaṣr al-ʿUthmānī (The Copts in Egypt during the Ottoman Period) (Cairo, Al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya al-ʻĀmma lil-Kitāb, 1992); Aziz Suryal Atiya, A History of Eastern Christianity (London: Methuen, 1968); Iris Habib al-Maṣrī in her work Qiṣṣa  al-kaṇīsa al-Qibṭīyya (The Story of the Coptic Church), vol. 5 (1517-1870) (Alexandria: Maktabat Kanīṣat Mārī Jirjis Sporting, 1992 [1975]); Theodore Hall Partrick, Traditional Egyptian Christianity: A History of the Coptic Orthodox Church (Greensboro, NC: Fisher Park Press, 1996); and Mansī Yūḥanna, Tārīkh al-kanīsa al-Qibṭīyya (History of the Coptic Church) (Cairo: Maktabat al-Maḥabbah, 1983).
Coptic Christians in any visible way. The answers to these questions are usually cursory since ultimately, within this nationalist-influenced account, “true” Coptic history does not begin until the “modernization” of Egypt and of the Coptic Church in the nineteenth century. During this period, the Church is viewed as having undergone a massive revival whose fruits are apparent in today’s strong clerical leadership.

Echoing a multitude of these narratives, one writer refers to the history of Copts prior to the modern period as one of “silent invisibility,” a “fact” supported by the low profile of the Coptic Church, by its monolithic organization, and by its belief in political apathy. In reality this alleged invisibility is due more to the absence of a critical and investigative gaze at Coptic communal existence in the early modern period than to a monolithic Coptic past. More specifically, it is related to a neglect of the sources written by Copts themselves, sources that show Copts to be major actors in their own survival rather than groups “marginalized” by the Islamic society at large. By no means do I intend to undermine in this dissertation the significance of the political and legal circumstances which shaped Coptic existence under Islamic rule. In fact, in the next section, I will provide a brief examination of Coptic status, particularly under early Islamic governance. But ultimately this line of examination alone tells us little about what it meant to be a Copt, a practicing Coptic Orthodox Christian, during the Ottoman period. This dissertation calls for detaching the study of Muslims and non-Muslims from

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7 For an elaborate discussion on the relevance of this debate to Coptic history, see Marlis J. Saleh, “Government Relations with the Coptic Community in Egypt during the Fatimid Period (358-567 A.H./969-1171 CE),” Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Chicago, 1995, Chapter I.

formulaic correlations, and for instead asking different questions regarding their identities, worldviews, and communal beliefs.

Historical Background

When researching the historiography of Egyptian Copts under Islamic rule, one encounters several difficult and potentially controversial questions. Coptic scholarship on the community’s experience under Muslim rule, for the most part, has tended to favor a portrayal of Coptic history as a unified struggle of Copts against foreign Muslim rulers. Scholarship which deviates from this convention -- which challenges a prevailing assumption that the historical relationship between Muslims and Copts is inherently negative -- has been regarded by some as inflammatory rhetoric which undervalues the Copts’ present suffering at the hands of Muslim extremists. In the study of non-Muslim communities, the writing and rewriting of history intertwines with current politics in a most explicit manner. In this section, I shall attempt to present and challenge some of the questions relating to the history of the Coptic community, focusing on the effects of the Islamic conquest on the Copts and on their general status in the early Islamic centuries. The remainder of this dissertation focuses on the period of Ottoman rule (1517-1798 CE) and on the topic of Coptic religious practices rather than on the Copts’ socio-political status. However, this brief survey is critical to an understanding of Coptic practices leading up to the period of Ottoman rule.
I. Lingering Questions: The Arab Conquest of Egypt, by Agreement or Resistance?

By most accounts, the Coptic Christian inhabitants of Egypt suffered great hardships under Byzantine domination. For centuries prior to Muslim rule, Egypt was an important province of the Roman Empire and then of its Eastern vestige, the Byzantine Empire. Serious tensions between Copts and the Byzantine authorities erupted over a theological dispute at the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), where Copts refused to accept the doctrine of the dual nature of Christ and were thus dubbed *monophysites*. In the period between Chalcedon and the Islamic conquest in 641, the Coptic Church became outspoken in its defense of the “true” Christian doctrine and sought to secure its position with Byzantine rulers. The emperors, however, rejected this assertion on account of the factionalism it created within their empire. Further conflict resulted when, in the sixth century, Byzantine rulers began to appoint non-monophysite and non-Egyptian bishops to the seat of power in Alexandria, which the Copts had regarded as their own center of authority.

According to some historians, these actions may have incited a “nationalist” spirit among the Coptic community. The Copts reacted against Byzantine repression and

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9 As Theodore Hall Partrick *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: A History of the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Greensboro, NC: Fisher Park Press, 1996), pp. 39-40, comments, “The Eastern churches and theologians who have rejected the Council of Chalcedon and its two-natures-after-the-union in the Incarnation have traditionally been called ‘monophysite,’ since they have recognized only one, divine-human, nature after the union. Their present-day successors reject the term because they confess that the incarnate Word of God is ‘from’ or ‘out of’ two natures and that they do believe that Jesus is perfect in his humanity (as over against Eutyches) as well as in his divinity. So we use the term ‘anti-Chalcedonian’ instead of ‘monophysite.’”


11 Works cited throughout this discussion by Walter Brumm, Frend, and Partrick use the term “nationalism” liberally without applying contextual definitions. The term nationalism, as defined in our present age, has distinct implications and should be cautiously projected into the past.
began to elect their own popes and to establish a new hierarchy of priests and bishops. Despite the Coptic Church’s attempts to secure its power, on the eve of the Arab conquest, Egypt was in a state of commotion and disarray. In 619, the Persian armies invaded Egypt and raised great havoc. Upon reconquering Egypt in 629, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius appointed the non-monophysite Cyrus, a close adviser, to be patriarch of Alexandria and governor of Egypt.¹² The reigning Coptic patriarch Benjamin I (622-661 CE), fearing for his life, fled to Upper Egypt where he hid until the Muslim conquest in 641.¹³ One can presume that Coptic dissatisfaction had reached its peak on the eve of the Muslim conquest; the Byzantines had failed to defend Copts against Persian aggression, and their imperial delegates were brutal in their rule of the Copts.

However, did the Copts feel so disaffected as to assist the Arab commander ‘Amr ibn al ‘Āṣ (d. 633 CE) and the invading Arab armies? This question has been intensely debated, its affirmation seen as a potential threat to modern-day Copts’ nationalist agenda. Conventional wisdom maintains that it is difficult for Copts to fathom surrendering “their” country to foreign invaders who may have contributed to their modern-day status as an oppressed minority. No doubt the leadership vacuum created by Coptic Patriarch Benjamin I going into hiding and by the defection of many bishops to

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¹² Jak Tajir provides an extensive discussion on the controversial identity of Cyrus or “Al-Muqawqas” in his work *Aqbāt wa-Muslimūn mundhu al-fath al-‘Arabī* [Copts and Muslims since the Arab Conquest] (Cairo: Kurrāsāt al-Tārikh al-Miṣri, 1951) pp. 44-46.

¹³ As a display of Byzantine supremacy, Cyrus tortured and executed the patriarch’s brother, Mina, in a most brutal manner. “And he brought upon him great afflictions and lit his sides on fire until the fat of his inner body ran down his sides and [then] he threw him on the ground and extracted his teeth by beating [him] for confessing his faith and he ordered that sacks be filled with sand and that Saint Mina be placed inside and drowned in the sea.” Sawirus ibn al-Muqaff’a, *History of the Patriarchs*, vol. II, ed., trans., and ann. by Basil Thomas Alfred Evetts (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1915), p. 491 (This is my translation, rather than Evetts”).
the pro-Chalcedonian camp aroused much dissension. However, it would be “misleading to see in the events of 640-642 anything in the nature of a Coptic rising against Byzantium,” as one scholar writes; “indeed, some Copts fought for Byzantines, some remained neutral, while some aided the Arabs.”

When ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ conquered Egypt, he immediately requested a meeting with Patriarch Benjamin. He instructed the patriarch to arrange the affairs of his community, to which the patriarch responded with great gratitude. The notion of congenial relations existing between the two camps is not far-fetched, particularly if we consider that Islam held no inherent hatred towards Coptic Christians (or other previously-established monotheistic religions, for that matter). The new conditions imposed upon the various non-Muslim religious groups were placed, at least in theory, to make clear the divisions

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14 Frend, “Nationalism and Anti-Chalcedonian Feeling,” p. 37. It is likely that the majority of the Egyptian population, witness to many struggles in previous years, did not know enough about the Muslim invaders to support or oppose them. See Walter Brumm, “Egyptian Copts in Historical Perspective,” Indiana Social Studies Quarterly 30, no. 2 (1977): 83. Thoroughly incensed over Byzantine abuse, some may have joined the tide of Muslim success while others remained uninvolved in actual fighting albeit hoping for the most peaceful resolution. However, there are historians who refute this explanation and insist upon the absolute indifference of the Copts, who allegedly watched as others decided their fortune. Some historians of the Coptic Church make the argument that it was the mysterious Cyrus “al-Muqawqaṣ” who negotiated the fate of the Copts with the Arabs. See, for example, Anba Isidhiros, Al-kharīda al-nafīsa ft tārīkh al-kāniṣa, [The Precious Stone in the History of the Church], vol. II (Cairo: Matba‘a Ṭiqaṣid Khayr, 1964), pp. 102-104; Al-Maṣrī, p. 207.

15 Ibn al-Muqaffa’a, History of the Patriarchs, pp. 496-497. The encounter between the two leaders has been romanticized as an “historic moment,” one which displays the graciousness of the conqueror and the appreciation of the patriarch. Edwar Ghali Al-Dahabi, Mu‘āmalāt ghayr al-Muslimūn ft al-mujtama‘ al-Islāmī [Treatment of Non-Muslims in Islamic Society] (Cairo: Dār Gharīb lil-Tibā‘a, 1993), pp. 133-141; Al-Maṣrī, p. 213.

16 Christians and Jews (according to the Qur’ān) were considered to be ahl al-kitāb or People of the Book, sharing similar scriptural traditions with Muslims, who were allowed (in theory) to live in peace under Muslim rule so long as they paid the jizya poll-tax. The Prophet Muhammad himself is noted, in hadiths or Prophetic traditions, for his sympathy towards the Coptic community. The Prophet’s specific interest in the Copts has been attributed to the influence of his Coptic wife Miriam, who could have informed him of Byzantine offenses against her people. Tajir, Aqhāt wa-Muslimūn, p. 20, citing Ibn ‘Abd al-Hākim’s Kitāb futūḥ Miṣr [Book of the Conquest(s) of Egypt].
between the rulers and the ruled, to differentiate rather than to persecute.\textsuperscript{17} The choices presented to the Copts by ‘Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ were essentially as follows: 1) convert to Islam; 2) accept Islamic rule and pay the \textit{jizya} tax or; 3) continue fighting and bear the consequences. As the second choice was apparently agreed upon, the Copts entered into a contract with the Muslims whereupon they attained \textit{dhimmī} status, the name designating non-Muslim communities under Muslim rule.\textsuperscript{18} The terms of this agreement were codified in the “Pact of ‘Umar,” ostensibly a treaty between ‘Umar I (634-644 CE) and the Christians of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Dhimmī} status, which is often referred to as “second-class citizenship,” rather specifies a protected community in a society which distinguished among its social, economic and religious orders. The community in effect became autonomous, self-governing, and charged with electing its own patriarch. Furthermore, the initial duty conferred upon its religious leader to collect taxes gave the patriarch a

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} As it is well known, the early Islamic conquests were not intended as a proselytizing mission. They were rather a military, political, and economic expansion out of the arid Arabian Peninsula and into fertile areas, such as Egypt, where the Arabs could establish one of several tax bases. Most Arabs who migrated to the conquered lands remained secluded from non-Arab populations and even from new Muslim converts (mawālī). Ira Lapidus, \textit{A History of Islamic Societies} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 63-64; Georges Anawati, “The Christian Communities in Egypt in the Middle Ages,” in \textit{Conversion and Continuity}, eds. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), p. 242. However, as Richard Bulliet writes, after the earliest Islamic conquests, “Individuals with missionary outlooks eventually did appear, even though they were not formally authorized by the caliphate. …While on occasion whole villages, tribe, or localized religious communities probably entered Islam en masse, either following the example of their customary leaders, or responding to missionary appeals, the graphs of conversion derived from name data indicate that the overall model of conversion best fits the hypothesis of an immense number of individual choices to identify with the Muslim community.” See Richard W. Bulliet, \textit{Islam: The View from the Edge} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 42.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Tajir, \textit{Aqbāṭ wa Muslimūn}, pp. 53-55. Scholars have made a strong argument that much of the document dates to the time of the Umayyad Caliph ‘Umar II (717-720 CE).
\end{itemize}
source of power and the Copts a sense of liberty not felt under Byzantine rule.\textsuperscript{20} In essence, Copts became free to practice their religious beliefs without molestation.

\textit{II. Conversion, Arabization and Islamization}

The incentives behind the Pact of ʿUmar gradually disappeared as the \textit{jizya} became more burdensome over the years. In many respects, heavy taxation is what led to a progressive Islamization and Arabization of Egyptian society, and it is often argued that both elements produced a “decline” of Coptic culture.\textsuperscript{21} The Umayyad caliphs, rulers of the Islamic Empire in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, enacted policies which resulted in severe peasant exploitation by commissioning Muslim jurists to rewrite the story of Egypt’s conquest in order to maximize taxation profits.\textsuperscript{22} Furthermore, the Umayyads had previously relied upon Egyptian locals, namely on church officials, in

\footnotesize{$\textsuperscript{20}$ Brumm, “Egyptian Copts in Historical Perspective,” p. 81; Qasim Abdu Qasim, \textit{Ahl al-dhimma fī Miṣr, al-ʿuṣūr al-wusta} [Non-Muslims in Egypt during the Middle Ages] (Cairo: Dar al-Maʿārif, 1977), p. 33.}

\footnotesize{$\textsuperscript{21}$ With differing emphases, Al-Maṣrī and Bat Ye’or, \textit{The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam}, trans. Miriam Kochan and David Littman (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), both make this decline argument: the idea that Coptic culture, as it was known in pre-Islamic years, was essentially eradicated after the conquest.}

\footnotesize{$\textsuperscript{22}$ As Gladys Frantz-Murphy articulates, “Between \textit{ca.} 97-122 [A.H.]/715-740 [C.E.] jurists introduced a whole new series of traditions imputing what was, in fact, a new status retroactively to the time of the original Arab conquests. Islamic traditions were rewritten to assert that Egypt had been conquered ‘by force’ (ʾanwaṭan) as opposed to ‘by treaty’ (ṣulḥan) and hence all of its land was ḥarag [sic] land, \textit{i.e.}, presumably subject to double the rate of taxation. According to the jurists’ classical explanation there were two types of land- ḥarag land and ‘uṣr land, ḥarag land defined as state land conquered by Arab Muslims from non-believers. ‘Uṣr designated land owned by Muslims which was subject to the ‘uṣr, or tithe. The tithe rate was only half the rate of taxation on ḥarag land. So changing the status of land from ‘uṣr to ḥarag would have resulted in the doubling of revenues.” Gladys Frantz-Murphy, “Conversion in Early Islamic Egypt: The Economic Factor,” in \textit{Documents de l’Islam medieval}, ed. Stuart Mews (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 11-12. The consequences of these policies were visible in the peasant revolts of 697, 712, and 725-26, which became a clear signal of Coptic dissatisfaction. See Lapidus, \textit{A History of Islamic Societies}, p. 48.}
their tax-collecting operations. As this system proved costly, however, these officials were replaced by Muslim administrators.\(^\text{23}\)

The far-reaching effects of this change were visible in the disintegration of church influence over rural areas. This was not merely a loss of economic power but a weakening of the church’s moral grip -- a loss of legitimacy, so to speak. When contact between the Church and Coptic believers was limited, the Church became more a place for congregation or ritual celebration than a center of authority. Nonetheless, few conversions occurred during the Umayyad period, and in fact Arabs discouraged this practice by refusing to exempt the converts from the *jizya* tax until the reign of ‘Umar II (717-720 CE).\(^\text{24}\) Conversion occurred at a later time because of various incentives; high on the list were the material and social enticements, chiefly freedom from the poll tax and a potential for upward mobility. In spite of this, there are incidences in which conversions were not sanctioned by Muslim authorities.\(^\text{25}\) Moreover integration between Muslims and Copts, often through Muslim intermarriage with Christian women, blurred religious differences. The apparent simplicity of Islam in contrast with the complexity of Coptic

\(^{23}\) According to Frantz-Murphy, “Conversion in Early Islamic Egypt,” p. 13, documents show that reliance on the Egyptians often resulted in non-compliance with tax decrees and/or partial remittance of taxes, which would, in theory, be eliminated by the appointment of Muslim officials who were directly accountable to the government. For a more general examination on the role of taxation in the early Islamic state, see Fred M. Donner, “The Formation of the Islamic State,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 2. (1986): 283-296; in particular, see pp. 286-289.

\(^{24}\) Anawati, “The Christian Communities in Egypt,” p. 239.

\(^{25}\) For instance, in the year 755, when 450 conversions took place in one day, they were not “altogether approved, for it was felt that they were only deceit and trickery, so that men may get posts under government and marry Muslim women.” A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their Non-Muslim Subjects* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1970 [1930]), p. 36.
Christian theology (i.e., trinity, incarnation, sacraments, monophysitism) made conversion an attractive alternative.\textsuperscript{26}

The Arabization of Egyptian culture was an even slower process than its Islamization, and the Coptic language was spoken at least until the tenth century. Utilizing existing Byzantine institutions, the early caliphs maintained many Coptic scribes on their payroll. These scribes were likely to be first among the Copts in mastering the Arabic language and consequently retained a monopoly over their posts.\textsuperscript{27} Additionally, a slow diffusion of the Arabic language occurred among the lower classes, where interaction between Arab garrison soldiers and peasants was common.\textsuperscript{28} Coptic had never been employed as an official language prior to the Arab conquest,\textsuperscript{29} and after some time, Coptic was used only as a language of prayer in liturgical services (alongside Arabic). In any event, the adoption of Arabic as the colloquial language among various Christian minorities did not hinder their cultural development, as some have implied. In

\textsuperscript{26} Anawati, “The Christian Communities in Egypt,” pp. 239-241.

\textsuperscript{27} Qasim, \textit{Ahl al-dhimma fi Miṣr}, pp. 39-40. Wilson Bishai’s curious argument that Copts learned Arabic only in conjunction with conversion to Islam seems insufficient, for in fact many Copts kept both their religion and positions without converting. Wilson Bishai, “Transition from Coptic to Arabic,” \textit{Muslim World} 53, no. 2 (1963): 149. In fact, Bishai’s entire analysis that the eradication of the Coptic language was due to Muslim oppression, and that this is supported by the lack of Coptic influence on modern Egyptian Arabic, seems questionable and unsubstantiated; see also Tritton, \textit{The Caliphs}, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{28} Anawati, “The Christian Communities in Egypt,” pp. 241-243. The author argues that Copts and Arabs intermingled under different circumstances, e.g., when the soldiers went into the countryside to relax during certain months of the year or when hospitality was given to the soldiers by the Copts. The Pact of ‘Umar also requires non-Muslims to quarter Muslim troops in time of war; perhaps as the conquest of North Africa proceeded under the Umayyads, such contacts were not uncommon.

\textsuperscript{29} According to some papyral evidence, the Arabs were the first to sanction the use of Coptic in legal documents. Qasim, \textit{Ahl al-dhimma fi Miṣr}, p. 37; Bat Ye’or, \textit{The Decline of Eastern Christianity}, p. 60, states that the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (685-705 CE) forbade the use of regional languages in the administration and replaced them with Arabic. However she neglects the textual evidence which illustrates that Greek (not an indigenous language to Egypt), not Coptic, had been the administrative language in Egypt, and that in spite of the introduction of Arabic, Greek and Arabic were used side by side for a few centuries after the Muslim conquest.
the Coptic case, a number of clergy and laymen continued to record church traditions and to invent new ones.\(^{30}\) As will be apparent throughout the remainder of this dissertation, the Arabic Christian manuscript production among Copts, which particularly characterized the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, was quite rich and distinctive. Arabic became part of the Coptic cultural and literary expression; it was the means by which Copts came to articulate their religious worldview in the period under study.

**III. Rights and Practices**

The relationship between the Muslim rulers and *dhimmīs* was precarious and reveals the many inconsistencies in the policies of various Muslim leaders. Many rulers considered minorities to be politically unthreatening and repeatedly chose them to serve in high government positions. However, during a time of economic crisis, vocal opposition and sporadic violence erupted against *dhimmīs*.\(^{31}\) The government, in such cases, issued various edicts reasserting its commitment to purging its administration of non-Muslims. Presumably this might be considered a gesture of appeasement towards its Muslim populace made at the expense of *dhimmīs*. By and large, though, Copts held stable positions as government clerks and administrators, their extensive experience being essential in tasks such as land surveying and the annual measurement of the Nile, a

\(^{30}\) Qasim, *Ahl al-dhimma fi Miṣr*, p. 39. The contrast made by some historians between the Copts and the Egyptian Jews, who were able to preserve the Hebrew script in their daily usage, may be explained by the significant ties between language and religion in the Judaic tradition, something which is absent from Christian customs. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, according to Jewish customs and traditions, has a significant numerical value which is utilized in mathematical analyses and is applied by religious scholars in the exegesis of biblical scriptures. However, Jews, like Copts, certainly adopted Arabic even if they retained the Hebrew script.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., pp. 22-23.
practice carried out since ancient times. The reliance on Coptic experience was linked to the fact that the Coptic solar calendar had been retained for agricultural purposes, just as the Julian calendar was used in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Under the Pact of ‘Umar, Christians were forbidden to build new churches and to repair old ones; in fact, all non-Muslims were technically prohibited to build new houses of worship. However during his own reign (634-644), ‘Umar I allegedly gave protection to the Christians of Jerusalem in respect to their lives, their churches, and their crosses. In Egypt, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āş allowed the Copts to build new churches in Alexandria and in Fusṭāṭ (old Cairo) and forbade acts of destruction against church buildings. Under Umayyad rule and subsequent dynasties, the status of churches and monasteries was as precarious as the aforementioned relation between government and dhimmīs. Following Coptic peasant revolts in the eighth century, several newly-built churches were destroyed, and, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were detrimental to Coptic institutions. Wealthy monasteries, which had previously increased the church’s authority, were vulnerable to attacks by Bedouin Arabs and Berbers and gradually lost much of their wealth and prestige. Religious restrictions, in theory,

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33 Ibid., p. 39.
34 Ibid., p. 33. Scholars have thus concluded that the Pact could not have been promulgated under ‘Umar I but is more consistent with the policies of ‘Umar II.
35 As A. S. Tritton recounts: “At first churches were built freely, sometimes with the approval or even the help of authority....It is not till 150 or 170 [of the Islamic calendar i.e., 772 or 792 CE] that there is the least suggestion of a ban on new churches and this idea was slow in finding general recognition. [The Abbasid caliph] Mutawakkil [847-61] was the first to make this ban law. On the other hand, from an early date churches were always liable to be destroyed for some caprice of the ruler. In times of political upheaval the danger was of course greater. Usually much, if not everything, depended on the character of the ruler, were he governor or caliph.” Tritton, The Caliphs, pp. 50-51.
extended to the ringing of church bells, ritual processions, and the display of crosses, banners and icons, some of which were associated with superstitious beliefs.36

Limitations upon Coptic dhimmīs also encompassed dress and horseback-riding. These restrictions mirror an official policy of asserting the superiority of the Islamic religion and of its leaders.37 Most public display of pomp by non-Muslims was not tolerated, since such pageantry was reserved for the elite classes of Muslim society: for the descendants of the Prophet, for the religious scholars or ‘ulamā’, and for the ruling authorities. Similar reasoning was used for distinguishing between Muslim and dhimmī dress, and it suffices to say that the rule of thumb for dhimmīs was not to wear any attire similar to that of Muslims. Blue and black became associated with Coptic dress, and in special situations, Copts were also required to wear crosses.38 However, one should note that in medieval societies, both in Europe and in the Middle East, dress distinguished classes, faiths, and professions, and was viewed as a critical marker of identity. Constraints on dhimmīs were imposed especially when their loyalty was called into question. For instance Byzantine military victories on the borders of the empire this

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36 Bat Ye’or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity*, p. 87. We are aware of numerous periods, well into the Ottoman age, when these restrictions were not imposed.

37 This story is very telling of this policy. “A Christian secretary rode by the mosque of al Azhar wearing boots and spurs, with an Alexandrian jacket thrown over his head, runners in front to save him from the pressure of the crowd, and servants behind in fine clothes on light baggage horses. This annoyed some Muslims, who sprang at him, dragged him from his horse, and thought to kill him...[After he complained to the Mamluk sultan] the Patriarch and the leading Christians...were summoned to the sultan’s presence...and he recounted their many and repeated violations of the covenant.” Tritton, *The Caliphs*, pp. 33-34.

38 Ibid., p. 120. This was mostly enforced in bathhouses, where the absence of clothing required distinguishing markers, or during times of severe persecution. According to Coptic traditions, the weight of these crosses caused severe bruising and explains a customary reference to the Copts as “blue-necks.”
would trigger mob violence against Christians.\textsuperscript{39} Once again, though, it is difficult to derive from this survey a coherent policy towards non-Muslims, and in perspective these codes illustrate society’s compulsive need for differentiation rather than persecution.

The issues discussed above, specifically as defined in the Pact of ‘Umar, will be revisited throughout this dissertation. While this study will primarily focus on how Copts expressed their religious beliefs in the public and private spheres of Egyptian society; questions of whether the public display of religion was acceptable, specifically during the Ottoman period, will become significant. In Chapter Two, for instance, we encounter the story of a Coptic martyr who publicly defamed the Prophet Muhammad and who subsequently refused to convert to Islam as an act of pride on behalf of his faith. Whether specifications for the legal rights among \textit{dhimmīs}, as discussed above, are a significant marker of non-Muslim life is an issue that emerges again in Chapter Three, when examining the rise of the virgin martyr cult of Saint Dimyana and the public veneration of her shrine, and in Chapter Four, when tracing the tradition of Coptic pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the Ottoman period, a tradition that provoked a total and unrestricted display of religion in the streets of Cairo. For the most part, Ottoman rule over Egypt allowed the Copts to continue their communal existence and to sustain their religious practices. To Egypt’s Copts, the Ottomans extended the traditional “tolerance.” As a consequence, the Coptic Church hierarchy was again the source of communal leadership in the persons of the patriarch and bishops, although this was challenged, as will be discussed in Chapter Five, by the role that wealthy Coptic laymen came to play in leading

\textsuperscript{39} Anawati, “The Christian Communities in Egypt,” p. 243.
their community and by the encroachment of an aggressive Catholic missionary movement in Egypt. The way in which those ministering to the Coptic community at large -- be they clergy or laymen -- attempted to control (or not) the public behavior of Coptic believers will be examined in the latter part of this study.

“Belief” and “Community”

Keeping this overview in consideration, the remainder of this dissertation will be approached as a series of historical “snapshots” informed by a particular methodology that considers the term “belief” to transcend personal faith and conviction, and the term “community” to be more encompassing than it is restrictive. After all, despite their basic differences, Egyptians have historically shared a number of religious and cultural practices; the profound ritualism of the Coptic faith has frequently permeated Muslim traditions and vice versa. Today, as in centuries past, the attendance by Muslims at Coptic saints’ festivals and by Copts at Muslim celebrations illustrates the consistent overlap between these two communities’ practices. One could argue that it is within this overlap that the differences between what constitutes official and unofficial Christianity, and what defines Muslim or Christian belief, have often blurred. While

40 At the core of Coptic “official” customs are seven sacraments (baptism, chrismation [anointing with holy oil], communion [the Eucharist], confession, marriage, priesthood, and the anointing of the sick), a rich liturgical heritage, and the strict, nearly vegan fasts that believers are obligated to follow.

41 Medieval Muslim chroniclers report that one of the Coptic sacraments, baptism, was performed by both Christians and Muslims, who believed that submerging their children in cold water would endow them with a lifelong immunity from disease. See references in Qasim Abdu Qasim, “Al-Wad’ al-ijtimā‘ī lil-Aqūbah fī ‘aṣr salāfīn al-Mamālīk” [The Social Situation of Copts during the Era of the Mamluk Sultans], Al-Tārīkh wal-mustaqbal 3 (1989): 165.

42 As Tony Watling notes for the case of Catholicism in the Netherlands, a church’s “official” recognition of dubious “unofficial” practices might be a way to “revitalize the church;” “not doing so may lead to” the
avoiding an interfaith-utopian approach which maintains that harmonious relations generally existed between various religious communities and, for that matter, that on a “popular” level, all practices are interchangeable, this study takes a closer look at Coptic religious beliefs in a period spanning nearly three centuries. This work will also attempt to avoid a narrow and unrepresentative focus on Coptic Church leadership while acknowledging that the Copts’ experience was shaped by their encounters with other religious communities, including Muslims, Jews, Armenians, Greek Orthodox, and Catholics.

When choosing to research a specific “community,” such as the “Copts,” it is perhaps unavoidable to begin within predefined lines, that is, among the monophysite, Orthodox Christian inhabitants of Egypt. This is in part a consequence of divisions intrinsic to the Islamic legal structure, i.e., the separation of religious groups into Muslim believers and dhimmīs, divisions along which the study of religious communities under Ottoman rule tends to exist; Copts, in this picture, were the most numerous group of dhimmīs in Ottoman Egypt.43 Necessary as these boundaries might be, a rigid definition of “community” as an enclosed group of individuals with only a religious faith in decline of the institution. See “‘Official’ Doctrine and ‘Unofficial’ Practices: The Negotiation of Catholicism in a Netherlands Community,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 4 (2001): 574.

43 Copts, like all Christians and Jews in the Islamic world, lived for centuries under the dīmma (protection) system; the community is frequently referred to as a millet in the context of the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. “Dhimma” may be defined as “the sort of indefinitely renewed contract through which the Muslim community accords hospitality and protection to members of other revealed religions [i.e., Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism], on condition of their acknowledging the domination of Islam.” See a more detailed definition in Arent Jan Wensinck, “Dhimma,” *EI2*. By no means, however, was there one, monolithic approach towards the treatment of non-Muslim communities under Islamic rule. This relatively divisive legal status did not preclude all communities -- Muslim and non-Muslim -- a common existence as part of a broader societal, economic, and political framework. This should only remind us that Islamic legal provisions were never static and ageless.
common may stifle an examination of Muslims, Christians and Jews as groups that have at times harbored attitudes and beliefs that were quite close to one another and, at other times, that were different from those expressed in the greater “umbrella” of “Islamic” culture. It is also possible that when it came down to holding specific religious worldviews, particularly among the elite laymen and clergy of those communities, and to the aspects of life which potentially shaped individual communal attitudes, each of the three religions inspired unique responses from its adherents. The manuscripts that I examine in this dissertation will be read with this type of discriminating approach in mind.

Sources

The sources used here are mostly preserved in Coptic archives in Cairo: at the Coptic Museum, at the Patriarchal Library in the district of Azbakiyya, and at the Franciscan Center for Christian Oriental Studies in al-Muskī district. Other significant volumes are located in the monasteries of Wadī al-Nāṭrūn (specifically Abū Maqār and al-Suryān monasteries) in the part of the Sahara Desert northeast of Cairo, and in the Monastery of Anba Anṭuniyūs near the Red Sea. This research was also completed with key documents obtained from the British Library, the Selly Oak Collection at the University of Birmingham, and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; and with the

44 In that sense, the definition of “community” as “all the people living in a specific locality” or as a “fellowship; similarity” is more apt. See The Oxford American Dictionary of Current English (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
assistance of the valuable collection of Coptic sources held at the Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society in Los Angeles.

The project of writing Coptic history with a reliance on internal community documents housed in guarded Church archives is susceptible not only to the current political climate in Egypt but also to a frequently reserved Coptic Church leadership. This was an issue taken into careful consideration throughout the research process. Some of the most heavily shielded manuscript collections, such as the one in Dayr al-Suryān, have not been catalogued and lie fallow in the confines of decaying buildings. Others, like the one at the Monastery of Abū Maqār, are highly organized and have long been open to researchers, particularly to Western scholars, seeing as the leadership of that Monastery strongly encourages critical scholarly endeavors. The task of gaining access to some of this material was highly precarious and depended upon intra-communal connections, personal relations, and sensitive dealings rather than on an agenda which I defined and planned.

The sheer abundance of documents surviving from the period between 1517 and 1798 indicates that there was indeed an enduring church literature, supported by well-to-do Coptic patrons who commissioned the writings of many of these works. My research has ultimately identified three groups of Arabic Christian manuscripts which will be closely considered here. Under various thematic headings, I will examine how these manuscripts were used by the Coptic Church and in what contexts they served their functions. The first type are chronicles that record communal events, noting momentous occasions such as pilgrimages or “miracles” performed by Coptic patriarchs; even these sparse annals provide evidence of communal events that bridged the gap between “high”
and “low.” Two other categories characterize the massive literary output which was a hallmark of the Ottoman era. These are hagiographies and sermons, which were read out loud to sizable audiences and which document the performative dialogue between the church hierarchy and its congregation. Hagiographies were often recited at shrines and holy places to a mixed audience of clergy and laymen, usually on saints’ feast days; thus they point to devotional trends among the Coptic community at large by highlighting figures who became objects of veneration during the Ottoman period. Sermons instructed the community in appropriate moral codes and behavior. By revealing the Coptic clerical hierarchy’s social concerns, they provide clues to widespread practices among the community in this era. Again, bearing in mind the artificiality of the distinction between “popular” and “elite” religious practice and asking specifically what defines and who sanctions pious acts as one or the other, I read my sources “against the grain” so that I can uncover not only the institutional reality of the church elders who composed most of the works I study but also the lived reality of the laity, most of whom had no access to the pen.

Organization of the Material

The organization of this dissertation is primarily influenced by another monograph on Egyptian history, that of Boaz Shoshan. In the Preface to his study of popular culture in medieval Cairo, Shoshan is candid about the fact that each chapter addresses “a separate phenomenon” and that his book “is a collection of studies,” which, according to the author, is possibly the only method “for treating so wide and variegated
a subject as culture yet on a limited basis of historical data.\textsuperscript{45} Just as Shoshan argues for the case of culture in Mamluk Egypt, any study with such an expansive geographic and temporal range can be neither exhaustive nor completely representative. This is reassuring to the present author, whose foray into previously uncharted territories -- literally in the remote monasteries dotting Egypt’s deserts and metaphorically in the conceptual framework motivating this dissertation -- was often unsettling. Needless to say, the sporadic nature of source-hunting and source-gathering, as described above, also affects the way in which this dissertation is constructed as a series of “snapshots” exploring a number of themes while attempting to be faithful to the broader topic of Coptic religious beliefs and worldviews during the Ottoman period.

In this study, I use these sources specifically to shed light on the communal practices, namely saint veneration, pilgrimage, and customs of the Coptic Church -- on rituals that bridged the gap between Church officials and the laity, as well as that between Copts and the majority Muslim community. Crucial here is a specific understanding of Christian literary production in the Coptic Orthodox Church, a subject that will be addressed when discussing hagiographic texts in Chapters Two and Three, and in the context of sermons in Chapter Five. In the case of hagiographies, an author may have collected material relevant to each saint, edited this material according to the best methods available, and interpreted the information in a way that would make sense according to the literary and historical setting of this age. Likewise sermon texts were written with the clear intention of effecting change in the community’s behavior, but they also serve as the most apparent example of a performed text, of a text that links clergy to

\textsuperscript{45} Boaz Shoshan, \textit{Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), x.
laity through attempts to reconcile perceived and applied moral behavior within the community. Sensitivity to these points -- to the intention of text-writing and text-performance -- makes for an enriched reading of sources which upon initial examination may appear dry and repetitive.

In the context of hagiographic production, Chapter Two deals with the “neo-martyrdom” of Saint Šalīb and explores what I shall refer to as a text of “communal remembrance” from the late Mamluk and early Ottoman periods. During a time of political transition in Egyptian society, this narrative promoted a type of commemoration on behalf of the Coptic Christian faith, as a story which describes both congenial and adverse relations with the majority Muslim population in Egypt. It is unusual that a text addressing the story of a Copt who was tortured and martyred by Muslim authorities is not filled with anti-Islamic invective; this stands in contrast, for instance, to contemporaneous martyrologies from the Ottoman Balkans. Ultimately, Šalīb’s story depicts a complex picture of the social relations which existed in Egypt during the early sixteenth century and, even more importantly, of how these relationships may have been remembered as part of the Coptic communal worldview among future generations.

The following chapter, “Visiting with Kin: The Hagiography and Shrine of Saint Dimyana during the Ottoman Period,” is devoted to the hagiography and cult of the early Christian female martyr Dimyana. In this chapter, I examine the relatively unexplored issue of the perception of women and gender relations in Coptic society. Such a line of inquiry is timely given the fact that the status of women in pre-modern Ottoman society, particularly in the Arab lands, is currently a topic of considerable interest. A detailed study of the Dimyana cult suggests a contested conceptualization of the “ideal” Christian
woman that reflects conflicting notions of gender and power relations within the Coptic community. An idealized version of Dimyana as an erudite virgin and vocal Christian devotee was promoted by elite clerical authorities yet was often eclipsed by a more popular version, advocated by both laity and lower clergy, of Dimyana as a modest, benevolent, homegrown “girl.” The hagiography of this virgin martyr and the practices at her annual festival, observed by both Christians and Muslims, illustrate that ascetic values reflected in the clerical and popular versions of her legend offer clues to the virtues upheld for both Coptic women and women of the Muslim majority.

In the next chapter, titled “Coptic Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Ottoman Period: Ritual and Communal Identity,” I examine the lengths to which Coptic pilgrims went in order to make an annual pilgrimage from Cairo to Jerusalem, usually, but not always, with the consent of Muslim authorities. The pilgrimage illustrates a particular manifestation of an age-old Christian tradition but also exposes common logistical practices linking the Coptic pilgrimage with the organization of the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. This allows insight into the construction of spiritual meaning among Ottoman-era Copts but in an approach that also unveils the collusion between Copts and local Muslims, as Arabic-speaking Egyptians sharing a similar experience.

In Chapter Five, the way in which preaching and sermon-giving linked clergymen to worshippers by promoting a specific moral program is highlighted in the works of two late eighteenth-century Coptic sermon-givers: Bishop Yusāb and Patriarch Yu’annis. This final chapter will explore how the contact between Copts and Catholics, as well as Coptic clergy and laymen throughout the eighteenth century, stimulated an explicit response among Coptic clerical authorities, in the form of sermons. The intense aversion to
Catholic missionaries, who had been winning over converts among the most notable of the Coptic Christians in Egypt, provoked Coptic Orthodox clerics to call for expulsion from communal existence of those who fell outside the lines of acceptable moral behavior, thereby raising questions surrounding the definition of “community.” As will be discussed, the interaction among Copts, Catholics, and even Muslims called for the characterization of an “authentic” Coptic identity, in this pre-nationalist age, vis-à-vis the perceived moral and spiritual vices of other communities.

By the end of this dissertation, it will become clear that those questions touched upon earlier regarding tolerance of and toleration by the surrounding Muslim community are relevant but that they are not the only factors which shape our understanding of Coptic communal and religious life. It will also be evident that the neglect of Arab Christian texts within Islamic and Ottoman historiography has deprived us of a more enriched and pluralistic understanding of this period. Even more, the dismissal of “official” texts as being unworthy sources that could illustrate the multiple selves of a community’s religious worldview will seem unwarranted. This dissertation speaks to the need to recognize and document the Coptic contribution to Egyptian society and religious life while focusing on an historical era that has long been neglected. More broadly, it contributes to a realization of the diversity and pluralism of Ottoman society by enriching our understanding of the intimate interaction between Muslim and Christian practice, and on a broader level, between the Muslim majority and ethno-religious minorities.
CHAPTER TWO

COPTIC COMMUNAL REMEMBRANCE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY:
THE STORY OF THE MARTYR ŞALĪB

She was wailing in grief and she said to her brother, “Recant this act,
for perhaps you will be saved from this punishment and from the chains with
which you are bound.” When she said this to him, her words disturbed him
and he bid her the farewell of a person who is prepared to die. She wailed and
said, “Oh woe is my longing for you my brother, the apple of my eye,
woe is the misery of your absence and your separation from me.”

The above quotation is from the martyrology of Saint Şalīb (d. 1512 CE), a Coptic
Christian who was condemned to death in the late Mamluk era and whose story was
recorded soon after. The main speaker is Şalīb’s sister, heard here pleading with her
brother to renounce his crime, blaspheming Islam, so that he would be saved from
imminent death. Immediately, one is struck by the intensity of this woman’s voice, as it is

1 From Cairo, Coptic Museum, MS Tārīkh 475, 17r; Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Arabe 152, 97r. In the
Coptic Museum manuscript, this paragraph has many misspellings which are corrected by the Bibliothèque
Nationale copy. From here on, I will refer to the “martyrology of Şalīb” as M.Şalīb, which will denote the
Coptic Museum manuscript, unless there are clear discrepancies with the Bibliothèque Nationale
manuscript, which will be noted separately. I would also like to note that when providing an Arabic
quotation from M.Şalīb, I will transcribe the text unpunctuated and with all its misspellings, as it appears in
the original form. This will provide a more authentic sense of how the manuscript sounded to its Coptic
audiences.
presented in the colloquial Egyptian dialect. The sister was crying, begging, and imploring her brother to change his mind, and yet he continued to act as a firm and resilient witness for his faith. This scene is depicted by the hagiographer, as is the remainder of the narrative, with consideration to the social setting in which the martyrdom occurred and to the everyday relationships that constituted this saint’s life.

The attention to such details renders this hagiographic text an important source for Coptic and Egyptian literary and social history. Moreover, M.Šalîb is only one of a few

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2 I am most indebted to Father Wadi Abullif, of the Franciscan Center for Christian Oriental Studies in al-Muski district in Cairo, for guiding me in researching the topic of Saint Šalîb. He generously shared with me his brief but immensely significant work “Šalîb (p i c t ą r ö c c). ?-1512. Martire Ch. Copta,” in Santi della Chiesa Copta di Egitto (Cairo: Al-Muskī, Centro Francescano di Studi Orientali Cristiani, 1991-1996), pp. 255-256, which contains an excellent bibliographical guide to many of the available sources about this Coptic martyr.

The seven manuscripts which exist of this martyrrology (or which make mention of Šalîb’s martyrdom) are as follows: 1) Cairo, Coptic Museum, MS Tārīkh 475(2), fols. 10r-24v (listed by Murqus Simayka in his Fahāris al-makhtūtāt al-Qibṭiyya wa-ʿArabiyya al-nawjūdā bi-l-matḥaf al-Qibṭi wa-l-dār al-batiriyarkiyya wa-ahamm kanāʾis al-Qāhirah wa-iskandariyya wa-adyirat al-qūtr al-Miṣrī, vol. I [Catalogues of the Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts Existing in the Coptic Museum, in the Patriarchal Quarters, in the most important Churches of Cairo and in the Monasteries of the Egyptian Realm] (Cairo: Government Press, 1939), serial number 102, p. 54. The manuscript in which Šalîb’s martyrdom is embedded is dated 24 Baʿūnah, 1266 AM (1550 CE); 2) Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Arabe 152, fols. 90v-108r, listed by Gérard Troupeau, Catalogue des manuscrits arabes, Tome I (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, 1972[1995]), p. 122. This manuscript is undated but according to the notes by Troupeau, it is a sixteenth-century document; 3) Cairo, the Patriarchal Library, MS Tārīkh 31(5), fol. 78r-92v, listed by Simayka in his Catalogues, vol. II, serial number 651, p. 297; 4) Cairo, Patriarchal Library MS Taqs 106(3), listed by Simayka in Catalogues, vol. II, serial number 723, p. 331. The dating of this manuscript is unclear. The first section of the manuscript contains a document which dates from 1377 CE But there is a dedication in the manuscript from circa 1496-1497 CE made by Patriarch John XIII (1484-1525 CE) to the Muʿallaqa Church in Old Cairo. It is possible that after the martyrdom of Šalîb, his story was compiled with this manuscript; 5) The John Rylands Library, Manchester, MS 433[69], fol. 101a, listed by W. E. Crum, Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the Collection of the John Rylands Library, Manchester (London: Bernard Quaritch, and Sherrat and Hughes, 1909), p. 208. This is an eighteenth-century manuscript and the entry regarding Šalîb is in the form of an Ibsālīyyah or hymn dedicated to him; 6) Crum also cites another work, the John Rylands Library Manchester, MS 435 [22 and 21] (pp. 210-212). This citation is in a dīnār (Antiphonary), a work of hymns that correspond to saints and their festivals. One hymn is dedicated to Šalîb, the martyr “who came at the eleventh hour, yet received the whole day’s wage.” This manuscript is from the year 1799 CE; 7) In the year 2000, as will be noted at the end of this chapter, the Coptic Church published a booklet about the martyr Šalîb. The author of that booklet, Father Dawūd ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, indicates that he used an original manuscript of M.Šalîb which is housed at the Convent of the Virgin Mary at Ḥārit Zuwayla. While this manuscript is not cited in any other source, there is no question that this author relied on an authentic copy of the martyrrology. This would indicate that there are in fact seven copies of the martyrrology in existence today. (Note: for this chapter, I have consulted the first two copies.)
contemporaneous martyrological texts that survive in the Coptic Church archives from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The original authorship date of this martyrology is unknown, but the seven manuscripts which exist today date variously from 1550 CE, from unspecified dates in the sixteenth century, and from 1737 CE; little is known about the remaining manuscript. While the events described in M.Šalīb took place in the last years of Mamluk rule, they appear to have been recorded shortly thereafter and thus may have begun to achieve popularity in the years following the Ottoman conquest of Egypt (1517 CE) and the destruction of the Mamluk sultanate. In that sense, the narrative can be considered a text which had an appeal over a long period.

Because Šalīb was a martyr in the Islamic era, he is considered a “neo-martyr;” his story complements the scores of “neo-martyrologies” that appeared in the Arab lands following the Islamic conquests of the seventh century but that were especially profuse in the predominantly Orthodox Christian Balkan region during the Ottoman period. While

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3 Yūḥanna al-Qalyūbī, a monk in the Monastery of Saint Bishoy, was another Coptic martyr killed during the sixteenth century. His story is retold by Iris Habīb al-Maṣrī in Qīṣṣat al-ḥākimāt al-Qibṭīyya. 1517-1870 [The Story of the Coptic Church], vol. 4 (Cairo: Maktabat Kanṣat Mārī Jirjis Sporting, 1992 [1975]), p. 25. Reportedly, Yūḥanna was captured by a ruler (ḥākim, probably the provincial governor of Jirja or possibly even a judge) who demanded that the monk deny his Christianity. Because he refused to do so, he was tortured and then killed. He died on 30 Ḥāṭūr, 1298 AM/6 December, 1582. His story is recorded in Patriarchal Library MS Taqs 106(2) (listed by Simayka in his Catalogues, vol. II, serial number 723, p. 331). Interestingly, this text is embedded in the same manuscript as the fourth copy of Šalīb’s story, cited in fn. 2.

One of the best known neo-martyrs of the Ottoman period is the nineteenth-century martyr Sidhum Bishāy. He is a neo-martyr of the early nineteenth century. He was “a Christian native of Damietta, [and] he was working in a rice factory when a Muslim accused him of blasphemy against Islam and had him taken to court. The judge ordered him flogged and the angry populace tortured him and led him in a procession through the city riding a buffalo. He died five days later.” See Aziz Atiya, “Martyrs, Coptic,” in Coptic Encyclopedia 5.1550-1559.

4 In an interesting comparison, Mark R. Cohen explains why the concept of martyrdom among Jews in the Muslim world was never as popular as it was among analogous Christian communities. Cohen writes that “Jews in Islamic lands, when threatened with extinction unless they converted, typically accepted the religion of Islam rather than a martyr’s death…. Martyrdom in the surrounding Muslim society was not as salient a concept as it was in Christianity. Muslims – particularly, Sunni Muslims – unlike the early
Nomikos Vaporis defines neo-martyrs by their allegiance to the Byzantine Orthodox Christian creed and by their ethnic identities. Sidney Griffith offers a more general definition of the term. Griffith describes neo-martyrdom, in the context of the relationship between Christians and Muslims after the Islamic conquests of the seventh century, as follows:

[In] the Islamic world, unlike in the pre-Constantinian, late Roman empire, there was no general pursuit of Christians as such. Rather, in these new circumstances, it was on the one hand sometimes the Christian enthusiast himself who, if he did not instigate the confrontation with the Muslim authorities, he [sic] used it as an opportunity to earn his death by defaming Islam and the prophet Muhammad. Sometimes, on the other hand, the martyr was a convert to Christianity from Islam, and thereby forfeited his life as an apostate Muslim. These were all ‘neo-martyrs’ in Byzantine Greek parlance.

As Griffith notes, one of the more common acts that led to martyrdom was public defamation of Islam. Due to the nature of this crime, Şalîb’s martyrdom, as will be discussed below, shares features with other narratives in this genre, including a subtext of confronting Muslim judges and officials, as well as an offer to recant made by Muslim authorities to the accused. However, beyond such particulars, the contents of Şalîb’s

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5 By a broader definition of the term, Şalîb can be considered a neo-martyr despite the claim by Vaporiş that neo-martyrs were mostly of Albanian, Bulgarian, Georgian, Greek, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Syrian, or Ukrainian heritages. The study by Nomikos Michael Vaporiş attempts to shed light on these predominantly Balkan neo-martyrs and is aptly titled Witnesses for Christ: Orthodox Christian Neo-Martyrs of the Ottoman Period, 1437-1860 (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000).

narrative are relatively uncommon. The text gives a Coptic Christian perspective on the social interaction that occurred between Muslims and Christians, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, one that is, in general, not addressed by other Arab Christian sources.

Ṣalīb’s martyrrology was fundamentally a text of communal remembrance. But it was also more than that. The story’s potential, as a text intended to be read time and again, lay in its ability to inspire a kind of “witnessing” or a type of “commemorative reaction” among future generations. In this chapter, following a summary of the martyrrology, I will draw attention to how this story may have promoted a sort of commemoration on behalf of the Coptic Christian faith in a period of general instability. While remaining wary of adopting terminology that stems mostly from psychoanalytical and literary studies, I believe that an examination of this text can benefit a great deal from an understanding of what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub define as “witnessing,” the act of listening to and simultaneously experiencing a “testimony.” Laub writes that “Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time.” The listener to a testimony (or an historical narrative, or an oral performance, for that matter), according to Laub, might experience “distinct levels of witnessing”:

[There is] the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.

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7 I refer here to the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub titled *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); see also Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1995).


9 Ibid., p. 75.
In the context of Christian literary history, the hagiography of a martyred saint can be considered a record of testimony to Christ, as evidence of the courage of a particular individual in upholding his or her Christian faith.\textsuperscript{10} Within \textit{M.Šalīb}, the experience of the protagonist, who is clearly a witness for his faith through martyrdom, is highlighted. Moreover, the Muslim and Coptic characters who are introduced in this narrative are eyewitnesses to and participants in the life and death of the saint. On yet another level, the writer of the hagiography, through the act of recording this narrative, is a witness for Christ because of his spirited dedication to preserving the story for posterity. Finally, there is the mass of Coptic believers who constituted the audience for this story -- the listeners and witnesses to this testimony of memory.

The second main point of this chapter will unfold as the description of witnesses, testimony, and textual perception is related. It may come as a surprise that a text of moderate popularity, about a Copt who was tortured and martyred by Muslim authorities, does not overflow with anti-Islamic invective.\textsuperscript{11} This text stands in stark contrast to

\textsuperscript{10} In the context of Copto-Arabic hagiographies, this point has been explored in detail with regard to Saint Victor in Saphinaz-Amal Naguib’s original study, “The Martyr as Witness: Coptic and Copto-Arabic Hagiographies as Mediators of Religious Memory,” \textit{Numen} 41 (1994): 223-254.

\textsuperscript{11} This is quite comparable to the findings of Mark Swanson with regard to the martyrdom of a ninth century Arab Christian. Swanson writes that “The emphasis in \textit{The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masîh is not on an explicit anti-Islamic polemic, but on something else.” In the case of the ‘Abd al-Masîh text, the focus was on combating the high rate of Christian conversion to Islam. See Swanson, “The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masîh, Superior of Mount Sinai (Qays al-Ghassānî),” in \textit{Syrian Christians under Islam: The First Thousand Years}, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 123-124. In general, the Arab neo-martyr literature from the early Islamic period does not focus on “evil” Muslim characters but instead on conversion narratives, reflecting the “fluid” line between being a Muslim and Christian during the early Islamic centuries. Scholars like Sidney Griffith and Mark Swanson have extensively studied these neo-martyr narratives and have contextualized their stories in the charged milieu that produced them. On the other hand, the only work that we have about neo-martyrs from the Ottoman period is that of Nomikos Vaporis, whose monograph examines the stories of 171 Orthodox Christian neo-martyrs killed between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries. These stories often highlight the wickedness and immorality of Muslims.
Balkan neo-martyrologies, for instance, where Muslim characters as the “other,” as the perpetrators of “forced conversion” and persecution, clearly dominate the narratives.\(^{12}\)

According to Vaporis:

Most of the Neomartyrs suffered numerous tortures before and in between the three interrogations, which were mandated by Islamic law and imposed by a *kadi* (judge) and other judicial and administrative officials. In most instances, the interrogations were intended to convince the Orthodox Christian to become Muslim or to return to Islam if they had left it.

And:

The vast majority of Neomartyrs, however, found themselves in a position brought on by a variety of circumstances and events where they had to either convert to the Muslim faith or, if they refused, stand as witnesses for their Orthodox Christian beliefs and die as a consequence. In these instances Orthodox Christians were actually being threatened with the loss of life, with no real attempt on the part of the Muslims to convince them of the truth of Islam.\(^{13}\)

However, in the story under study here, as with most other Arab Christian martyrrologies, the diabolical Muslim character is not a main focus of the story. As we shall see, many Muslim characters who are introduced in *M.Şalîb* are not vilified. Some, in fact, act with a great deal of kindness and goodness which the narrator highlights in the text.

The noticeable absence of anti-Islamic invective in a Coptic text also stands in contrast to the sentiment against Coptic Christians in the writings of Muslim chroniclers. Mamluk chroniclers especially loathed those Copts who held high positions in the administrative structure. The antipathy towards Christians who were perceived as “manipulative opportunists” was a regular theme in these writings. The chronicler ‘Abd

\(^{12}\) One such story, of the monk Theophanes from Constantinople, tells that the hero “because he was a child-like person, was easily tricked by a group of Muslims to accept the Muslim faith.” The martyrdom of John the Tailor from Ioannina was brought forth partly “because he was quite handsome and a man with great dignity and fearlessness,” and therefore “some Muslims were envious of him.” Theophanes was martyred in 1559 (Vaporis, *Witnesses for Christ*, p. 76) and John the Tailor in 1526 (Vaporis, p. 64).

\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 3 & p. 9.
al-Raḥīm b. al-Ḥasan al-Umawī al-Qurayshī al-Asnawī, for example, was among the fiercest of these writers. In the late fourteenth century, al-Asnawī described the situation as follows:

The Copts declare that this country still belongs to them, and that the Muslims evicted them from it unlawfully. Then they often steal as much as they can from the state treasury, in the belief that they are not doing wrong. As to the possibility of confiscation and punishment, torture [sic], they hold that the chances of these happening to them are about equal to that of falling sick; that is to say, sickness does sometimes come upon a man, but is not likely to be frequent.14

Similar diatribes were repeated regularly in the works of the most popular writers of the Mamluk period, including al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī. It would be logical to presume that in a communal record of a persecutory act against a Copt, a Coptic writer would be highly biased against Muslims; thus, the viewpoint presented in Ṣalīb’s story is more nuanced than one might predict.

**Storytelling Approaches**

In the six neo-martyr narratives discussed in “Christians, Muslims, and Neo-Martyrs,” Sidney Griffith emphasizes the issue that the historian most often confronts when dealing with neo-martyrological texts: that of their authenticity. Griffith writes:

Inevitably the question of historicity arises in connection with these narratives and it must be addressed on several levels. In the first place, of course, each narrative must be taken individually. But at the outset one can say that for none of them is there any independent confirmation to be had from non-Christian sources, and in particular no Islamic text confirms any one of them.15

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One of the problems facing the researcher, then, is whether the martyrs actually lived and died as described in these texts or whether their stories were exaggerated and semi-fictitious. Generally, according to Griffith, modern scholarship has addressed this issue by accepting the “basic reports” but not the more “personal” subtexts, including the words and emotional states of the martyrs. With this approach, a martyrology such as Şalîb’s -- filled with a number of “personal” subtexts and intended to rouse its audience -- might be dismissed as “wrong” or factually incorrect. If we look beyond such “fictions,” however, these types of stories are valuable because they allow us to recognize the motivations of the tellers, as well as the dreams and desires beneath them.

Moreover, what happens to the issue of authenticity, as referenced by Griffith above, if there is corroboration of a martyr’s story, such as Şalîb’s, in a Muslim source? On the one hand, this may further validate an event described in a Christian source. On the other, the Muslim account may provide an alternative storytelling approach to the same incident. In many ways, this situation can be referred to as one of “dialogic narration,” a term coined by Edward Bruner and Phyllis Gorfain to suggest that there is no one or the story of a particular event, but rather stories exist in an ongoing dialogic process of multiple and historically positioned tellings. In the case of Şalîb’s

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16 Ibid., p. 204.

17 For more on this approach to studying history, see Alessandro Portelli’s work The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

martyrdom, the issue of retelling is quite significant. The manner in which this event is remembered and recorded by the Muslim chronicler Ibn Iyās, as will be noted in the next section, is unlike the way it is retold by a Coptic hagiographer. The use of each text is different but also the value attributed to the event shifts according to the author’s perspective and to his perception of the intended audience.

To understand the level of audience participation in and interaction with a text that is orally performed is a highly speculative endeavor. There are no records of such matters, but only hints and clues suggesting the applied value of a particular text and the context in which it was utilized. It is up to the historian to make his or her judgment in interpreting the contents and function of a specific manuscript. In her evaluation of the usage of historical narratives in the context of Ottoman Egypt, Nelly Hanna argues that we can detect a noticeable interest in the demand for historical works and in historical writing among a wide array of social classes in Egypt during this period. Storytelling existed as a form of entertainment, and this was certainly nothing new in Egypt. As Hanna maintains, some of the most popular repertoire of the public storytellers was retelling exciting heroic deeds of the past. In this context, it appears that the writers and chroniclers of the Ottoman period were aware of the diverse nature of their audiences. The language used often told of the intent of the writers in reaching specific social strata:

19 On this point, Jonathan Berkey’s work on preaching in the medieval Near East work is quite relevant. Berkey writes that “storytelling was a disparate phenomenon, and the Islamic societies of the Near East inherited and adopted a long-standing tradition of storytelling of a purely secular nature. This literature took a variety of different forms: it was recited and recorded in both prose and verse, and it has survived as both epic narratives and more variegated collections of anecdotes.” See Berkey, Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 15.

In a number of histories and chronicles, the language that is used approaches the spoken language. These works make ample use of colloquial, of direct speech, often including grammatical structures which diverge from the “classical” or “correct” forms of the written word. One could explain this trend in more ways than one. For some observers, this use of incorrect language has been understood as a manifestation of the general decline of the Ottoman period. However, one could also explain this phenomena [sic] in relation to prevailing conditions, the demand from audiences for whom historical writing was not primarily an intellectual pursuit but a daily pastime; the influence of story-telling techniques with their abundant use of colloquial and slang, of direct speech, and the lack of concern for grammatical correctness.21

In turn, chroniclers who used language which was “grammatically correct” and which was written in a flowing “narrative” form, free of conversational banter, likely had different audiences in mind.

Similar to the function of some Muslim chronicles, many Arab Christian manuscripts were usable texts; they were texts with specific liturgical functions, intended to be read out loud and to engage audiences with the subject matter. Thus the role of the audience here, as active listeners and “participants” in the retelling of a hagiography, must be underscored. While it is not unusual that details, such as the date of a text or the identity of its author, would be lost, it is possible for the historian to surmise a text’s usage in the literary compendium of a particular community. Not much is known about the history of the text of Șalîb’s martyrdom for instance; however, it is clear from its rich colloquialisms and dramatic descriptions that it was intended for public consumption.22

21 Ibid., p. 245.

22 On the subject of Arab Christian hagiographies, Mark Swanson very astutely writes that “These saints’ lives and martyrdoms were not composed – and then copied, preserved, and elaborated upon – in order to provide later generations with data establishing the historicity of particular individuals or to offer raw material for the social historian’s Cuisinart. They were composed – and copied, preserved, and elaborated upon – by Christians, usually monks, in order to edify other members of the Christian community: their fellow monks, visitors to their monasteries, pastors and their congregations.” See Swanson, “The Martyrdom of ʿAbd al-Masîḥ,” p. 121.
The everyday flavor imparted to this story signifies its practical usage and allows the researcher to appreciate the dynamic value of the text. While *M.Ṣalīb* might be considered a “contaminated” work, with a more nuanced approach, the historian can be equipped to ask questions beyond what is “accurate” or “embellished,” what is “truthful” or “contaminated.”

*I. Ṣalīb’s Martyrdom: The Muslim Account*

This method takes on a new dimension when we consider that, unlike most Arab-Christian martyrologies, the account of Ṣalīb’s martyrdom is supported by a Muslim source, namely Ibn Iyās’ *Badāʾiʿ al-Zuhūr*. For the Muslim chronicler Ibn Iyās, the martyrdom of Ṣalīb was a passing incident, yet one of enough significance to record. The narrative provided by this chronicler is concise, straightforward, and fairly linear. On Monday 20 Ramadan, 918 AH/29 November, 1512 CE, Ibn Iyās refers to a “strange incident” regarding a man named “ʿAbd al-Ṣalīb,” a Christian from the village of Dalja/Dalga in Upper Egypt, which is located southwest of the town of Mallawī and west of the meeting point of Baḥr Yusuf and the Nile.²⁴ It was said, according to this narrator, that a group of people had witnessed this Christian insulting the Prophet with *فاحشة*.

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²³ In storytelling, there are different types of voices. Often, there are “authoritative” or “linear” tellings which are defined by their tendency to fix meanings upon stories, to stabilize and to order the narrations. These voices also tend to be constructive, “straightforward,” and event-based. On the other hand, “contaminated” or “challenging” tellings tend to be deconstructive and seemingly incoherent. Within stories, particularly hagiographic narratives, both voices can exist side by side and are not mutually exclusive. For more on this relationship between “authoritative” and “challenging” tellings, see Dominick LaCapra, “The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian,” in *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 45-69.

“criminal” or “immoral words”) and so they recorded this event, and it was authenticated by the qādī in that region. Subsequently, they brought the Christian before Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī (906-922 AH/1501-1516 CE) in Cairo, and Șalîb again confessed what he had said earlier about the Prophet. The martyr was offered the chance to convert to Islam but refused.

The sultan then ordered the accused sent to the house of the amīr Țūmânbay al-Dawādār (d.1517 CE), who then called upon a judicial council to determine his fate. Șalîb again confessed before the judges of the council and insisted that he would never abandon his Christian faith. The judges ruled that he be executed. So they nailed him to a cross, atop a camel, and then led him through the streets of Cairo until they arrived at al-

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25 Under classical Islamic law, both blasphemy (“sabb al-rasūl”) and apostasy (“sabb al-dīn”) are punishable by death. In providing a “textbook” definition of these terms, Mohammad Hashim Kamali writes, “The hallmark of blasphemy is, of course, a contemptuous and hostile attack on the fundamentals of religion, which offends the sensibilities of its adherents. It is on this basis that blasphemy can be distinguished from apostasy…[B]ut a separate definition is still wanting, especially with reference to non-Muslims who can only commit the one but not the other” (p. 213). Kamali continues by citing “the principal offence of blasphemy in Islam” as the “reviling of God and the Prophet Muḥammad” (p. 215). In his interpretation, Kamali writes that “A non-Muslim would not be committing blasphemy merely by professing a religious doctrine which conflicts with the belief-structure of Islam. The Christian belief, for example, that Jesus is the son of God may be deemed blasphemous by the Muslim faith as it explicitly contradicts the clear text of the Qur’ān wherein God Most High denies having any offspring (CXII:3). But since Christians normally profess this belief, not so as to offend Muslim sensibilities but as an article of their own faith, they are not committing blasphemy” (p. 217). See Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Freedom of Expression in Islam (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997). Of course, it is fair to say that this is an evaluation of blasphemy and of its punishment which does not take into consideration the way in which Islamic law was differently interpreted and applied throughout history.

26 Al-Ashraf Țūmânbay was, on record, the last reigning Mamluk sultan; he was executed by the conquering Sultan Selim I (1512-1520 CE). “Dawādār” is the title given to “the bearer of and keeper of the royal inkwell.” See David Ayalon, “Dawādār,” EtF 2.172. According to Carl Petry, Țūmânbay al-Dawādār was the highly trusted nephew of Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī. Petry writes that “by any standard, Țūmânbay was impressive. Highly skilled in military arts, he cut a dashing figure as an officer, in a way his uncle had not…”[He] exhibited the kind of charisma, the ability to lead men by inspiration.” Petry also mentions that al-Ghawrī “gave his nephew almost free rein to administer his offices as he saw fit. When Țūmânbay’s staff committed serious crimes, the sultan referred their cases to the Sharī’a court, knowing that the oral testimony required to sustain a conviction would never be secured. No one cared to stand forth as a witness against a client of the dawādār, even when he was accused of murder.” See Carl Petry, Twilight of Majesty:
Madrasah al-Ṣāliḥiyah, which was during the Mamluk period, “the supreme judicial tribunal of the state.” There, he was beheaded “below the windows of the school.” His body was burned in a bonfire in the midst of the sūq (market), and when the evening came, the dogs came, ate his bones, and, according to Ibn Iyās, this matter was concluded.

As Michael Winter points out in a recent article, Ibn Iyās’ chronicle Bada’i’ is a singular and “isolated” account of late Mamluk and early Ottoman history, written by someone who was highly invested in the Mamluk regime. The chronicler’s attitudes must be considered when examining his description of Ṣalīb’s martyrdom. Ibn Iyās delivers the facts of the martyrdom and retells the process by which Ṣalīb was judged and

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27 This madrasa was built by the Ayyūbids during their final years of rule in Egypt. The construction began under al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb (639 AH/1241-42 CE) and was completed in 647-648/1249-1251. In Carl Petry’s evaluation, because of its excellent location in the economic heart of Cairo, the salaries for the madrasa professors were the highest in the city. According to al-Maqrīzī, it was one of the wealthiest madrasas during his time. With regard to its role as “supreme judicial tribunal of the state,” Petry writes that “in its portico ḯiwān, the four chief justices heard cases referred to them from the lower courts. Since their decisions could not be questioned, if not dismissed by the sultan alone, this madrasa was the final civilian appellate court of the empire. The grand qāḍīs were, of course, served by a host of notaries, scribes, and jurisconsults. Therefore, al-Ṣāliḥiya was much more than a center of worship and scholarship. As the most prominent seat of civil litigation in Cairo, it was a forum of state politics and intrigue. Sultans monitored its activities to assess political sentiments of the ‘ulama’. No legal student aspiring to a judgeship could hope to locate himself more suitably than here to learn both the law and statecraft at first hand.” See Petry, The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 330-331.


29 Michael Winter, “Attitudes toward the Ottomans,” in Kennedy, ed., The Historiography of Islamic Egypt, p. 198. There are, unfortunately for the historian, no other chronicles dating from this period with which Badā’i’ might be compared. Moreover, the biases of someone who was part of the “awlād al-nās,” (“the sons of the [important] people,” i.e. the Mamluks), according to Winter, must be considered when studying Ibn Iyās’ chronicle. When it was fitting to his views, Ibn Iyās criticized the Mamluk regime; however he would later compare it favorably to the Ottoman rule which came to replace it.
sentenced to death. He includes the story as one of many “events” that took place during the reign of Sultan al-Ghawrī in the year 918 AH/1512 CE. In the scheme of other events, the incident was likely insignificant both for Ibn Iyās as a storyteller and to his relatively well-educated audience, although the fact that the accused was brought before the sultan and offered reprieve may have rendered the story worthy of retelling. By the same token, the chronicler likely referenced this story in order to make a point: to reflect on the justness of a Mamluk regime which he admired and to depict his and the general repugnance towards a Copt who overstepped his boundaries in society. Moreover, there may have been a deliberate effort on Ibn Iyās’ part to portray Tūmānbay as the “just ruler” and as an improvement over al-Ghawrī, most likely as an attempt to foreshadow his importance.30

II. The Martyrdom: The Copto-Arabic Version

In contrast to the very succinct version provided by Ibn Iyās, the Copto-Arabic martyrdom of Ṣalīb is filled with many elaborate details. The difference between the few lines in the Muslim chronicler’s account and the several pages devoted to Ṣalīb in the Coptic version is indicative of Ṣalīb’s meaning for the Coptic community. It was important for the hagiographer to evoke images of heroism and bravery, but also to spiritually uplift his audiences. Although the narrative which I summarize below seems fairly linear, in actuality, it is interspersed with biblical references, personal comments, and words of spiritual encouragement, which branch off from the main narrative.

30 I would like to thank Jane Hathaway for her guidance in developing this particular point.
The narrator begins with the saint’s early life. Šalīb was born to a devout Christian family from Upper Egypt, from the town of Ibshāda in the province of al-Ushmūnayn. The devout parents raised their son with the virtue of purity, the narrator relates. When he was born, they wished to give their son the most prestigious of names, so they chose Šalīb (Cross), the name that represented the sign of “worldly redemption.”

The narrator mentions, interestingly, that both of his parents were modest carpenters, an astonishing detail considering that women likely did not work in this vocation. They raised their son within the customs (adāb) of the church, but they also taught him their skilled trade. One day, his parents decided that their son should be betrothed to a relative, thinking that if he were to marry, it would bring grandchildren who would ultimately assist in the family business. The hagiographer explains that the parents’ seemingly material desire was intended to earn the family more income in order to “feed the poor.” The parents made plans, without their son’s consent, to marry him to a virgin relative. Considering that the martyr had not chosen this marriage, he decided not to “lie with [his wife even for] one day” since his body was pure and without sin. Indeed, his body was being protected, the hagiographer reports, by the Archangel Michael. The saint, in his

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31 Al-Ushmūnayn is a town (and also a province) in Upper Egypt, located on the west bank of the Nile. Under Fatimid rule, according to Ayman Fu’ad Sayyid, it served as an important region between the two provinces of al-Bahmasā and Manfalūt. In the medieval period, it was known as a center of the woolen and carpet industry. Gradually, however, it lost its significance. In 1720, under the rule of Ottoman governor Muḥammad Nishāndji Pasha, the nearby town of Mallawī became the administrative center of the area and eventually in 1826, the province of al-Ushmūnayn ceased to exist in name and became a mere village in the province of Mallawī. See Ayman F. Sayyid, “al-Ushmūnayn,” EI 10.916.

32 M.Šalīb 12r, l.5-6.

33 Ibid., 13r, l.3-4.
defense, was defying his parents because he was heeding the words of the gospel, advising him to be virtuous and chaste, which he had so frequently heard in the church.

Consequently, the narrative continues, Šalīb spent most of his time wandering in the hills and in the wilderness, visiting the numerous monasteries and churches that dotted Upper Egypt, and listening to the “divine word.” These actions so enraged his parents that they imprisoned their son in the house in chains so as to prevent his escape. However, their attempts failed: the chains miraculously broke apart and freed the saint by the “power of Christ.”34 During these hardships, Šalīb appealed to the Virgin Mary, asking her to bestow upon him the crown of martyrdom so that he could join Christ in heaven. During one of his usual wanderings, he came upon some “non-Christians” and, without provocation it seems, he insulted them, uttering something that was “not appropriate to be heard” (‘بشي لا يليق بسماعه’). The offended group was angry and at first captured him, but then decided to release him as a “courtesy to his parents” (‘لولدائه’). However, as they were about to release him, he hurled more insults, and so they brought him to the ruler in charge of al-Sa‘īd. As he stood before the ruler, Šalīb did not deny the charges against him, but again repeated the insults, and as a result, received much abuse for what he had said. Gathering crowds tied him up and began to stone him, according to the text, but the Archangel Michael again protected him.35

The “ruler” then ordered Šalīb jailed. While in prison the saint again manifested his ability to summon the divine: when the Muslim jailer chained him, he witnessed Šalīb’s chains being miraculously broken. One night, as the saint was praying, a “very

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34 Ibid., 13r, l.12-15.
35 Ibid., 14r.
illuminated woman” (the Virgin Mary) appeared to him and told him that he would receive the crown of martyrdom in the name of her son. Watching this scene was the jailer’s wife, who was in awe of what she had seen. She later described the incident to her husband, saying that she saw an illuminated woman “who was speaking to him [the prisoner] in a way that is different from our speech.”36 The jailer said that he believed the prisoner to be some sort of magician because he had witnessed his chains being broken. The husband and wife, out of awe and possibly even fear, offered to help Šalīb escape, but the martyr refused.

The next morning, Šalīb stood before the local qādī, and the qādī ordered that he be sent to Cairo, accompanied by guards. As he was being taken to the ship that would transport him, Šalīb’s parents and brothers came and bade him a tearful farewell. Aboard the ship, absorbed by prayer, Šalīb did not eat or drink. His guard witnessed Šalīb’s conversations with the “illuminated woman.” Upon their arrival in Cairo, the qāʾid (commander) of the guards approached a group of Christian “believers” and asked them to give the martyr some money as he had nothing; the group complied and also offered to feed the saint.

In the next scene, we learn that the guard took the accused to meet the latter’s sister, who lived in Cairo. This scene, which is related at the beginning of this chapter, is filled with emotional and passionate pleas on the part of the sister and a vigorous defense on the part of Šalīb. Despite her intense appeal, the saint was unmoved from his commitment to die on behalf of his religion. After this encounter, the prisoner was taken to “al-ḥākim,” a Mamluk “amīr,” and the written evidence against Šalīb, in the form of

36 Ibid., 15v, l.14.
letters that recorded the vile things that he had said in his hometown, was also presented.  Şalîb was confronted with these accusations and was asked by the amîr about the veracity of the accusations against him ("هل وقع منك هذا الكلام الذي أتى به منك?"). Şalîb was threatened with torture if he did not respond truthfully. At that moment, the Holy Spirit gripped the saint and “he confessed the noble confession,” confirming the veracity of the accusations.

The amîr ordered that Şalîb be taken to the “King of Egypt” (presumably Sultan al-Ghawrî) the next morning. At this point, as in other parts of the text, the hagiographer interjects the martyr’s thoughts, noting his state of mind, his disposition towards martyrdom, and his recollection of scriptural verses which strengthened his resolve to be martyred. According to the narrator, Şalîb was not in awe of the splendor and glory of the king’s court, nor did he fear the king’s soldiers or the torture with which he was threatened. The king asked him to recant what he had said, promising that once he converted to Islam, Şalîb would be forgiven for those “inappropriate” utterances. Yet Şalîb confessed again, confirming the veracity of the charges against him:

Everything that they said and wrote about me, and sent to you, is true. There is not a single word in it that is false. Everything that I uttered was from my heart and from all of my senses. I declare publicly that I am a Christian!38

One would assume that this self-incrimination would send Şalîb directly to his death, and yet extraordinarily, the Sultan asked that the judges be brought to hear these words and then to judge Şalîb according to their law. When judges and witnesses were called forth,

37 In I Timothy, 6:13-14, the phrase “made the noble confession” is used to refer to Jesus’ testimony of faith before Pontius Pilate.

38 M.Şalîb 18r-19v.
again, the saint was asked to confirm or deny the charges and once more he confessed, claiming “Not only was everything that I spoke true, but I would even add more to what I have said.” Consequently, upon seeing with their eyes the face of the accused and hearing his words, the judges condemned Šalīb to death.

The punishment was ordered: a camel was brought and Šalīb was nailed to a wooden plank in the shape of a cross (“ṣalīb”) and then mounted on the camel. They paraded him throughout the streets of Cairo, repeating the words with which he had blasphemed Islam, but the actual words of blasphemy are not repeated in the text by the hagiographer. The saint, according to the narrator, was pleased at this and happy that the hour was near when the promise made to him by the Virgin Mary would be fulfilled. He was then brought before the executioner and a qādī. The qādī asked him if he would recant (note the colloquial words):

‘Ṣalīb, recant your opinion and I will keep you alive [lit. “restrain your bloodshed’] and leave you to go on your own.’ So he increased his outcries with his loudest voice and said ‘I will not die except as a Christian in the name of Christ!’ When the judge heard this noble confession from the martyr, he immediately ordered that his holy head be taken off.

After his death, the Virgin Mary “took his soul,” “wrapped it in sheets of light,” and presented it to her beloved son. Šalīb’s body was burned in the midst of the city, but miraculously, according to the hagiographer, the saint’s body withstood the fire for three
days without damage or theft by “unbelievers.” Finally, a group of “believers” took his body and brought it to the patriarchal headquarters of Patriarch John the 94th (in Ḥārit Zuwayla). From there, some of the saint’s relics were sent to various churches. His relics became a source of numerous miracles and healings, according to the narrator, and Ḥārit Zuwayla would serve as the main shrine for the saint. The martyrdom date for Saint Ṣalīb, on 3 Kiyahk 1229 AM/21 November 1512 CE is a few days earlier than the one recorded by Ibn Iyās (29 November 1512).

Characters and Witnesses

I. Family: “The Ties that Bind and Gag”

From the progression of the text of Ṣalīb’s martyrdom, it appears that one of the factors which may have led Ṣalīb to profess his disdain for the Islamic religion and to insult the Prophet Muhammad was frustration with the life that he was forced to live within his own family and his local community. As depicted in the Coptic account, the martyr was receiving distinctly contradictory messages from his family, on the one hand, and from his church, on the other. While his parents raised him to be a proper Christian and to serve the Lord, they also wished him to marry, procreate, and conform to the life

42 Very little is known about the reign of this patriarch. The most eventful happening of his reign seems to have been the fall of the Mamluk sultanate and, according to Iris Ḥabīb al-Maṣrī, the transfer of many skilled Copts and Egyptians to Istanbul to serve the new sultan. See al-Maṣrī, p. 9.

43 Myriam Wissa writes that “In the year 1303, the [Ḥārit Zuwayla] church became the patriarchal seat that had previously been transferred from Alexandria to the Church of al-Mu’alāqah and then to the Church of Abu Sayfayn in Old Cairo. It remained in Harit Zuwaylah for almost three centuries amid the greater security of a Coptic community. The first pope to reside in Harit Zuwaylah was John VIII (1300-1320), the eightieth patriarch; the last was the 102nd patriarch, Matthew IV (1660-1675). Subsequent popes moved to the neighboring Harit al-Rum.” Myriam Wissa, “Harit Zuwaylah,” Coptic Encyclopedia 4.1207-1209.
expected of him. For Ṣalīb, these were seen as conflicting expectations, as he had understood serving the Lord to entail a life of chastity and sexual purity.

Thus when it came to the idea of marriage and procreation, Ṣalīb’s parents encountered opposition from their son, who cared much less for familial and societal desires than for his religious beliefs. In a plausible scenario for the period under study, the parents forged an agreement for their son’s marriage without his consent. Utterly frustrated at having to abandon a hermitical (solitary) lifestyle and faced with the horror of losing his chastity by “touching his wife,” Ṣalīb had no apparent option but to escape his family. He frequently ran away and sought spiritual comfort in the hills and in the remote monasteries that dotted his homeland. It is interesting that the narrator does not comment on the treatment with which the parents responded to his acts of rebellion. They did, after all, chain their son in order to prevent him from evading his duties and obligations as a husband, duties that he presumably owed to them and to his wife. Ṣalīb’s parents were especially concerned with a practical matter: they had expected grandchildren (laborers) to help boost their family business of carpentry, and their son’s…

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44 A very contemporary vision of the role of family and the Coptic Church in the shaping of a “Copt” provides an interesting parallel here to the vision of parenthood as portrayed in this early modern martyrology. Maurice As’ad writes that today, “The life of the Coptic home offers the child an atmosphere that has been very effective in shaping his identity as a Copt. The naming of the child after biblical figures and the saints itself imprints a sign on the child's personality as a Christian. Following the apostolic tradition, the Coptic church has practiced infant baptism through the centuries. The child becomes a member of the church through baptism, and recognizes his spiritual distinction from the non-Christians….The Coptic family has been traditionally the center of religious life in collaboration with the church. Coptic parents nurture their children in Christian faith and life and nourish them in the love of God. Acquaintance with the Scriptures and sacred writings has been stressed because they are useful for teaching virtue. Coptic parents offer to their children a good example of Christian life in their own lives….Religious practices in the Coptic home have tied the children to the tradition of the Coptic church. In fasting, for instance, the child learns self-control and sacrifice; in addition, it is an opportunity for the Coptic family to share with the rest of the Coptic community a common religious tradition. Through the centuries, the means of recreation for the Coptic home were also religious. The occasions of the celebration of the feasts of the saints served as reminders to the Copts of the example of Christian life given by the saint whose feast
behavior was an obstacle to that aim. And while it is unclear from the text, it is likely that Ṣalīb’s eccentric behavior was socially frowned upon and that his parents were attempting to salvage their reputation within the community by exercising control over him.

In this context, one of the interesting motifs that arise in *M.Ṣalīb* is the way in which familial decisions are (nonchalantly) portrayed as pronouncements made by both parents, by the mother and the father, who act as a team. The narrator of this martyrology works to preserve the integrity and the authority of mother and father, as co-decision makers within the family unit. It was the decision of both parents to name their son “Ṣalīb,” to raise him in proper Christian traditions, and to insist, through punishment, that he conform to his expected societal role of being a husband and father. The participation of mother and father, side by side, in these family decisions is a possible indication of an existing viewpoint, at least within the Coptic community, on the role of decision-making within the family unit: for parents to disagree with one another is, in essence, constructed as improper conduct for true Christian believers.

Moreover, while the hagiographer does not overtly criticize the parents’ actions towards Ṣalīb, knowing that his audience would likely agree with the parents’ judgment, he does replace Ṣalīb’s earthly parents with a “heavenly family.” The martyr’s chastity was protected from his wife’s sexual advances by the Archangel Michael, depicted here as an overseer or even as a brother. The saint’s new and more powerful mother was the Virgin Mary, and the overarching patriarchal figure was God himself, whom the saint was celebrated and at the same time as an opportunity for recreation and meeting friends and relatives.” See As’ad, “Family Life, Coptic,” *Coptic Encyclopedia* 4.1086-1089.
longed to meet and join. Ultimately, as depicted in the narrative, it is this heavenly family that guides and oversees Șalîb’s actions. We are reminded of this fact in the abovementioned scene between Șalîb and his sister, in which her pleas for his wellbeing are more or less ignored because, in conformity with numerous hagiographic texts, an earthly family is irrelevant once a martyr has chosen the path of Christ.

A remarkable feature of this hagiography is its depiction of a Copt, who presumably lived in difficult times and under the rule of an “oppressive” Islamic state, and yet who experienced no confrontation with a Muslim individual or a government official prior to his arrest. What is absent rather than what is present in this text is of significance; indeed, the absence of direct, antagonistic encounters with Muslims is generally typical of an Arabic neo-martyr genre, as opposed to its Balkan counterpart, in which Muslims seek out Christians to victimize. Much like Peter of Capitolias, an Arab neo-martyr killed under the Umayyad Caliph Walîd (705-715 CE), Șalîb sought his own martyrdom by provoking Muslim passersby rather than waiting for death to knock on his door. Unlike Peter, however, who was already living an ascetic life freely and with no obstacles from his family (his wife and daughters were living in a convent), Șalîb was not a free man.

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45 Here, I follow the lead of Mark Swanson in his own study of an Arab Christian martyrlogical text. Swanson invites us to examine that which is “missing” from a text. See Swanson, “The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masîḥ,” p. 122.

46 Vaporis, Witnesses for Christ, pp. 10-11, lists those martyrs who were victimized in this manner.

While the narrator of Şalîb’s hagiography is successful in highlighting the hero’s courage in the face of inevitable Muslim harassment, a feat that likely roused his audiences, the subtext regarding Şalîb’s family emerges as equally noteworthy. It appears, from all angles, that the martyr’s utter frustration with his parents and with the expected societal role of being a “family man,” in addition to his commitment to Christ, are what led him to “seek” his own death. Şalîb could not fathom, in any way, that he would abandon devotion to his heavenly family for a mortal existence defined by the boundaries of societal demands. On multiple levels, this subtext complicates the assumption that a martyrological text written within a period of relative oppression would be inclined to depict all Christians as “good” and all Muslims as “evil.” As will be discussed in the following section, this was far from the case. Ultimately, it is within a fairly credible scenario of a protagonist’s Christian family affecting his decision to seek martyrdom that we find a subplot which is atypical of the neo-martyrological genre.

II. Muslim or Christian? Fluid Identities

According to Mark Swanson, the lines which divide Christians and the “other” are often quite clear within the Arab Christian martyrological literature. In his discussion of a ninth-century Arab Christian martyr named ‘Abd al-Masîh, Swanson writes:

Plainly, the account of ‘Abd al-Masîh’s martyrdom intends to strengthen the community of its Christian readers and hearers by drawing a clear line of demarcation between it and the community of Muslims; likewise, it encourages those readers to persevere unmoved on the Christian side of that line, come what may.48

In that sense, one of the more remarkable elements of Ṣalīb’s hagiography is the lack of directly stated moral judgment placed upon several characters in the text. As the narrative progresses, many individuals are passively introduced without overt reference to their religious affiliation and without an authorial bias towards their actions. Audiences are left to decide how to react to these individuals as they are encountered within the story. If a character is Muslim or even if he or she is a Muslim representative of the government, he or she is not necessarily portrayed in a negative light. The function of some of these ambiguous characters, as discussed above, is to serve as witnesses (whether literally or metaphorically) to the life, death, and mission of this saint and to the supernatural powers which back him.

The Muslim passersby at Ṣalīb’s hometown, in front of whom Ṣalīb pronounces his initial defamation of Islam, are the first group of witnesses. These individuals are referred to as “a group of non-Christians” who were passing through the town either on a military campaign or a mission (“حملهٔ”). Their behavior is perplexing. Although initially, they capture the martyr because they are offended by his insults, they immediately release him out of “courtesy to his parents.” However, as Ṣalīb hurrs more insults at them, they become possessed with a “satanic jealousy” and decide to take Ṣalīb to the local ruler. Although the phrase “satanic jealousy” implies malicious intent, it seems that for a time these observers are willing to give Ṣalīb the benefit of the doubt. But as he launches his reported anti-Islamic invective, they are forced to take him to local authorities. Indeed, these witnesses of what is clearly a crime under Islamic law act quite reasonably by not taking matters into their own hands and attacking Ṣalīb for the offense that he had
committed. It is only when Şalîb is brought before the ruler and reiterates these insults in front of numerous other witnesses that he is physically attacked by surrounding mobs.

Shortly thereafter, we are introduced to the jailer and his wife, who are charged with guarding Şalîb in prison; they are, in fact, the second married couple encountered in the text. We assume that this couple is Muslim, although no mention of their religion is made. The main literary function of this couple is to observe the miraculous powers working through this seemingly ordinary man. Both the jailer and his wife observe different facets of Şalîb’s supernatural force. The jailer chains Şalîb, only to discover, repeatedly, his chains broken and “the martyr walking from here to there” (‘يَمْشِي وَالْشَهِيد يَمَشَي’). The idea that this martyr could not be tied down by earthly shackles is reintroduced in prison, much as it was first introduced when the martyr was chained by his parents. As for the jailer’s wife, out of curiosity, she snuck a peek at the prisoner during the night and observed him praying to an “illuminated woman” (the Virgin Mary). Although it is stated that the jailer’s wife had no comprehension of the dialogue between the martyr and the woman, she was deeply moved by this vision.

From these details, one can speculate that it was significant for the narrator to depict the couple’s two separate experiences of witnessing Şalîb’s powers and faith. Each of the witnesses was privy to different aspects of the martyr’s supernatural abilities, and thus the dialogue which ensued between wife and husband following these revelations is unusually dramatic. As the couple excitedly share their encounters, in a tone of awe and amazement, the husband concludes that their prisoner is a “magician.” Consequently, and possibly out of fear of the “magician,” the jailer and his wife take a radical decision. They decide not only to offer their prisoner his freedom, but they also express their own
intentions of escaping. This can be viewed as a reinforcement of the themes of freedom and imprisonment which permeate the text. Şalîb, who had earlier faced imprisonment (both literally and metaphorically), rejects this offer, for he is seeking spiritual freedom, the freedom that would reunite him with his heavenly family. However, the jailer and his wife are seeking an earthly freedom. Trapped by their societal roles, possibly facing a powerful sorcerer, and perhaps feeling confined by their own religious values, the couple may, as the story subtly implies, have been tempted to escape to Christianity. They had been quite moved, according to the text, by the miracles they witnessed, and they were persuaded by the divine power backing their prisoner. While the words “Muslim” and “Christian” are never used in this subplot, the depiction of these witnesses’ reaction reveals the narrator’s conviction that, particularly in face of the (Christian) paranormal, Muslims can act with kindness and compassion, and that they are ultimately “redeemable.”

This situation is repeated when the officer in charge of Şalîb on the boat trip from Upper Egypt to Cairo witnesses apparitions and conversations among the martyr, the Virgin Mary, and the Archangel Michael. The narrator implies that perhaps it is this experience which moves the Muslim officer to ask a group of “believers” to aid Şalîb upon their arrival in Cairo.49 The officer not only approaches these Christians but also “presents a case” to them on behalf of Şalîb, reporting the prisoner’s lack of financial means and support. Indirectly, the kindness of this guard is juxtaposed with the kindness of the Christians, who agree to help Şalîb. The narrator describes these “believers” as joyous in receiving Şalîb and kind in their generosity towards him; they are lengthily

49 M.Şalîb 16v.
praised for their charity. Subsequently, in another immediate act of compassion, the guard takes Ṣalīb to see his sister and to bid her farewell. It is only after these episodes are concluded that the guard finally brings Ṣalīb to face his judges.

Indirectly, the actions of “believers” and “non-believers” in these passages are presented with relative impartiality and are weighed against one another with a balanced sentiment. No hostile words are used to describe these characters: the passersby, the jailer, his wife, or the officer. Their behavior, whether motivated by personal kindness or by the supernatural revelations streaming through the martyr Ṣalīb, can be considered highly significant in a narrative in which the protagonist is ultimately condemned to death by Muslim state officials. As will be evident in the next section, there is an almost intentional separation in the narrator’s account of those who make the judgment of death and who incite violence against the martyr from those ordinary individuals who carry out their duties, as jailers, officers, or even whistleblowers -- in the most compassionate way possible.

III. Judges and Kings: A Coptic Perspective on Muslim Justice

In the Ṣalīb hagiography, the lines of demarcation between Muslims and Christians are clearer when the narrator introduces characters who are part of the Mamluk judicial system. Moreover, almost to the letter, the description of Ṣalīb’s treatment within the Mamluk legal structure is identical in Ibn Iyās’ account and in M.Ṣalīb, perhaps indicating evenness in the reporting of events by both sides. After the initial offense was committed, Ṣalīb was taken to either a ruler (M.Ṣalīb) or a judge (Ibn Iyās’ version) in his local district. There, he was confronted with his crime and immediately confessed;
subsequently, he was sent to Cairo for further hearings. In Cairo, he first faced a ḥākim (ruler or judge), as he is known in the Coptic text (amīr Ṭūmānbey al-Dawādār in Ibn Iyās’ account), who then ordered that he be taken to the Sultan, who after interrogating the accused, ordered Ṣalīb sent back to the amīr. At the residence of the latter, a meeting of judges was convened to determine Ṣalīb’s fate.50 The judges concurred that he should be executed, and the execution is recounted in similar fashion by both M.Ṣalīb and Ibn Iyās. It is more than possible that the sequence of judicial steps accurately reflects how a criminal, accused of blaspheming Islam, was treated in this historical context.

Interestingly and in direct contrast to contemporaneous hagiographies from the Balkans, the presumption in the Ṣalīb hagiography (as supported by Ibn Iyas’ account) is that the accused actually committed the crime, without any sabotage by his accusers. In Balkan neo-martyr narratives, some martyrs are falsely accused of insulting Islam or of blaspheming the Prophet Muhammad, or are tricked into publicly professing their Christian faith. Few Balkan neo-martyrs, in comparison to Ṣalīb and other Arab Christian

50 An interesting comparison could be made here with the trials of Sabbatai Tzevi and his subsequent conversion to Islam, as recently elucidated by Marc Baer in his dissertation, “Honored by the Glory of Islam: The Ottoman State, Non-Muslims, and Conversion to Islam in Late Seventeenth-Century Istanbul and Rumelia,” vol. II, Ph.D. dissertation, the University of Chicago, 2001. The context for the interrogation of Sabbatai Tzevi is quite similar to the narrative regarding the martyr Ṣalīb. Baer cites an Ottoman historian, Râṣid Mehmed Efendi, who related the Sabbatean incident as follows: “[A rabbi from Izmir, because of the disorder he had caused, was banished and exiled.] Since even there he spread disorder among the Jews, he was made to appear at the imperial stirrup [before the sultan] in Edirne....The aforementioned Jew was brought forth while the şeyhülislâm, Vâni Efendi, and the kaymakam paşa were in the imperial presence. When he was interrogated about that which had occurred, he denied the nonsense attributed to him, which had earned him fame. Because he knew that his execution was certain, he showed an inclination to become Muslim.” See Baer, p. 299. Baer also writes, p. 300, that the offer of conversion which was made to Sabbatai Tzevi in order to spare his life “was meant to illustrate God’s forgiveness and generosity manifested by his agent on earth, the sultan. Jews thought it miraculous that Sabbatai Tzevi was not executed.”
martyrs,\textsuperscript{51} actively sought their deaths nor did they dream of joining their heavenly families. We might call them “coincidental martyrs”: martyrs who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, but whose bravery is nevertheless applauded.\textsuperscript{52}

Despite this discrepancy, the neo-martyrdom genre as a whole not only embellishes the bravery of its heroes but also insists on noting the judicial processes used to condemn these individuals to death. Neo-martyrs, including Şalīb, gain more credibility and respect when they must defend themselves multiple times in front of numerous Muslim judges and rulers. In a manner reminiscent of early Roman and Byzantine martyrologies, these narratives illustrate the tenacity with which true Christians hold to their faith in the face of persecution. On the one hand, the exchange between the accusers and the accused in the Şalīb hagiography is structured in a way that is reminiscent of the biblical trials of Jesus. In a highly stylized manner, the martyr Şalīb relives Christ’s life. He is named “Cross”; he is nailed to a cross; he is judged just as Christ was. On the other hand, the perception of the Muslim judicial system is relevant in the way that it lends authority to the story. For instance, the narrator of Şalīb’s story keeps sight of the fact that his audiences are aware of an Egyptian judicial system which includes a “sultan” or a “king” and sharī’a judges. Ultimately, biblical and

\textsuperscript{51} Mark Swanson’s study of the martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masīḥ highlights how this martyr also sought his own martyrdom. However he failed on his initial attempt and received his martyrdom only years later in different circumstances. Swanson explains this “failure to seek martyrdom” as follows: “Like a number of others whose stories were told and whose feast days were celebrated ‘Abd al-Masīḥ sought martyrdom on his own account. As events made plain, however, his personal quest for martyrdom did not conform to the will of God. Years later, of course, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ did receive the crown of martyrdom. This time, however, he had not himself reached for it.” See Swanson, “The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masīḥ,” p. 127.

\textsuperscript{52} These martyrs, as cited by Vaporis, \textit{Witness for Christ}, include Malachios of Rhodes (1500 CE), p. 45, Kyrillos the Tanner of Pelagonia (1566), p. 79, and Damianos the Monk of Myrichovo (1568 CE), p. 81.
contemporaneous images are both recalled in the process of recreating the story of this martyr.

Here, we cannot neglect the fact that at the core of many Christian hagiographic texts is the desire to present the martyr or saint as one who strives to mimic the life of Christ (*Imitatio Christi*). The New Testament, upon which many hagiographies are modeled, is rich in imagery of the judicial trials of Jesus prior to his crucifixion. The Gospel according to Matthew, for example, furnishes a poignant account of the first altercation between Jesus and Caiaphas the Jewish High Priest, retold within the “question-answer” format which later became familiar in the hagiographic genre. The Coptic perception of a similar verbal exchange uncovers resemblance to and divergence from the trials of Jesus. In both narratives, witnesses are brought forth with evidence and the accused is asked to respond to the charges. However, while the biblical narrative emphasizes Jesus’ innocence in the face of his false accusers, the narrator of Ṣalīb’s hagiography, as mentioned above, never casts doubt on Ṣalīb’s guilt. His crime, of defaming Islam and publicly stating his Christianity, is what the narrator considers as showcase-worthy for his audiences:

And they brought [Ṣalīb] to one of the rulers in the land of Egypt and they stood him in front of the ruler and brought to him [the ruler] the books and letters which

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53 *Gospel of Matthew*, 25:57-66: "Jesus was led off under arrest to the house of Caiaphas the High Priest, where the lawyers and elders were assembled. Peter followed him at a distance till he came to the High Priest's courtyard, and going in he sat down there among the attendants, meaning to see the end of it all. The chief priests and the whole Council tried to find some allegation against Jesus on which a death-sentence could be based; but they failed to find one, though many came forward with false evidence. Finally two men alleged that he had said, 'I can pull down the temple of God, and rebuild it in three days,' At this the High Priest rose and said to him, 'Have you no answer to the charge that these witnesses bring against you?' But Jesus kept silence. The High Priest then said, 'By the living God I charge you to tell us: Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?' Jesus replied, 'The words are yours. But I tell you this: from now on, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven.' At these words the High Priest tore his robes and exclaimed, 'Blasphemy! Need we call further witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What is your opinion?' 'He is guilty,' they answered; 'he should die.'"

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they had written regarding what the pure one had spoken in the lands of al-Sa‘īd and he asked him saying, “Oh Christian one, did you truly speak those words that they have alleged against you or not? Tell me the truth or else I will bring upon you the harshest of tortures.” Upon hearing these words, the martyr derived strength from the Holy Spirit and made the noble confession, saying courageously and with little fear of the torture with which they had threatened him, “Everything they have spoken about me regarding the religion of Christ is true, for there is no God in heaven or on earth, except Jesus Christ.”

Beyond depicting the martyr’s outward bravery, the narrator provides a glimpse of Šalîb’s internal strife to underline his valor. A picture is painted of a fragile person who, at the prospect of death, is in desperate need of self-assurance and who, in the face of “evildoers,” recalls biblical words of encouragement, words that he had perhaps heard in church and which comfort him and instruct him to be fearless. The narrator elucidates Šalîb’s thoughts and concludes that in due course, those kings and military leaders with earthly powers, those who have the authority to kill the body and to destroy the flesh, will ultimately receive their punishment in the fires of hell.

The narrative continues with full force. The bravery of the martyr Šalîb is again exhibited when he faces the sultan, in a conversation very similar to the one above:

And when they brought him to stand before the king and all of the soldiers, armies, lords of nations, and rulers, he was not afraid of the majesty of the king nor was his heart distressed by the soldiers who surrounded him, nor from the torture that he was promised. For he was brave in his answer to the king and his armies, when the king asked him, “Oh Christian one, heed me and leave the religion of your fathers and I will forgive what they have said about you in the

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54 M.Šalîb, 17r, l.2-12.

55 M.Šalîb, 18v, l.3.
testimony which those who accompanied you from the countryside brought with them and in which there are the inappropriate words which came out of your mouth.” So the martyr took courage in the power of Christ, glory be upon him, and he said, “Oh king, everything that they said and wrote about me, and sent to you is true. Not a word of it is a lie, but all of it I have said with my heart and all of my senses. I am a publicly a Christian! And when he said these words before the king and the officials [deputies of the king], the king ordered that they send him to the judges so that they could hear his words.56

It is uncertain whether this type of discussion could actually have taken place or whether the words of a modest carpenter would have been so blatant in the face of a Mamluk sultan. In all cases, it is not the accuracy of the encounter but its dramatic retelling which was of importance to the audience of this hagiography. The tale is conveyed in a manner consistent with the theatrical encounters related in the Bible and in other hagiographic narratives.

Following this exchange, as described above, the sultan ordered Şalîb sent to the judges so that they could hear his testimony and make a judgment regarding his case, according to sharî’ā law. He was taken to the house of the first amir with whom he had met; there, the “sharî’ā judges,” as well as other witnesses, were convened to hear his case.57 In this scene, by committing Şalîb to such a confession, the biographer foretells

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56 M.Şalîb, 18r.

57 Here is the excerpt of their dialogue from M.Şalîb, 19v, l.7-14.

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the martyrdom of the saint in the most conclusive way, thereby fulfilling the expectations of his audiences. In many regards, these “contests” between the saint in one corner and the Islamic judicial system in another, retold in highly colloquial language, are more spectacular than the acts of torture and death which are subsequently described.

The mystery lingers, however, of the exact nature of Ṣalīb’s offense. What were the “criminal words” which he spoke against the Prophet Muhammad, according to Ibn Iyās, or the “inappropriate words” described by his hagiographer? Again, in contrast to the Balkan neo-martyr narratives, which reproduce anti-Islamic invective in detail and with pride, this hagiography is silent. Compare, for instance, the case of a Bulgarian monk who, in the face of Muslim accusations of blaspheming Islam, replied:

Your false prophet Muhammad is a teacher of perdition, a friend of the devil, and an apostate of God. His teaching is satanic and you unprofitable servants have believed in him and are destined for hell unless you believe in Christ the true God.58

Clearly, the written neo-martyr tradition in the Balkans was more daring, perhaps reflecting the fact that the Balkan region was predominantly Christian whereas in Egypt, Coptic Christians were only one of several minority populations in the period under study. In addition, the confrontation in the Balkan region between what is customarily called Orthodox Christianity (Chalcedonian) and Islam was at times highly charged. Whereas the Copts had not ruled Egypt in recent memory and their early experience with

And the judges asked him about the inappropriate things which he had said, and he confessed and did not recant in front of the public [or crowds] saying, “You have not asked me about the truthful words which I have said and there is no need for you to ask, for all what they said about me and even more [is true]. I am not afraid nor should he who speaks the truth be afraid. A person spoke the truth to you and as the proverbs say, he who speaks the truth, they shall bring upon him judgment.” When they heard this with their own ears and saw his face with their own eyes, they sentenced him with the shedding of his blood [execution].

Muslim rulers, as described in Chapter Two, was relatively favorable, this was not the case in the Balkans. Moreover, there may have been some fear on the part of the hagiographer of transcribing Ṣalīb’s exact crime, knowing that the text was going to be vocalized in church.⁵⁹ Thus, whereas the nature of the crime is important for Balkan neo-martyrologies, in Ṣalīb’s hagiography the criminal act itself is irrelevant. While elaborate accounts of the dialogues between the accused and his Islamic judges regarding the nature of his crime are provided, the goal of the hagiographer was neither to praise Ṣalīb’s crime nor to encourage his audience to commit illegal acts. The hagiographer provides a detailed depiction of the Islamic judicial hierarchy in order to recapture the images of one man’s bravery and heroism in the face of a horde of accusers. On many levels, the Muslim prosecutorial approach towards Christians is criticized, but in other ways, the judicial system functions as expected: by punishing the criminal. This is again consistent with the concept of *Imitatio Christi*. Through his punishment, the criminal fulfills his ultimate ambition. In the case of Ṣalīb, this dream is not of delivering salvation but of personal martyrdom and rejoining Christ.

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⁵⁹ This seems to also have been the case with earlier Coptic and Copto-Arabic texts. The research of Jason Zaborowski on the Coptic neo-martyr John of Phanijōit confirms the point that certain texts served as “hidden texts,” available only to the Coptic community and not to the Muslim community at large. See Jason R. Zaborowski, “The Coptic Neo-Martyr John of Phanijōit: The Re-Conversion of an Apostate Christian ‘Deceived by Lust of a Saracen Woman’ (c. 1210),” paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Toronto, November 24, 2002. This paper is a condensed version of a chapter in Zaborowski’s working dissertation, titled “The Neo-Martyr John of Phanijoiit: A Late Coptic Text Describing a Public Conversion from Islam to Christianity,” Ph.D. Dissertation (in progress), Catholic University of America.
To a large extent, modern-day historians portray the Mamluk era as harsh and brutal for many Egyptians, and this seems to be particularly the case for Copts. A number of historians have referred to the Mamluk sultanate and specifically to the Baḥri Mamluk era (1260-1382 CE) as a blow to the Coptic population. Some of these references, like Moshe Perlmann’s, are quite dated. Perlmann summarizes the Mamluk period as what “contributed decisively to the crushing of the Copt element in Egypt.” In a more contemporary evaluation, Donald Richards writes the following:

[From the end of the thirteenth century,] the non-Muslim population of Egypt was faced with increased violence and oppression in their relations with the Muslims. The pressure to convert was great, both on individuals and at times on communities at large, because of the periods of mob violence, the damage to property and loss of life, and the increased financial exactions and social disabilities. Most of this pressure fell on the Copts simply because they were numerically more significant [than other minority populations]. Large-scale conversions to Islam began about the middle of the fourteenth century. The Jews, however, were certainly not immune from social restrictions and attacks on persons and property.62

It is no surprise, then, that Theodore Hall Partrick, in his recent history of the Coptic Church, titles a chapter on this period “Surviving Mamluk Rule,” and in fact, it was a game of survival, considering that the conversion of numerous Copts by the mid-

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fourteenth century, as Donald Little confirms, reduced this Christian group to a small minority. In Terry Wilfong’s evaluation, “the Mamluk period saw perhaps the most extensive conversions of Christians; increased tension between Christians and Muslims seems to have been a major factor in the marked increase in conversions during this period.”

Among the Copts who worked in governmental service, whether as scribes or as financial agents, conversion was especially frequent and often occurred because of the threat of violence and restrictions on hiring non-Muslims. The stories of these converts are scarcely recorded in Coptic annals, as they were understandably viewed with suspicion; however, as Little points out, there is considerable mention of converts within Muslim chronicles of the period. Historians such as al-Nuwayrī (d. 732 AH/1331-32 CE), al-Safadī (d. 764 AH/1363 CE), and Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 874 AH/1469-70 CE) were especially critical of those converts, usually referred to as masālima, which connotes “new Muslims” or “pseudo-Muslims,” and viewed them with skepticism, mistrust, and

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general disdain. In his Sulûk, for example, al-Maqrîzî retells a chilling tale about a Coptic-Muslim kâtib (scribe) who, in the year 801 AH/1399 CE, was dragged to the gate of the Cairo citadel by other Coptic-Muslims because he had renounced the Islamic religion. He was then asked to renounce Christianity, but he persisted in his position “without giving a reason” and was subsequently beheaded for his apostasy. It appears that most Muslim chroniclers regarded Coptic-Muslims as opportunists and a disgrace to the religion. Some of the new converts, according to Donald Little’s research, continued to be threatened with job insecurity or even death. In many ways, the martyrdom of Şâlîb stands as an implicit critique of these Copts who were unable to persist in their faith. Instead of overtly viewing them as traitors, however, the Christian account frowns upon these converts’ inability to act as witnesses for Christ, despite trial, tribulation, or even the threat of death.

In general, like the account relayed by al-Maqrîzî, the neo-martyrdom literature is filled with stories of Christians who, after they converted to Islam, apostatized and returned to their original faith, subsequently being punished for their crimes. According to Sidney Griffith, one of the most common characteristics of these stories, particularly in the early Islamic centuries, was that the heroes usually did not actively seek their own martyrdoms. They are depicted as “champions of their faith because they would not back

66 Little, “Coptic Converts of Islam,” p. 266.
Griffith believes that these narratives were intended to taunt those born-Christians who were converting to Islam in record numbers. Although free of the conversion-apostasy element, Ṣalīb’s martyrdom likewise acts as a testament to the resilience of the Coptic faith in the face of perceived Muslim oppression. However, unlike earlier neo-martyrologies, Ṣalīb’s “seeking martyrdom” was portrayed as an act of heroism and courage, but also as a general statement of antipathy towards any societal oppression. The combined motifs of bravery, showmanship, and social defiance make Ṣalīb a timely hero in a period, particularly for Copts, of social malaise and discontent.

Ṣalīb’s actions can be further appreciated in the context of the early sixteenth century, when the idea of any Copt acting “heroic” in defense of his or her religion within the public space of Egyptian life was virtually unthinkable. In 1320, following the mob burning of Coptic churches all over Cairo, Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt, a group of Coptic monks decided to avenge these acts by plotting the burning of Cairo. A number of Cairene districts were burned in the catastrophe which followed, and the long-term consequences for Copts were grave. By the mid-fifteenth century, Muslim chronicles reported that most churches in Egypt had been defiled or destroyed. It is more than likely that by the last years of the Mamluk sultanate, not only had the number of Copts dwindled; the morale of the community had plummeted. As Terry Wilfong writes:

The situation of the Christian population of Egypt on the eve of the Ottoman conquest was precarious. Decidedly in the minority, their numbers were perhaps

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70 Griffith, “Christians, Muslims, and Neo-Martyrs,” p. 203. This appears also to be the case for most Balkan neo-martyrologies.

the lowest they had ever been, with a large percentage of the remaining Egyptian Christians living in monastic communities. The decline in the population level of Christians in Egypt posed unique challenges to those who still identified with the religion. In particular, the Christian communities of Egypt had to balance the preservation of their cultural and religious traditions with the need to adapt to changing and often adverse political circumstances.72

In this atmosphere, the story of Saint Ṣalīb promoted the act of witnessing for Christ with a fresh vigor and sense of drama that only a recently martyred saint could stimulate. The story appealed to the average Copt on a mundane level. The narrative is filled with references to local sites and scenes, the most notable being al-Madrasa al-Ṣāliḥiya, which was close to Bāb Zuwayla73 and the commercial center of Cairo. The original audience for this martyrology may have actually acted as eyewitnesses to Ṣalīb’s death or at least heard about the event from other witnesses. When we add to that a text which is rich in colloquialisms and in social interaction, the appeal of this story must have been indeed extraordinary.

For non-Muslims living in Egypt during the last days of the Mamluk sultanate, the Ottoman conquest may have been a welcome change.74 While it is commonly

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72 Wilfong, “The Non-Muslim Communities,” p. 197.

73 This is one of the most infamous gates to the city of Cairo. It is located in the southern wall of Fātimid Cairo. Among the incidents for which it is known is the execution of Egypt’s last Mamluk Sultan Ṭūmānbāy (the abovementioned al-Dawādār), who was hung at the gate by orders of the conquering Ottoman Sultan Selim I.

74 Michael Winter argues that it was especially welcomed by Egypt’s Jewish communities. “Generally speaking, the Ottoman conquest improved the fortunes for the Jewish community. Mamluk rule had been tyrannical, exploitative and arbitrary and tended to oppress the religious minorities. Financial extortion, destruction of the dhimmis’ houses of worship and other forms of persecution were quite frequent. Such a regime which was, in addition, spiritually guided by orthodox Islam…was onerous for religious minorities. The economic distress and sense of military insecurity during the Sultanate’s final decades also created a feeling of insecurity among the dhimmis.” Michael Winter, *Egyptian society under Ottoman rule, 1517-1798* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 199-200.

Mark Cohen’s description of an incident in 1524 CE counters some of Winter’s comments. Cohen writes that “beginning in the sixteenth century, at the same time that Sephardim expelled from Christian Spain
acknowledged that Copts experienced severe hardship during Mamluk rule, as described above by Donald Richards, it is less clear whether Copts viewed the Ottoman conquest with apathy or enthusiasm. In one evaluation of the conquest and of Ottoman rule, Aziz Atiya writes:

With the lapse of Mamluk rule in Egypt and the conquest of the country by the Turks under Sultan Selim I in 1517, the Copts entered a new chapter in their history of painful survival. Their community had been depleted by recurrent persecutions, during which a considerable number perished. Many others converted to Islam because of great pressure from the authorities and the desire to continue earning a respectable livelihood. Unquestionably, this is a popular, modern-day assessment of Coptic life under Islamic rule. In reality, though, while the text of Ṣalīb’s martyrdom reflects wariness of certain societal constraints, it says little about the legal and societal treatment of Copts during the late Mamluk and early Ottoman periods. The martyrdom does, however, stand as a tribute to an era during which some of the last disputes between Christianity and Islam were taking place in the public sphere of Egyptian society. This was a story intended to be retold and remembered lest it be repeated in the future. Moreover, the hagiography paints a picture of the complex social relationships, particularly between Muslims and non-Muslims, which existed in Egypt during the early sixteenth century and, perhaps more

began to compose their chronicles of persecution, do we encounter Jewish literary texts from the Muslim world memorializing suffering and persecution at the hands of gentiles. From the year 1524 in Egypt comes a megilla [an Egyptian scroll], in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic versions, echoing the Book of Esther and sprinkled with verses from it. The scroll describes the deliverance of the Jews of Cairo from a local persecutor, Aḥmad Pasha, the newly appointed governor of Egypt who rebelled against Ottoman overlordship. The episode, which occurred two weeks after the holiday of Purim, was recorded in some of the Hebrew chronicles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries….Memorialized in the holiday cycle and liturgy of the Jews of Cairo as an ‘Egyptian Purim,’ it was observed as recently as the early 1950s.” See Cohen, Under Crescent and Cross, p. 188.

importantly, of how these relationships may have been recalled and remembered in later generations.

A Neo-Neo-martyrdom? Reinventing Šalīb

The story of Šalīb lives on today, with moderate popularity. The relics of this martyr are on display at the Church of the Virgin in Ḥārit Zuwaylah, a district in Cairo, and an annual celebration is held at that church to honor the saint and his relics. In a booklet published in the year 2000 about the life of the martyr, the author, Father Dawūd ‘Abd al-Maṣīḥ, recaps the story for today’s Coptic believers. From the onset, he admits that his booklet is not an historical study but a “love story of the pain that Saint Šalīb lived.” Having provided this disclaimer, Father Dawūd takes great liberties with the original narrative of Šalīb’s martyrdom. For example, he does not describe Šalīb’s escape into the wilderness and to the monasteries as “taking flight.” Instead, he writes that Šalīb “loved his parents and would never leave his home against their will;” however his spiritual calling was too powerful to deny. Once Šalīb left his home, according to this contemporary narrator, he witnessed for Christ wherever he traveled. In fact, it was because he was overheard witnessing for his Christian faith by “others” that “they” arrested him, insulted him, and humiliated him. These individuals are openly labeled “tormentors” who brought Šalīb before the ruler of al-Sa‘īd. In turn, the ruler was not interested in the crime that Šalīb committed but wished to question him about “the secret


77 Ibid., p. 2
of his faith.” In a fantastic scenario, which clearly deviates from the original text, Father Dawūd relates how this ruler ordered that Ṣalīb be tortured, insulted, and mistreated to the “utmost extent of cruelty.” Clearly, the manner in which Ṣalīb is treated in the original story does not befit a heroic Coptic martyr in modern times.

Moreover, while the modern version conveys the judicial exchanges that are central to the text, along with Ṣalīb’s bravery, Father Dawūd changes Ṣalīb’s crime from blasphemy against Islam to “witnessing for his Christian faith.” Ultimately, he implies that Ṣalīb was publicly humiliated and executed for proclaiming his Christianity. It is perhaps more awe-inspiring for modern-day Coptic audiences to read and hear this version of the story. In this account, after all, Ṣalīb was murdered for simply proclaiming his faith, a worry with which some Copts live today. The story relates the severe tortures experienced by the martyr and downplays the close and often congenial interaction described in the original text between Ṣalīb and many of the Muslim characters.

Inadvertently or not, this version of Ṣalīb’s martyrdom raises caution in its audience, caution against an Islamic society which is perhaps “predisposed” to torment and to persecute. In that sense, it is a wonder that Father Dawūd and the contemporary Coptic Church did not find the original text of Ṣalīb’s martyrdom sufficiently “inspirational.” After all, it is text from a period in which Copts were, by the Church’s own accounts, severely persecuted. It is possible that the original text was too “realistic,” lacking the “fantastical” elements for which other Coptic hagiographies are renowned. Whatever the reason, this “neo-neo-martyrdom” stands as a testament to the resilience of stylized hagiographies and of the power of their writers and audiences to constantly reinvent and reinterpret their meaning.
The modern story seems intent on casting the story in black-and-white terms, as a clear conflict between Muslims and Copts. On the other hand, the older version’s implications of collusion between Copts and Muslims, as well as ambivalence on the part of recent converts, have little place in this present-day interpretation. Şalîb’s martyrdom is a significant indicator of the way in which the Copts’ experience during the Ottoman period was fashioned by their encounters with other religious communities. It also implies how martyrological texts -- texts that are inherently structured to remember pain, suffering, and persecution -- can be indicative of more complex social relations that, in fact, call into question the definition of “community.” The clearest acts of benevolence and compassion, in Şalîb’s story, transcend religious faith and the boundaries of the “Coptic” community. This seemingly modest revelation should enable us, as historians, to formulate more nuanced ideas in the study of all religious and ethnic communities living under Ottoman rule.
CHAPTER THREE

VISITING WITH KIN: THE HAGIOGRAPHY AND SHRINE OF SAINT DIMYANA DURING THE OTTOMAN PERIOD

The relationship between the divine and mortal, the supernatural and mundane clearly surfaces in the cult of the saints, whether in the context of Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Buddhism. Fearing that the Creator would find their concerns too trivial, human beings have historically brought their earthly questions, including issues of family, health, relationships, fertility, and even politics, to saintly advocates and intercessors. These saints were a wide variety of deceased and living mortals who attained the highest levels of spiritual grace and, were therefore believed to mediate on behalf of humanity. What made saints different from mere mortals was the perception that they formed a special bond to the divine, a relationship that was simply lacking in other religious functionaries or virtuous individuals.

In the first few centuries of Christianity, believers came to view martyrdom as the most significant prerequisite for sainthood. The persecution and murder of Christians as a result of clashes with the Roman state resulted in scores of martyrs being recognized as champions of the faith. By the end of the fourth century, when Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, the ideas of what constituted sanctity and sainthood had begun to change. Notions of asceticism and self-sacrifice, in the form of fasting, prayer, and monastic seclusion, proliferated, taking root as the new standards of
piety. Sexual purity and abstinence came to be regarded as alternate avenues for the achievement of ultimate sanctity.\(^1\) Thus the thread continued to be spun, as numerous saints were recognized, newly “discovered,” and venerated by the mass public alongside earlier martyrs.

The veneration of saints has inspired much discussion in the fields of religious studies, anthropology, literature, and history; thus an attempt to summarize the arguments and questions raised by this topic might result in its oversimplification. Yet the scholarly discussion has called attention to the ways in which both the church establishment and the mass of believers participated in improving access to saintly intercessors and in expediting the fulfillment of their supplications. For instance, the growth of local cults centered on early Christian martyrs can be understood as part of the desire to efficiently manage and accurately direct the power of the saints. In particular, this effort included facilitating access to the saints’ relics: to physical objects such as clothing, weapons, and body parts, that could serve as conduits to the divine realm. In Eastern churches, the painted images of saints in the form of icons would constitute yet another relic to be touched, adorned, and embraced as a link to supernatural powers.

Cults that were especially focused on the reputation of a saint’s miraculous performances attracted pilgrims from great distances. Miracles, whether through apparitions or healings, raised the physical significance of the saint to a higher level so that being in the presence of her shrine or possessing a physical token of her sanctity became the greatest joy a Christian believer could achieve. A saint’s relic that could

perform miraculous feats illustrated her intercessory power; and more miracles meant greater popularity. This created a revolutionary change in the definition of sanctity: saints who were deceased continued to “live” through their shrines and relics. Although miracles were understood to come from the divine, divine intervention was recognized through its mediation in various forms, whether through holy persons, holy objects, or holy places.  

Often, remote shrines proliferated around their namesake patrons, and thus the act of pilgrimage to these locales was a devotional practice, a journey of spiritual wandering and fulfillment. Journeys could be made at any time of the year, but they were most often annual events that drew the collective community into the acts of worship and festivity. As such, pilgrimage has been studied as a vehicle of political, economic, and cultural exchange, but also as a place where scriptural authority intersected with popular conceptions of piety. Stephen Wilson argues that while church authorities sought to monitor popular veneration of saints, by channeling it “via monasticism, canonization procedures, formal liturgies and emphasis on the postmortem cult,” he neglects to point out that despite their attempts to control the unsupervised veneration of the saints, religious authorities were often willing to participate in the “chaotic and liminal” aspects of pilgrimage and festivity.  

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2 The relationship between holy objects and the rise of shrines centered around the cult of the saints has been addressed in Peter Brown’s monumental study The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1981).

3 Stephen Wilson, ed., “Introduction,” Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 14. Here, Wilson is cautioning against the overemphasis of the concept of “liminality” in pilgrimage, as formulated by Victor Turner. Turner explained liminality as a sort of passage or transition into a phase, where “previous orderings of thought and behavior are subject to revision and criticism, when hitherto unprecedented modes of ordering relations between ideas and people became possible and desirable.” See Victor Turner and Edith Turner, Image and
boundaries potentially trespassed, but the prestige of defining what constitutes spiritual authority was challenged and altered.

In these contentions over spiritual authority, a hagiography, the *vita* (life) of a saint, emerged as a significant focal point. A hagiography was as important to the development of a cult as was the saint’s shrine and her relics, since in itself, a hagiography was a relic, a reliquary of the saint’s literary body. Hagiographies may have been initially written to record historical events, to commemorate those saints whose cults were already active, or to promote dormant cults.\(^4\) These texts worked with other elements to maintain an active cult. However, as an historical source, the hagiographic genre is notorious for repetition and intertextuality, and thus its legitimacy as anything but fiction has often been questioned. Nevertheless, “as with any text,” writes Gail Ashton, “what at first sight might appear to be a stable, fixed entity might also be a place where meanings are contested or resisted.”\(^5\) A hagiography’s volatility was tested time and again when it was read out loud (performed) in front of the masses on specific occasions: it became an active text capable of transforming its listeners and of being transformed by them.

This study understands that a hagiographic text might, as such, reflect collaboration and collusion among various social elements within a religious community and might in effect be the most intimate space where such an exchange took place, where

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conversations over a saint’s life were ultimately documented. With the awareness that a
textual source is suggestive of the cultural niche that produced it (or read it), I examine in
this chapter the hagiography and cult of Saint Dimyana, a fourth-century C.E. Coptic martyr whose popularity climbed dramatically in Egypt during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The cults of Christian saints were often revived or reinvented at times when new persecutions loomed large and the desire to awaken the spirit of a community was a primary concern. This process also took hold at times when church officials and/or local communities wished to associate a saint with a specific geographic locale.

Thus in this chapter, I will explore the intentions of a church and community to popularize the cult of the martyr Dimyana, with attention to what David Frankfurter calls “local versus institutional and indigenizing versus scripturalizing tendencies.”6 This approach will foreground my hypotheses that the construction of pious religious conduct among Ottoman-era Copts was reflected both in the hagiographies of saints like Dimyana (scripture), and in the practices at her annual festival (local and indigenous customs). At the same time, I will bear in mind that Coptic Christians did not live in isolation but existed in a broader community, which encompassed Muslims, Jews, and other Christians. As I shall point out below, the rise of Dimyana’s cult was most likely the product of adverse Muslim-Coptic relations, and yet ironically her festival created a space where a number of religious and social elements interacted in a delicate but agreeable balance.

Who is Dimyana?

The study of any Coptic martyr cult must take into account the fact that as one of the oldest Christian churches in the world, the Coptic Church has historically taken pride in being the “Church of the Martyrs.” The Church derives its dating system from the accession of Roman Emperor Diocletian (284-305 CE), during whose reign when thousands of Egyptian Copts were martyred defending their Christian faith. Despite the centrality of martyrdom and sainthood in Coptic liturgical practices, in centuries past, there have been only a few popular Coptic saints with active cults. The extent of activity can be measured by a believer’s recurrent visitation of a shrine, his or her attendance at annual celebrations of a saint’s feast (mūlid), the making of votive offerings -- whether in spiritual or financial terms -- and the invocation of a saint’s miraculous powers. Among the dozens of names commemorated in the Synaxarion, the book in which stories about most Coptic martyrs and saints were historically recorded, only a handful became namesakes of churches, shrines, and monasteries. Even fewer became the foci of annual festivals in the period under study.

7 The term mawlid (mūlid in colloquial Arabic dialect) means “birthday” in Arabic. Among Copts, it refers to the celebration of a saint’s rejoining God, i.e., the anniversary of a saint’s death or martyrdom.

8 “Synaxarion,” the Coptic and Greek form of the Latin “synaxarium,” is a compilation of the lives of saints, martyrs, religious events, and heroic stories in the Coptic Church. According to René-Georges Coquin, “Until the fourteenth century, the lives of these holy men and women were read separately, in independent encomiums, on their passion days. Ultimately they were assembled in a single book.” This book had multiple authors and was incomplete; many Coptic saints were not included in older recensions of the Synaxarion prior to the twentieth century. Such saints included Dimyana, Macrobius, Pshoi, and Petrus. See René-Georges Coquin, “Synaxarion, Copto-Arabic [Part I],” and Aziz Atiya, “Synaxarion, Copto-Arabic [Part II],” Coptic Encyclopedia 7.2171-2190.

9 As Otto Meinardus writes about the contemporary church, in a statement that holds true for the early modern era, “the Copts depend for their religious life only upon very few saints.” See his Christian Egypt: Ancient and Modern (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1977), pp. 147-148. For the Ottoman era, the number of popular Coptic saints in Egypt seems to have been more limited than in the modern period.
In this light, one appreciates the rise in notoriety during the early Ottoman period of Saint Dimyana, a saint whose popularity is still attested by a lively annual festival and by the cult at her shrine in Egypt’s Delta region. The development of Dimyana’s popularity is a case of acculturation; it is the adoption of a legendary martyr into the institution of the Coptic Orthodox Church and into the lived reality of believers. Remarkably, this fourth-century figure is nonexistent in historical sources prior to the fifteenth century. Dimyana’s Arabic hagiography, among the most widely recorded and read by Copts in the period under study, has no counterpart in earlier Coptic-language hagiographic texts. That is to say, this saint was likely known to Ottoman-era Copts, a group whose native tongue had generally fallen into disuse by the thirteenth century, only through the medium of the Arabic language. Furthermore, among popular female saints, including Saints Barbara, Irene, Febronia, and Marina, Dimyana’s hagiography was the most prevalent and her annual festival was nearly unmatched in popularity.

Dimyana’s renown was enhanced by the fact that she was a local girl: born, raised, and martyred in Egypt. The significance of this local connection is placed in the

10 Although in writing it persisted for some time, Coptic had effectively disappeared as a spoken language by the thirteenth century. There are reports, however, that it continued to be used in isolated regions of Upper Egypt up till the seventeenth century. See Emile Maher Ishaq, “Coptic Language, Spoken,” *Coptic Encyclopedia* 2.604-607. The reported hagiographer of Dimyana’s martyrdom, Bishop John of Burullus, claims to be retelling the story from documents that came to him written in Coptic and Arabic. Indeed the story may have existed previously in Coptic. It is a sort of “epic passion” consistent with others of its genre and characteristic of earlier Coptic hagiographies. Various elements in Dimyana’s story, including “characters who tended to be more strictly connected to one another through family relations or increasingly fantastic and romantic events,” in addition to an exaggerated “motif of religious controversy...as a means of protest against the dominant Arab political power” characterized such later hagiographies dating at least to the eighth and ninth centuries. For more information, see Tito Orlandi, “Hagiography, Coptic,” *Coptic Encyclopedia* 4.1191-1197. We must keep in mind, however, that Dimyana was not included in the first Arabic Synaxarion in the Coptic church, collected by Peter Severus al-Gamīl, Bishop of Maīg (12th-13th century) or in the next one collected by Michael, Bishop of Atrib and Maig (1243-1247 CE). Indeed, it was not until editions printed in the early part of the twentieth century that Dimyana’s story was finally included.
context of an Orthodox Church that shared many of its saints with other Christian sects, particularly with its Eastern Orthodox kin. In the period under study, the veneration of saints such as George, Irene, Marina, Cosmas and Damian took place among Greek, Coptic, and Russian Orthodox Christians alike. However, believers and their churches were interested in forming closer bonds with saintly intercessors, and this was more easily achieved by placing saints’ lives within familiar landscapes, that is by thoroughly indigenizing these saints. Far from being an act of “national allegiance,” the permanent implantation of foreign or lesser-known indigenous saints in local soil enhanced the feeling of kinship with these intercessors. These homegrown saints held political and economic importance for local districts, towns, and villages. While the Coptic Church has had a long tradition of promoting native saints, this practice more commonly applied to male saints such as Shenoute, Barsum the Naked, and Abanoub. Consequently, Saint Dimyana, as an indigenous female martyr, is a significant subject of study, as she was not memorialized beyond the Coptic context and has unique ties to the Egyptian soil. Dimyana therefore represents a significant female icon at a time when few such models existed within the Coptic Church and community or within broader Egyptian society.

The image of Dimyana as a heroic, valiant, and powerful saint stems directly from the story told in her widely popular hagiography, of which numerous copies circulated during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. According to her

11 Frankfurter, “Introduction,” Pilgrimage and Holy Space, p. 27.

12 As Mary Ann Fay writes, as historians, we are “confronted with the virtual absence of women of all classes from the history of the Ottoman period,” and thus our “primary task…is to locate the women in the sources” (my emphasis). See Mary Ann Fay, “Women and Waqf: Property, Power, and the Domain of Gender in Eighteenth-Century Egypt,” in Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era, ed. Madeline C. Zilfi (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 28.
Dimyana was born in Roman Egypt at some point in the late third century, during the era of Emperor Diocletian, the ruler infamous in Coptic history as supreme persecutor. She was the only child of Murqus (Mark), the Roman governor of the province of Burullus, Za‘farāna and the Wādī al-Sībān, located in the northeastern Nile Delta. When Dimyana was one year old, her father took her to be baptized in a monastery in the Delta known as Dayr al-Mayma. She was raised to be a devout Christian and was so pious that at the age of fifteen, when her father wished her to marry, she refused his entreaties, saying that she had promised herself to Christ. Murqus, who deeply loved his daughter, consented to her decision and also granted her request that a “pleasant place”

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be built outside the city where she could live an ascetic life. Murqus constructed the most luxurious of palaces, built in only a few days according to the text. As soon as Dimyana settled in this palace, along with forty of her closest female virgin companions, Murqus posted guards to protect the young virgins.

Shortly afterwards, Emperor Diocletian promoted Murqus to the office of Governor of al-Farama, another province in Lower Egypt. The father bade his daughter farewell and left to take up his new appointment. Meanwhile, the hagiography reports, Diocletian had turned his heart against the Christians and had already begun his notorious persecutions. Diocletian’s paranoia prompted him to call a gathering of all his governors: he asked them to prove their loyalty by praying to the gods of Rome, an order with which Murqus complied. When the news of her father’s betrayal reached her, Dimyana and her forty companions marched to al-Farama in order to persuade Murqus to recant his breach of faith. Dimyana’s commanding, “guilt-giving” exhortation, discussed below, prompted her father to recant, and before long, a confrontation with Diocletian resulted in Murqus’ execution. Diocletian then turned his attention to Dimyana and sent one of his officers, referred to as a “prince,” to cajole her away from Christianity. Dimyana’s stubbornness and unceasing commitment to the Christian faith ended in severe and numberless

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14 This palace was suspended over fifty columns -- its roofs inlaid with gold, its walls made of Chinese potsherds, and its floors built from the finest of marble. As a final touch, a glorious throne enhanced with jewels was made for Dimyana to sit upon. See ‘Awad, Mimar al-shahīda Dimyana, p. 59.

15 Al-Farama is a “city located in the northwest corner of the Sinai Peninsula about 14 miles (22.5 km) east of the Suez Canal and 3 miles (5 km) inland from the Mediterranean Sea. Coptic tradition holds that the Holy Family stopped in al-Farama during the flight into Egypt... A number of saints and martyrs had al-Farama as either their birthplace or place of martyrdom. Some of those associated with the city are Antonius of Banah, Apa Til, Epimachus, bishop of Pelusium, Hor of Siryaqus, Isidore of Takinash, Isidorus of Pelusium, Piroou, and Sina.” See Randall Stewart, “Farama, al-,” Coptic Encyclopedia 4.1089-1090.
tortures. According to the story, she experienced multiple and fantastical deaths, and was resuscitated through divine intervention. Finally, she and her forty companions were beheaded, along with “thousands” of bystanders who had converted to Christianity after being inspired by Dimyana’s example.

**Hagiographic Production of Dimyana’s Legend**

In early Coptic hagiographic traditions, the passions or *vitae* of martyrs often followed a specific format that involved stereotyped characters placed in predetermined events; the pattern would be reproduced time and again in the following centuries. Prospective martyrs would profess their faith, be tried in front of an evil regent (either Diocletian or one of his lackeys), experience torture and miraculous resuscitations, and finally be martyred. However, fifth- and sixth-century hagiographic texts not only emphasized martyrdom but also the conflict against Roman imperial power which was then reinterpreted as symbolizing the conflict between Copts and the Byzantine Empire that followed the Council of Chalcedon. In the eighth and ninth centuries, Coptic hagiographies fell into a literary cycle that involved “characters who tended to be more

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16 Willy Clarysse writes that “a very typical feature of Coptic martyrdoms is the bodily restitution of the martyr: after the martyr has been burned in an oven, torn to pieces, after his entrails have fallen to the ground, after he has been declared dead and his ashes are to be thrown into the Nile, an angel comes and restores the body to its full splendour, reuniting the pieces or putting back the entrails into the belly, resuscitating the martyr from death, so that a second and third series of tortures can start all over again.” See Willy Clarysse, “The Coptic Martyr Cult,” in *Martyrium in Multidisciplinary Perspective*, eds. M. Lamberigts and P. Van Deun (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1995), p. 391.

17 See the Introduction of this dissertation for a more detailed discussion of “monophysitism.” As discussed in those chapters, the Copts were labeled supporters of the “monophysite” religious doctrine at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, when they opposed the majority of Christians and were consequently branded as heretics. Monophysites rejected the Council of Chalcedon’s decision to declare Jesus as having two natures, one divine and one human, both of which existed separately yet in union (i.e., two natures in one). They believed instead that Jesus had only one divine-human nature.
strictly connected to one another through family relations or increasingly fantastic and romantic events. The motif of religious controversy was accentuated as a means of protest against the dominant Arab political power, which overwhelmed Christian Orthodoxy. In this period, and through the eleventh century, hagiographic texts were either completely rewritten or reinvented to suit the literary demands of the period. Moreover, the proliferation of translated liturgical works (from Coptic to Arabic), in addition to newly authored works, likely began in the thirteenth century, according to Tito Orlandi, when it had become necessary for Coptic Church authorities to make accessible Church literature to a congregation that was now conversant solely in Arabic.

In the context of this literary output, the Dimyana hagiography stands as a sort of enigma. As previously mentioned, there are no separate Coptic and Arabic accounts of this legend, and although there are a number of existing manuscript copies from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (in Arabic), earlier hagiographies may not have been retained, a point that could reflect the late popularity of Dimyana’s cult. Moreover, Dimyana’s legend was circulated strictly in a separate hagiographic form until the twentieth century, when in 1935-37, an uncritical publication of the Coptic Synaxarion was produced based upon earlier manuscripts. This edition finally included Dimyana’s

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19 See Tito Orlandi, “Literature, Copto-Arabic,” Coptic Encyclopedia. 5.1460-1467.

20 The story comes to us only in Arabic, although some scholars argue that a Coptic version of this hagiography must have existed. Conversations with Gawdat Gabra, November 2000.

21 When discussing Coptic-Arabic manuscripts, we must consider that there are many manuscripts that are unaccounted for among Coptic archival sources. Many monasteries and churches do not possess catalogues of their holdings, nor do they allow researchers easy access to their facilities.
story, in addition to those of other saints who historically had been omitted from earlier recensions.22

The alleged original author of the Dimyana hagiography was John, Coptic bishop of the region of Burullus.23 It is likely that this “John of Burullus,” as opposed to an early seventh-century figure, authored both the Dimyana hagiography and the earliest renditions of the Copto-Arabic Synaxarion in the fourteenth century. Although not much is known about this figure, his motivation for writing this hagiography is provided in the prologue in his “own” voice:

I was bishop of Burullus and I had always attended the Church in Za‘farāna. I saw that it was in ruin because of the passing of time and the destruction of people. Thus it came to my mind that I should investigate the lives of the martyrs of this church. After some time passed, as I thought more about this matter and was unable either to eat or sleep because of my preoccupation, a saintly monk from Dayr al-Mayma came to me. He carried old and damaged books from that church….He said “Father, take these books in order to prepare the orders of the church since you are our father and have authority over this church.”….I was overjoyed and I searched in the books and found the orders of the church, in both Coptic and Arabic. While I searched, I [also] found the story in question, the hagiography of the saint martyr Dimyana….I began to

22 According to René-Georges Coquin and Aziz Atiya, the 1935-1937 edition was based on the earliest edition of the Synaxarion, which has been historically associated with the following authors, who reportedly assembled in the fourteenth century separate hagiographies of Coptic saints into one book: Anba Buṭrus al-Gamīl, bishop of Malīg; Anba Mikhā’īl, bishop of Atrīb; and Anba Yuḥanna, bishop of Parallos (Burullus). See Coquin (part I) and Atiya (part II), “Synaxarion.”

23 This town is located somewhere on the eastern shore of Lake Burullus in the Nile Delta. It continued to be a Coptic bishopric at least until the eleventh century. It is also considered one of the spots where the Holy Family rested during their flight to Egypt. See Randall Stewart, “Burullus, Al-,” Coptic Encyclopedia 2.427. Interestingly, the earliest renditions of the Coptic Synaxarion (ca. 1300’s CE) mention one of its authors as “John, bishop of Burullus.” There has thus been some confusion as to whether the author of both the Synaxarion and Dimyana’s hagiography was one and the same. There is also a question about whether this figure was John of Burullus (ca. 540-610/620 CE), a bishop who is known as one of the most significant Coptic theologians of his time, a cleric who fought against heresy through his writings, of which only a few survive. Those works that do exist are in Arabic or Ethiopic. See C. Detlef G. Muller, “John of Parallos, Saint,” Coptic Encyclopedia 5.1367-1368.
transcribe it, as it had been written in the handwriting of a boy from the slaves of Julius al-Aqfaḥṣī, whose name was Ikhristodolo.

The fact that John of Burullus transcribed manuscripts from Coptic and Arabic supports the hypothesis that the author was a later figure who likely lived decades if not centuries after the Arab conquest of Egypt. It would take some time, after the conquest in 641 CE, before the introduction of the Arabic language into the writings of the Coptic Church. The region of al-Burullus, meanwhile, remained a Coptic bishopric at least until the eleventh century. Moreover, the author of the hagiography notes that the Church of Za‘farana was practically in ruin during his era; thus, as will be discussed below, the author’s intentions may have been to revive the cult of Dimyana through the rewriting of this hagiography. This was evidently accomplished during the Mamluk era.

The hagiography, which proliferated during the Ottoman era, is divided into three parts. The first narrates Dimyana’s life and death. The second tells the story of the discovery of her relics and the building of a commemorative church at the site of her martyrdom as commissioned by Saint Helena (ca. 250-330 CE), the mother of Emperor Constantine (274-337 CE). The last section, the most complex and ambiguous, is part of...

24 Making an association to Julius al-Aqfaḥṣī was important. This personage is considered in Coptic traditions as the “biographer of martyrs.” He was also martyred and is commemorated on the 22nd of the Coptic month of Tūt (ca. January 1st). The entry on his life in the Coptic Synaxarium indicates that Julius cared for the martyrs’ bodies in life and after death, when he would shroud them for appropriate burial. He employed “300 young men” to help him with this task and together, they also wrote biographies of these saints and sent those biographies back to the martyrs’ hometowns so that they would be eternally commemorated. Ultimately, Julius himself was martyred, along with his slaves and entire household in the city of Towa, which is nearby the city of Tanta. He was buried in Alexandria. See Al-Siniksār, vol I (Cairo: Maktabat al-Maḥabbā, n.d.), pp. 47-48.

25 ‘Awad, Mimar al-shahīda Dimyana, p. 56.

26 Even if we were to assume the unlikely scenario that the original was written in the early seventh century, Dimyana’s hagiography definitively underwent changes, with much later additions that rendered it more appealing to audiences living under Muslim rule.
mythical tale and part legendary tradition regarding the relationship between Copts and the Muslim rulers under whom they lived. In all, the Dimyana hagiography is characteristic of many virgin martyrdoms and features a marked tension among family, violence, sex and faith. It is a story about the triumph of faith (Christianity in general and Coptic Christianity in particular) and individual beliefs over state persecution (Roman paganism, then Islam); however, it also features characters with much depth and emotion, a quality that renders the hagiography unique.

Undoubtedly, this legend captured the attention of audiences, with its images of extravagant palaces, familial conflict and reconciliation, as well as invincible young virgins. In practical terms, however, how did Dimyana and her hagiography achieve significant popular status, especially within a community that was mostly illiterate? The answer is related both to the demand for hagiographic production and to the ways in which hagiographies have been traditionally utilized in Coptic liturgical practices. Original hagiographic production among Copts was especially prominent between the fifth and eighth centuries. In this era, as Tito Orlandi writes, “the usual dossier of a saint in this period thus consisted of his Life or Passion, his Encomium [a homily about a saint], and his miracles.” This dossier could be frequently altered, manipulated, deleted, or augmented throughout the centuries, depending on the popularity of a particular saint.

In comparison to earlier periods, however, the Ottoman period has been hastily dismissed as a culturally unproductive era for Egyptians in general and Copts in

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27 Orlandi, “Hagiography, Coptic.”
particular. On both a literary and an artistic level, there was in fact a resurgent interest within the community in patronizing manuscript production and in preserving the dossiers of a number of saints. Perusing the catalogues of various libraries in Europe and in North America, in addition to Coptic monastic and church holdings in Egypt, provides only a small glimpse of this prolific manuscript production. Original written treatises may have been few in number, but the interest in preserving the Coptic hagiographic and literary tradition is attested by the staggering number of manuscripts from this period. This increased attention may indicate a belief in the importance of preserving a Coptic heritage and an increase in the resources funding such conservation projects.

From the Monastery of al-Suryān in Egypt’s Wādī al-Naṭrūn to the patriarchal headquarters in Ḥārit Zuwayla, a Cairene district, and the Church of St. George in the city of Dumyāt, Coptic patrons, ranging from bishops to the patriarch himself, time and again requested Dimyana’s hagiography. In the Ottoman period, Dimyana’s story was commissioned not only by higher clergy but also by elite laymen, who could appreciate this sacred literature. However, literate, elite men were not the only segment of the Coptic community touched by Dimyana’s hagiography. As Julia Smith asks, “What can hagiography reveal of the status and influence of the written word in a society that was

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28 See Tito Orlandi, “Literature, Copto-Arabic,” pp. 1460-1467 “With the subjection of Egypt to the Ottoman yoke in 1517, Egypt seems to have gradually lost its intellectual flair both among Muslims and Copts.” Aziz Atiya mentions that famous Coptic notable Ibrāhīm al-Jawharī (d. 1795) was solely responsible for the revival in Coptic literature during the late eighteenth century. Atiya writes that Ibrāhīm “hired scribes to copy older theological works for distribution among the churches in order to increase religious knowledge, perhaps the first serious attempt to revive the dormant Coptic theological studies in modern times.” See his History of Eastern Christianity (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 100. Although this sort of activity may have intensified in the eighteenth century, we know for certain that scribal copying and distribution of religious literature were taking place in much earlier periods. See for example the works of Murqus Simayka (1864-1944) cataloguing manuscripts at the Coptic Patriarchal Library and at the Coptic Museum for an indication of this profound literary output.
neither completely literate nor completely illiterate? In Ottoman Egypt, as in other parts of the early modern world, oral communication was the most common mode of cultural transmission, and thus there was a substantial opportunity for the wide dissemination of a given text through alternate venues. Although monks and church officials authored hagiographies, these texts were primarily intended for mass consumption among those with no access to the pen.

The practice of reading aloud a hagiography took place on designated occasions, particularly at a saint’s festival when multitudes gathered to participate in the annual celebration and to be engaged in the life of the martyr being memorialized. There, a hagiography became an active text, part of a “commemorative performance” in which “continuity with the communal past is established by the economy of form/performance encoded in set postures, gestures, movements, and utterances.” At the annual and vastly popular spring festival celebrating Saint Dimyana, the reading of the hagiography highlighted the commemoration of this saint, distinguishing the festival as hers. The oral dissemination of Dimyana’s legend is corroborated by the fact that a number of the Dimyana hagiographies are in the form of mimars or homilies. Homilies were preached

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29 Julia Smith writes that in the case of medieval England, “[A]ccess to the written word was not confined to those who could read and write. Large groups of people could and did rely on the services of others to read or write on their behalf,” Julia M. H. Smith, “Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany, c. 850-1250,” Speculum 65, no. 2 (April 1990): 311.


32 A homily was normally read out loud to monks in a monastery; Coptic monks, like their Byzantine counterparts, eagerly read the life narratives of female saints, and written collections of these vitae were commissioned for use in monasteries. See Alice-Mary Talbot, “Female Sanctity in Byzantium,” in Women and Religious Life in Byzantium (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001), p. 16.
to the general populace at local churches; a homily was a version of the *vita* that was meant to be accessible to audiences.

Hagiographies and homilies, as well as other spiritual treatises, were copied from a central location, likely to be either the patriarchal headquarters in Cairo or the Monastery of Saint Anthony. The Monastery of Saint Anthony, situated approximately 100 miles from Cairo, underwent a revival and restoration during the Ottoman period after bedouins destroyed it in the fifteenth century, a revival recorded by European pilgrims and travelers in the sixteenth centuries and onwards. After being copied at the Monastery, for instance, manuscripts were disseminated to churches or patrons who requested them from all over Egypt. In this context, the preference for Dimyana over other saints, as affirmed by relatively large numbers of her *vita* dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, attests to her fame. This mode of cultural transmission, of disseminating texts from primary to secondary locations, was not unique to Copts and was seemingly typical of the social milieu in this period. Suraiya Faroqhi calls attention to elite Muslim pilgrims traveling to the central Anatolian convent of Haci Bektaş who, upon receiving the blessing of the shrine, would visit its impressive library in order to copy texts for their personal use, “which they might in turn pass on to the library of their favourite convent.” Likewise, among the several manuscript copies of

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34 In various catalogue holdings of Copto-Arabic manuscripts, Dimyana easily surpasses other female saints, such as Barbara and Marina, in sheer numbers of hagiographies, and rivals in popularity the older cults of male martyrs such as Saints Mina and George.

Dimyana’s hagiography that I have examined, there is very little textual variation, a situation not unique to the Dimyana legend.

We can thus determine that the Coptic Church channeled the veneration of Dimyana by choosing which written version was disseminated to its clergy and public. As the story was heard, it was assimilated, altered and modified within the community and became a vehicle for pedagogy and entertainment but also for the potential transformation of established mores. The clerical and popular elements of the Coptic community interacted with one another, as the official and “folkloric” veneration of the saints overlapped at performances of these hagiographies. The written version, therefore, may have ultimately mirrored the popular rendition of Dimyana’s story among Copts. With knowledge that the masses would have access to this hagiography, the Coptic Church took an interest in the coordination and distribution of Dimyana’s legend and thus in the promotion of her fame. Popular demand for Dimyana’s story, in addition to those of other saints, called for a kind of involvement by church authorities in order to avert the spread of heretical and unapproved texts.

_The Legend that Is Dimyana: The Appeal of a Life and a Parable_

In the Coptic milieu, cults of ancient female martyrs, such as Saints Barbara, Marina, and Febronia, continued to flourish in the centuries following the Islamic conquest of Egypt, as did those of male martyrs such as Saints George, Theodore, and Mina. The Coptic Church, which lacked an official canonization process until recent times, came to recognize only a handful of new saints in those centuries, and of these,

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very few were female. Alice-Mary Talbot suggests that in the Byzantine context, the “paucity” of newly canonized female saints might be connected to the continuing “ambivalence about the possibility of sanctity for the weaker sex, tainted by descent from Eve, and always viewed as a source of sexual temptation and impurity.” Likewise, Coptic hagiographies reinforce ambivalence and contradiction in the portrayal of female piety. On the one hand, they enunciate ideals such as virginity, modesty, and humility, and on the other, they portray female saints as militant, eloquent, and aggressive defenders of the faith.

Gail Ashton argues that this contradiction is, in part, due to the inherent “fissured and unstable” nature of female hagiographic texts, as they embody both the authorial male voice that reflects a patriarchal power structure but also a “feminine voice that reveals itself differently,” putting pressure on the masculine narration. We might refer to this conflict as “hagiographic bipolarity,” an intrinsic feature of a genre that attempts to bind the life narrative of a paragon of religiosity (a saint) with cultural notions of a female archetype. The holy conduct of virtuous women, particularly in relation to patriarchal figures surrounding them, is upheld as a model for audiences, especially for female audiences. Most often, this model depicts relationships between male figures and female saints as reflecting a masculine ideal of the “enclosed” woman. The often tyrannical nature of male-female relationships is highlighted as a male character (usually

37 Talbot, “Female Sanctity in Byzantium,” p. 16.

a father or suitor) attempts to restrict, imprison, and disable the saint and her female sexuality.\textsuperscript{39}

However, viewed against this backdrop, Dimyana’s Ottoman-era hagiography is remarkably different from either its Copto-Arabic or its medieval English correlates. From the start of the narrative, Dimyana is in absolute control of her destiny and, arguably, of all those surrounding her. Her demand to stay celibate is accepted by her father. Likewise, Murqus not only agrees to build her a space for prayer (in the form of an opulent palace fit for a “princess”) but also allows her to live her life in a homosocial environment, with forty female companions, in a relationship that openly rejects the desire or need for patriarchal control. Dimyana’s immense power over her father ultimately affects his decision to reaffirm his Christianity, thereby sending him to his death. This is in stark contrast to the life narrative of Saint Barbara, for instance, whose father not only imprisons her in a tower but ultimately executes her.

In this context, Dimyana’s hagiography can be read as a heroic struggle, both characteristic of and deviant from the general martyrological genre. In typical fashion, Dimyana is depicted as the protagonist who bravely faces the persecution of the evil Emperor Diocletian and his lackeys. Through physical suffering (depicted in her choice of celibacy and in her being tortured) and her eventual martyrdom, she is a heroine by action. But she is more of a champion through her verbal authority than by her physicality. Her speeches and commentary pervade the hagiography, highlighting her strengths in the conversations with those surrounding her -- be they her virgin

companions, her oppressors, or her father. But can Dimyana’s words be viewed as representative of an ideal of “female agency,” as was advocated by Coptic authorities during the Ottoman period? Jocelyn Wogan-Browne argues that “we should be cautious about assuming that the representation of speech by women in these martyrdoms is a representation of women’s freedom to speak, and saints are exceptional as well as exemplary for their audience.” However, the exceptionality of Dimyana is in the efficacy of her “aggressive verbal power.” As Maud McInerney maintains, “virgins are the most argumentative of all martyrs;” and Dimyana wins most of the arguments she is involved in, particularly those with the supreme male authority in her life: her father. Her speech is reinforced by the presence of the forty virginal companions, who follow her loyally wherever she goes (even to the death), acting as a mostly silent Greek chorus. In the cultural context of Ottoman Egypt, where public exhibition of female authoritative speech was generally subverted, this representation cannot be overlooked. Whether the Coptic Church was advocating an inverted ideal of familial and social interactions is unclear. Most likely, a woman’s speech and her sexuality were being validated in the only means possible: as bound to her religious duties and obligations to Christ.

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42 Ibid., p. 51.
In contrast to the emphases of most female virgin martyrdoms, Dimyana’s virginity is the least emphasized element of this hagiography. It takes a back seat to the relationship with her father, Murqus, a relationship that becomes a disruptive subtext within an otherwise characteristic hagiography. Virgin martyrologies often depict the struggle of the heroine as a triangular one, with the martyr, her male oppressor, and Christ occupying a corner each: on the one side, there is the martyr vis-à-vis a male oppressor, who is aiming to soil her virginity (both literally and metaphorically), and on the other, there is the martyr vis-à-vis Christ, who is the protector of her purity. Often, the figure of the oppressor is not only the evil ruler but also a “pagan” family member, a father in the case of Saint Barbara, who has alternative plans for the future of an aspiring heroine.

In the Dimyana story, Murqus stands out, for rather than tormenting his daughter, he is a caring and loving parent. In fact, from the start of Dimyana’s life, he places her in the path of righteousness and Christianity. Upon her request, Murqus leaves his daughter to enjoy her “romance” with Christ and to abandon the expected social responsibilities of marriage and procreation. In contrast, Dimyana’s love for her father is profound yet not as vehement as her love for Christ. Her opposition to her father’s betrayal of the Christian faith should be contrasted to the characteristic oppositional stances taken by virgins

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Karen Winstead provides a succinct description of the typical or “generic” virgin martyr in the context of the late medieval English church. She writes “What distinguishes the legends of most female martyrs from those of their male counterparts is a preoccupation with gender and sexuality. Almost all virgin martyr legends dramatize some threat to the saint’s virginity. Usually that threat is directly linked to religious persecution. For example, in many of the most popular legends, including those of Margaret, Juliana, Agnes, and Agatha, a pagan falls in love with the saint, woos her, then persecutes her when he finds that she will have nothing to do with him. In other cases, the official presiding over the trial of a beautiful Christian offers to marry her and is rejected, as in most legends of Martina, Euphemia, and Katherine of Alexandria.” See Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, pp. 5-6.
against their male “oppressors” in martyrological texts. Typically, as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne comments, “the virgin’s opposition to her father-suitor-ruler in hagiography is an opposition that triangulates desire: the virgin is the medium of male exchange through which the hero competes with (and is bonded to) other men in order to gain the heroine.”44 Curiously, the competition in our story is between a benevolent father and Christ. Dimyana’s assertive stance against Murqus is based on the choice she has made: to follow Christ, not only as his bride but also as his messenger. Her exchange with her father upon discovering his apostasy can be seen as a statement against earthly patriarchal authority and as an example of her being a physical venue on behalf of Christ. Dimyana’s words matter because she is a vessel of the divine.45 However, they also have an appeal in the context of an almost ordinary rapport between any father and daughter. If understood purely as a literary ploy, this exchange between father and daughter arguably constitutes the most profound aspect of the martyrdom:

And when the news [of Murqus’ bowing to the idols] reached his daughter the Lady Dimyana, she leapt up hurriedly, accompanied by the forty virgins,…and headed to al-Farama. She met with her father, who, upon seeing her, rejoiced greatly since it had been a while since he had departed from her. After he greeted her, she told him, “Father, what is this news that I heard about you, which put fear and a void [ba al] in my heart?” He responded, “What is it my daughter?” She said to him: ‘I heard that you have left the religion of Christ, the strong God who has created and raised you, and that you prayed to the blind idols which are not worthy: [those] stones made by hands….Look above, my father, and raise your gaze. Stare at the joy of the heavens and the beauty in the arrangement of the sun, the moon, and the stars and at how the heavenly dome filled with divine wisdom exists without support and above which the hosts of angels [roam] ….How did it cross your heart to do this? Know my father, that if you continue in this state of being, then I shall be a stranger to you in this world and in the next world, on the

44 Wogan-Browne, Saints’ Lives, p. 98.

Day of Judgment. I shall deny you in the Valley of Jehoshaphat\(^\text{46}\) in the midst of the dreaded judgment, and you will have no part nor share in the eternal birthright. This is my final word to you.” Upon hearing this, her father came to consciousness as if he had been drunk and revived. At once, he screamed and cried, saying ‘I am a sinner for what I have done for I made the stones as my yoke and in Satan’s house I prayed to them. Blessed be the hour that I saw you, my blessed daughter!’\(^\text{47}\)

The scene of daughter confronting father imbedded within a story that is highly legendary and fantastical is notable and is followed by Murqus bidding his daughter farewell before heading to Antioch to confront Diocletian and face his eventual death. From the heroine’s perspective, the ultimate sacrifice is to “save” her father from eternal doom by, in effect, leading him to the suicidal profession of his Christian faith. This is at once a selfish act in that Dimyana thinks only of her commitment to her Christian beliefs, and a selfless one in that she knows that she will lose her earthly father.

Whether it is intentional or not, this literary technique de-emphasizes mythical elements in the story, such as Dimyana’s fantastical tortures and multiple deaths, bringing audiences closer to a real-life scenario. The complication of a kindhearted father indirectly calls into question Dimyana’s allegiance to Christ versus her duties towards her family. The family scenario also allows the Church, according to Katherine Young, to control the “independent-mindedness” of renegade female virgins:

Saints often present religious leaders with a serious problem. Many saints are individualistic or even eccentric. Sometimes, for whatever reason, they become very independent. The authorities soon begin to wonder if they are becoming too independent; that is, likely to foster renegade traditions. That is when they take preventive measures. Usually, they try to curtail the activities of these saints or to

\(^{46}\) This is in reference to a biblical verse in Joel 3:2. “Jehoshaphat” literally means “the lord judges.” The verse is as follows: “I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land.”

incorporate them into institutions. In short, they try to domesticate these saints, as it were, to prevent chaos. When renegade saints are women, male authorities often encourage them to return to their families. At the very least, they try to regulate the number of women choosing alternatives such as monasticism. Religions have developed many strategies for constraining independent-minded saints.\(^{48}\)

In the Dimyana story, the question is hypothetically asked and answered: “How should a daughter ultimately behave?” She must save herself and her family from eternal condemnation: Christ must rule the dynamic of family relations. In a hagiography filled with hints of female empowerment and agency, it is ultimately Christ (and implicitly the Church acting with Christ’s authority) who dictates the definitions of love, family and loyalty.

Following this sensitive account are the details of Dimyana’s torture, martyrdom, and the discovery of her relics by Empress Helena. This version of Dimyana’s hagiography, which circulated in the Ottoman period, also included a codex that told a miraculous tale in which Dimyana’s supernatural abilities, as narrated in the text, are juxtaposed with the equally marvelous powers of an eighth-century Coptic patriarch. Dimyana, a fourth-century martyr who converted scores to Christianity through her speech and physical perseverance, is contrasted with and kept in check by an equally miraculous patriarch, who, upon being faced by a mythical, oppressive Muslim ruler, used his authority to combat the harm intended towards Copts. In one pen stroke, the hagiography equally celebrates Dimyana’s heroism against pagan rule along with this mysterious patriarch’s valor against Muslims.

This “codex” may have become incorporated into the text when the hagiography was being modified into a homily, a text intended to be read out loud like a sermon,

possibly in the fifteenth century, a period coinciding with the rise of Dimyana’s cult. The parable-like story told in the codex takes place in the eighth century, one hundred and twenty years after the Islamic conquest of Egypt. Among the Muslims who migrated to Egypt, the story relates, there was an evil magician named Yūnus, who stumbled upon the ruins of the Church of Dimyana and wished to build a palace on that spot. He was unaware that the relics of Dimyana and the forty virgins were housed underneath this site. Thus he built a palace and began to use his powers in order to magically woo women -- virginal daughters of “kings” -- to fulfill his sexual desires. That the magician was participating in explicit acts of sexual lust on top of Dimyana’s final resting-place is simply stated as fact rather than reviled as appalling and sacrilegious behavior.

One day, the magician summoned Satan to bring him a “Frankish woman,” and so at night, the devil traveled to the palace of a “king” in Rome and kidnapped his daughter for Yūnus’ pleasure. When the king asked his daughter about her nighttime disappearance, she confirmed that she had been taken to a mysterious place by a power beyond her control, and as a result of her interaction with this evil magician, she was “no longer like other women.” Her father, enraged at the thought of his daughter being defiled, instructed her, upon arriving at this mysterious place, to place in a vial a small sample of any physical residues present in the kidnapper’s palace. That night, the king’s daughter was taken before his eyes. Upon her return, she brought back the seeds of hyssop (sishān) and a strand of saffron (za’farān). At once, the king knew that the palace was in Wāḍī al-Sisbān in Egypt, where there were vast fields of saffron. Therefore he summoned a navy and an army, and wrought destruction upon this region, obliterating a nearby dam, which reportedly stretched across the Nile Delta region. As a result, the tale
goes on, a fantastic flood swept these areas, destroying all towns in its path and killing the evil magician.

This took place, according to the text, during the time of a fictional Muslim “Caliph Sinān,” who upon hearing of the flood was infuriated at the financial loss incurred, as damage to the valuable saffron fields was costly. As he contemplated this news, one of the Jewish communal leaders arrived at the citadel to meet with the caliph. When the Jew witnessed the caliph’s anger, he suggested that the caliph asks the Coptic patriarch to restore order in these lands, for it was known, the Jew told him, that Coptic patriarchs are capable of great miracles. The Jew’s intentions were malicious, according to the text, for he wanted to obliterate all Copts from Egypt. And so the patriarch was brought before the sultan and was ordered to undo the damage incurred by the flood. If he failed, the caliph threatened him, all Copts would be massacred and their churches destroyed. The patriarch asked for a reprieve of three days. He entered the Church of the Virgin in Cairo, where he prayed and fasted for this period. As soon as he finished his devotions, the patriarch, along with other Copts, as well as the caliph and his troops, marched to the flooded region. After more prayers, the waters began to recede and the land returned to its normal state. The caliph was so pleased that he granted the patriarch’s wish to rebuild the Church of Saint Dimyana on its original spot and to outfit the church with anything the patriarch desired.

The patriarch’s miraculous feat is a close imitation of another story, a miracle tale that takes place in the tenth century, during the Fatimid period, and that was popular among Copts for centuries thereafter. The archetypal miracle concerned the translocation
of the Mountain of Muqaṭṭam,\(^49\) which borders the city of Cairo to the east\(^50\) (to compensate for damage from a flood, a mountain was shifted from one spot to another). Both stories share the motif of a malicious Jewish character, of a cruel-turned-benevolent caliph, and of a Coptic patriarch with great powers. Both are intended to rouse the spirit of the Coptic community vis-à-vis the dominant Muslim community and to illustrate the supernatural authority of the Coptic leaders. Likewise, both stories reflect the Church’s ideals of piety and asceticism. They highlight defiance in the face of persecution as an imitable quality, emphasize prayer and its connection to physical and spiritual salvation, and discuss fasting, a time-honored ritual in the Coptic Church. Dimyana’s stance against the oppressive pagans is compared to the Coptic patriarch’s defense against the Muslim caliph: both rulers had threatened to wipe out all Christians. In that sense, the heroine and the hero are placed on equal footage. The vulnerability of the male patriarch in front of his oppressor and his turning to prayer in order to achieve salvation for the Coptic community is as integral to this story as Dimyana’s constant appeal for divine assistance during her tortures. The prayers of Dimyana and the patriarch are not refused, and thus the prayers act as an equalizing force in the eyes of God.

\(^{49}\) The Fatimid period was also the last time there had been a caliph in Egypt. For the significance of this miracle among Copts, see J. A. Loubser, “How al-Mokattam Mountain was Moved: The Coptic Imagination and the Christian Bible,” in \textit{The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends}, eds. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 103-126. The popular Muqaṭṭam legend was likely modified and later included in the dossier of the Saint Dimyana hagiography to give more legitimacy to the shrine of Dimyana and to tie her cult to the great tradition of miraculous accomplishments by Coptic Church leaders. This codex was written, as such, to bring Dimyana closer to current geographic locales and to a Coptic populace who were now living under dominant Muslim rule and who would have been inspired to hear of this triumph.

\(^{50}\) The Mountain of Muqaṭṭam is considered to be sacred, both in Muslim and in Coptic traditions. See Doris Beherens-Abouseif, “Al-Mukaṭṭam,” \textit{EF} 7.509-511.
The hagiography of Saint Dimyana is utilized to awaken the faith of believers, appealing to a Coptic imagination that, like its Muslim counterpart, inhabits “a world of metaphysical realism, where magic, angels, evil spirits, heaven, hell and Satan are generally accepted.” The Coptic Church was able to utilize hagiographies such as Dimyana’s in multiple ways: to provide believers with specific models of piety and asceticism as well as to define its ideals on family and gender relations. It relied mostly upon the cults of those saints whose life narratives existed in the distant Christian past because they lived in a period when the Church had successfully struggled against the oppressive persecution of Roman and Byzantine rule. As the power of the Church waned under Islamic governance, it was easier, on a practical level, to reference those familiar saints, particularly at a time when the Church was threatened by mass conversion of its adherents to the rival and dominant Islamic religion. These timeless stories could be retold as living history and could be re-imagined as representative of a Coptic struggle for existence in a Muslim culture.

The Cult of Dimyana: Emergence and Proliferation

By all standards of the day, Dimyana’s hagiography was a “best-seller” among Copts living in Ottoman Egypt. It ranks among the most widely copied and read hagiographies of that period. In today’s Coptic Church, Dimyana is by far the most popularly revered female saint after the Virgin Mary. But what are the roots of this veneration and of the rise of her cult and annual festival near the town of Bilqās in the Nile Delta? This is a question best answered using a speculative approach that offers

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51 Ibid., pp. 122-123.
clues and hypotheses in an effort to bring us closer to the mindset of believers who gathered each year on the twelfth day of the Coptic month of Bashans (ca. May 20) to celebrate the annual feast of Dimyana.

Although Saint Dimyana is little known in non-Coptic contexts, relative to other saints, she has received only token scholarly attention. Otto Meinardus’ article “A Critical Study on the Cult of Sitt Dimiana and her Forty Virgins” has heretofore stood as the sole critical study devoted to this topic. Meinardus was perhaps the first to propose that the emergence and spread of Dimyana’s cult occurred in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, at a “rather late and otherwise unproductive time in the history of the Coptic Church.”52 He gives various reasons for this dating, suggesting that during this period, there appeared to be a need for the cult of an indigenous virgin-martyr, as most other female Coptic saints were of non-Egyptian origin. Meinardus offers an unsubstantiated hypothesis that a quarrel between Greek monks and Coptic pilgrims at the Greek Orthodox Monastery of St. Catherine in Mount Sinai, potentially because of the above-mentioned ecclesiastical conflict between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christians, may have led to a prohibition of Coptic visitors. This, according to Meinardus, prompted Copts to develop their own local cult of a female virgin martyr and to promote its rapid spread. Its location was logical, as Bilqās was quite accessible for travelers on the Nile. The cult was quickly publicized with the news of miraculous manifestations at the annual festival.

Meinardus suggests that the early seventeenth century should be considered the starting date for the widespread dissemination of this cult. He comes to this conclusion because, he claims, there are no earlier mentions of Dimyana’s existence in the texts of Muslim chroniclers, the memoirs of European travelers and cartographers, or the Coptic Synaxarion; according to Meinardus, Dimyana was not even the namesake of any churches (other than her shrine’s) during this period. Moreover, Dimyana’s image appears quite late in Coptic icons, making a mark only during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This, according to Meinardus, shows a latent interest in the cult of this saint.

It seems best to address these claims by beginning with the issues of naming and dating, both key points in the understanding of this cult and both insufficiently addressed by Meinardus’ study. While it is unclear if “Dimyana” was originally a Greek name, in Copto-Arabic traditions, “Dimyana” is actually known by the name “Gimyana,” as the name would be pronounced in the Egyptian dialect, or “Jimyana” in the fiusha form of Arabic. “Gimyana” is not a Coptic pronunciation of the Greek name, but more likely a regional, dialectical variation in its articulation. René-Georges Coquin and Maurice Martin logically state that it is “probable” that Gimyana and Dimyana are one and the same, a fact supported by hagiographic evidence in addition to travelers’ narratives. The reasoning behind the different names is unclear, although some have suggested that it could be due to the liturgical uses of her name.53

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53 “Gimyana” may have been more phonetically suitable in Coptic liturgical hymns. Hany Takla suggested this possibility in correspondence in May 2002.
Without taking into account this modification of the name, Meinardus may have overlooked the oldest reference to this saint. The Mamluk era’s best-known chronicler, Aḥmad ibn ʿAli Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, mentions in his fifteenth-century work Kitāb al-Mawāʾiz wa-l-tibār fī dhikr al-khiṭat wa-l-athār, a “Dayr Gimyana” (the Monastery of Gimyana) as part of a cluster of four Coptic monasteries in the Nile Delta region.54 One of these, Dayr al-Maghtis, was located north of the town of Bilqāš on the shores of Lake Burullus and was, according to al-Maqrīzī, destroyed by Muslim attackers in the month of Ramadan 841 AH/1438 CE. Al-Maqrīzī mentions that, before its destruction, the monastery had served as the center of a great pilgrimage among Copts, particularly those from Upper Egypt, a pilgrimage rivaled only by that to Jerusalem. Pilgrims came to Dayr al-Maghtis in the Coptic month of Bashans on a day referred to as ʿīd al-zuhūr or the “Feast of the Apparition,” when they celebrated the miraculous apparitions of the Virgin Mary.55 In addition to evidence from the Ethiopian Synaxarion, René-Georges Coquin identifies Dayr al-Maghtis as a locale visited during the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt, thus explaining why this region became an important pilgrimage center in the Middle

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54 Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, Macrizi’s Geschichte der Copten (Akhhār Qīḥṭ Miṣr maʾkhūdha min kitāb al-mawāʾiz wa-l-tibār fī dhikr al-khiṭat wa-l-athār), Arabic with German translation, introduction by Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (New York: Olms, 1979 [1845]), pp. 33-35. Al-Maqrīzī writes that in the Delta, there had been numerous monasteries but that many of them had been ruined or destroyed. He continues that many monasteries outside Cairo had been destroyed by the Fatimid ruler al-Ḥākim (996-1021 CE).

55 Coquin cites the Ethiopian Book of Mary’s Miracles, a work most likely translated from Arabic, as mentioning the feast celebrated in this area on 21 Bashans to commemorate the Virgin’s appearances and dates the destruction of this monastery sometime around 1441 CE. Also see al-Maqrīzī, Akhhār Qīḥṭ Miṣr, pp. 33-35.
Ages. The second and third monasteries, Dayr al-'Askar and Dayr al-Mayma, were reportedly located in the neighborhood of the town of Bilqās.56

“Dayr Gimyana” was a part of this cluster of four monasteries to the extent that they existed in the fifteenth century. These monasteries seem to have been closely linked to one another; for instance Dayr al-Mayma is mentioned twice in the hagiography of Saint Dimyana. It is cited as a place that contained ancient manuscripts about Dimyana’s life, manuscripts that were given by an aging monk to the professed hagiographer, John, bishop of Burullus. It is also the place where Murqus, Dimyana’s father, took her to be baptized when she was a one-year-old. It is likely that in the fifteenth century, “Dayr Gimyana” was not yet a significant pilgrimage site, although pilgrims en route to Dayr al-Maghtis, intending to make their annual visit in the Coptic month of Bashans, may have stopped there to get the blessing of Saint Dimyana en route. According to Coquin, it is logical that upon the destruction of Dayr al-Maghtis, the attention moved to Dimyana:

Several similarities will be noted between [the] appearances of the Virgin and saints at Dayr al-Maghtis and those of Dayr Sitt Dimyanah: they take place at the same time of the year, in the month of Bashans; the monasteries are not far from one another, being in the same region of the Delta; and, although here and there the Virgin appears even more than at Sitt Dimyanah, the duration of the appearances is similar: five days at Dayr al-Maghtis, three days at Dayr Sitt Dimyanah. Appearances of the same type were taking place in other churches of the Delta at the beginning of the thirteenth century, according to the History of the Patriarchs….One might propound the hypothesis that after [the destruction of

56 The name ‘askar, as Coquin notes, undoubtedly implies the presence of a nearby military camp. Al-Maqrizi locates this monastery about a one-day’s walk from Dayr al-Maghtis. He also indicates that it was dedicated to the Apostles and that only one monk was present there at the time he wrote his chronicle. Dayr al-Mayma, on the other hand, gets more mention since apparently, in earlier times, it was the most active monastery in the Delta and was bustling with monks. However, it was attacked, at an unknown preceding date, by an army (jaysh) and was effectively destroyed. Coquin cites research indicating that the towns of al-Mayma and al-'Askar (after which these monasteries were presumably named) were, by virtue of their close location, gradually joined to form the town of Bilqās. See also Stefan Timm, Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in Arabischer Zeit, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1984), p. 680 for an entry on “Der al-’Askar,” pp. 699-701 for an entry on “Der (Sitt) Damyana,” p. 731 for an entry on “Der al-Magtis,” and pp. 741-742 on “Der al-Mema.” I would like to thank Gawdat Gabra for this reference.
Dayr al-Maghtis in 1438], the pilgrimage of the month of Bashans was moved to Dayr Jimyanah (which had become Dayr Sitt Dimyanah), which would explain the spread of the cult.57

Why was it that the Monastery of Dimyana and not Dayr al-‘Askar or Dayr al-Mayma replaced Dayr al-Maghtis as a popular pilgrim destination? The other two monasteries had been either destroyed or nearly deserted in the fifteenth century, and thus Dimyana’s shrine might have been the obvious choice because it was already active as a pilgrimage site. Our discussion above offers viable evidence for the existence of a Dimyana cult in the fifteenth century and counters Meinardus’ suggestion that Dimyana can be linked only to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century.

Meinardus may have been more accurate in dating the cult’s widespread popularity to the Ottoman period. However, his reasoning might be incomplete as he cites the lack of namesake churches as well as the absence of visual representations (icons) of Dimyana as indicative of this late interest. A close examination reveals that there was at least one church in Upper Egypt, in the town of Akhmīm, dating to the sixteenth or seventeenth century, which bore the name of Saint Dimyana. There is also evidence that there was an ancient monastery, also in Upper Egypt (in the vicinity of the town of Balyāna), named after a Coptic hermit by the name of Mūsis, which also came to bear the name of Saint Dimyana sometime after the fifteenth century.58 This information attests to the fame accorded to Dimyana during the early Ottoman period. Furthermore, these


churches were both located in Upper Egypt, far from the source of the cult, illustrating the breadth of her popularity.

As for the lack of existing icons, Linda Langen offers possible explanations for the decline of Coptic iconography from the seventh century to the eighteenth century. There is indeed an enormous gap when one considers that this iconography existed in the context of an Orthodox Church where the centrality of icons was most crucial. In addition to sporadic outbreaks of iconoclasm and to periodic destruction of churches, Langen suggests that this absence was a result of the usage of old icons in the preparation of the Holy Myron oil used in Coptic christening ceremonies.⁵⁹ While the truth of the matter remains uncertain, these hypotheses might explain why Dimyana (or any other saint, for that matter) does not figure in Coptic iconography until the revival of this art during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Did the Dimyana cult arise, as Coquin suggests, simply out of the “need” to replace Dayr al-Maghtis as a pilgrimage site? It is important, when answering this question, to closely consider Meinardus’ assertion that in this period, there was also a

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⁵⁹ Linda Langen, “Icon-Painting in Egypt,” in Coptic Art and Culture, ed. Hans Hondelink (Cairo: Netherlands Institute for Archaeology and Arabic Studies in Cairo; Shouhdy Publishing House, 1990), p. 65. Langen cites travelers who mention that old or broken icons were utilized for the ceremony of the making of the Holy Myron oil, which is used for the consecration of the chrism and in christening ceremonies. The absence of Coptic icons does not preclude the existence of decorative wall paintings in Coptic churches and monasteries, which are currently being uncovered and which offer us a unique and potentially groundbreaking glimpse of medieval and early modern Coptic art. Zuzana Skalova has recently noted that although most chronicles are absent about this point, there “must have existed in cosmopolitan Cairo urban ateliers, the meeting grounds for Coptic craftsmen and Christian artists of different training and background who transferred traditional as well as the newest fashions in icon painting.” See Skalova, “Looking through Icons: Note on the Egyptian-Dutch ‘Conservation of Coptic Icons Project’ 1989-1996,” in Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlicher Zeit (Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Coptologists, Münster 20-26 July 1996), vol. I, ed. Stephen Emmel et al (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1999), p. 376.
necessity for the promotion of an indigenous Coptic female virgin-martyr cult.\textsuperscript{60} It is known that there is a long history of “localization” of non-Egyptian cults, the cults of Saint George, Saint Mina, and Saint Thecla are notable examples. Meinardus proposes that the figure of Dimyana was invented to counter the Greek Orthodox cult of Saint Catherine, whose shrine was centered mainly in the Mount Sinai monastery, a favorite stop of pilgrims en route to the Holy Land. Some similarities existing between the hagiography and iconography of Saint Catherine and that of Saint Dimyana have been noted and, in fact, Western travelers to Egypt in the nineteenth century confused the two figures.\textsuperscript{61} However, whether Catherine was ever terribly popular among Copts is questionable. Any hostility between the monophysite Coptic Church and the Greek Orthodox, dating from the time of the Muslim conquest, may have stigmatized the Catherine shrine. The infrequent veneration of Saint Catherine is telling of the choices made by the Coptic Church and community: Dimyana’s shrine in the Delta was more accessible than Catherine’s in the Sinai, particularly for pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. It is not implausible to infer that Dayr Dimyana was popular for this reason alone, that believers directed their adoration and prayers to the homegrown Coptic saint.

Moreover, the Dimyana hagiography did not really borrow from the Saint Catherine story, as Meinardus implies. All saints’ legends, particularly Coptic ones, as

\textsuperscript{60} Meinardus, “A Critical Study,” p. 52.

\textsuperscript{61} For example, Edith L. Butcher describes a discussion she had with a Coptic priest in Cairo, when she overheard him describe an icon of Dimyana as that of Catherine. “‘What made you say that?’ I asked him. ‘Has not that always been a picture of Sitte Dimiana?’ ‘What can I say?’ answered the priest with a deprecatory gesture. ‘Your excellency knows that it is Sitte Dimiana, but the tourists know nothing of Sitte Dimiana; and when I tell them, they do not understand. They say it must be St. Catherine; and –what do I know? –it may be that Catherine is the English for Dimiana. So I tell them it is St. Catherine, and they are content.’” See E. L. Butcher, \textit{The Story of the Church of Egypt}, vol. I (London: Smith, Elder, & Col., 1975[1897]), p. 126.
Willy Clarysse remarks, copied freely from one another, their only historical value usually being topography, that is, a description of the locality of Egypt in which the martyr cult existed.\textsuperscript{62} It is fairly unclear whether a newly incited disagreement between the Greek and Coptic churches took place in the Ottoman era and actually sparked the popularity of Dimyana’s cult in the Delta. Catherine was considered a familiar saint among Copts, a fact attested by Coptic pilgrimage to her shrine, although she was not part of the official compendium of saints in the Coptic Church. Whether this familiarity led to the adaptation of her story into the character of Dimyana cannot be confirmed nor should it be ignored. It is known that in the fifth and sixth centuries, the martyrdom of forty monks massacred in the Monastery of Saint Catherine was celebrated on December 28 and on January 14.\textsuperscript{63} While these “forty” were not martyred along with Saint Catherine, it is possible that the association between Catherine and a set of forty martyrs found its way into Coptic lore. However, additional similarities between the two hagiographies are limited only to the severe tortures experienced by the two female martyrs.

The correlation between the popularity of non-native versus indigenous saints can be more easily examined in light of the cult of Saint Thecla, who was indisputably the most popular female virgin-martyr in late antique Egypt. Stephen Davis explains that although Thecla’s was a foreign story, it found great appeal in Egypt and “became

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Clarysse, “The Coptic Martyr Cult,” p. 392. Clarysse adds that the public usually enjoyed hearing what stories happened in their own town or in a familiar surrounding.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Raithou, a seaport on the Gulf of Clyisma nearby the Monastery, also commemorated the massacre of forty monks on the same day as those of St. Catherine’s. See Irfan Shahid, “Arab Christian Pilgrimages,” in Frankfurter, ed., \textit{Pilgrimage and Holy Space}, p. 377; see also Meinardus, “A Critical Study,” p. 51.
\end{itemize}
thoroughly assimilated into the native Egyptian cult of the martyrs.” Davis surmises that the Thecla cult faded in the late medieval period, by the ninth or tenth century of the Common Era, possibly because the saint’s originally Greek identity was never successfully translated into the Egyptian context. The separation between the Coptic and Greek churches, over the course of many centuries, may have led to the gradual demise of the Greek Thecla and may account for the subsequent failure of the Egyptian Thecla to grow beyond certain “demarcated local boundaries.” It is feasible that as the Coptic Church acclimated to Islamic rule, local female hagiographic traditions took root and evoked a broader appeal. If it did not specifically replace Catherine, then Dimyana’s cult may have filled a general void that had existed previously in Egypt with the eclipse of Thecla’s cult, which was active in Egypt until the early Middle Ages. Copts linked the story of a “local” girl, born and raised on Egyptian soil and baptized in the “neighborhood” church, to a pre-established site.

The Delta region, with its early Mamluk-era glory as a vibrant and economically beneficial pilgrimage destination, would regain its prestige as a pilgrimage destination during the early centuries of Ottoman rule in Egypt. The Delta may have been a logical place for the proliferation of saintly cults during the Ottoman period, as it seems to have been already a great pilgrimage destination among Muslims and Christians. Father

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64 Stephen Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 172. He argues that Thecla underwent a process of “Egyptianization” which included a rewriting of her martyr legend into a hagiography completely rooted in Egyptian geographic locations. A ninth-century copy of the hagiography of the Egyptian Thecla “abounds with stereotypical characters, sensational scenes, and inconsistent historical details – characteristics that have earned for most Egyptian martyrlogies the reputation of literary fiction” (p. 180). Davis adds that the creation of new martyr traditions was a common feature of late antique and early medieval Christianity and that it was likely a “creative expression of local pieties” (p. 182).

65 Correspondence with Stephen Davis in March 2002.
Antonius Gonzales, writing about a voyage made during 1665-1666, mentions two major pilgrimages that were taken by Cairenes to the Delta region although we must keep in mind that his report is based on hearsay, as he attended neither one. The first pilgrimage was likely that to the tomb of Aḥmad al-Badawi in Tanta. Thousands of pilgrims went to a mosque located between Cairo and Damietta, according to Gonzales, in the period approximately ten to twelve days after the flood of the Nile. He described this as a bustling festival to which pilgrims apparently came not only to honor the saint but also out of a belief that all of their sins would be forgiven. The second festival, about which little is known other than Gonzales’ description, was a festival that took place somewhere between Cairo and al-Rashid (Rosetta), reportedly a few days after the first festival. The description of this pilgrimage is fascinating in how it compares with the festival of Dimyana, as will be discussed below:

Between Cairo and Rosette is a splendid tomb, like a large and beautiful mosque, [made] of beautiful cut white stones, enclosed on all sides and agreeably surrounded by trees like a small forest. The Turks [Muslims] say that there is a holy woman buried there who, during her life, never refused the use of her body to anyone, no matter the number that came to her. She used to always repeat: My children, satisfy your desires in the honor of God. She never wanted to accept the least payment because she was extremely rich. The Turks regard her as a great saint and this prostitution as a virtue. While going up and while descending the Nile, the Turks, while passing in front of this place, make a great veneration at this tomb and they call upon this saint to give them a favorable journey. One person had said this to me previously and I especially paid attention. When the

66 Aḥmad al-Badawi has been referred to as “the most popular saint of the Muslims in Egypt” for the past seven hundred years. Born in Fez (596 AH/1199-1200 CE), he eventually settled in Egypt, in the town of Tanta, where he died in 675 AH/1276 CE. He is venerated at a mosque that was built over his tomb in Tanta. There are three annual festivals celebrated in his honor, whose timing seems to correspond to the Coptic calendar. See K. Voller and E. Littmann, “Aḥmad al-Badawi,” EI² 1.280-281. Gonzales does not specify which festival this was, but mentions that it was likely the festival celebrated “about a month after the summer solstice, when the Nile has risen considerably but the dams of the canals are not yet cut.”

annual festival is celebrated every year, gathered around this place are an incalculable number of tents, as if a whole army was camped there. At the same time, also the notable women of Cairo and other cities go there to imitate this virtuous vessel of piety - as they refer to her. I heard this being told by some French tradesmen who had gone there out of curiosity – [at least they claim it!] - but I am very much afraid that they acted like everyone. One showed me a gold ring that he had received as a gift from a Turkish woman. They said that there were many women who offered themselves, who were richly dressed but refusing to say who they were or to show their faces. It is in this that one recognizes the blindness, the stupidity and the superstition of the Turks, who on this date seem devoid of jealousy and, according to what one person says, would not dare forbid their wives to go there for devotion, [so as] not to sin against the holy one or the deceased prostitute. However at other times, they can be excessively jealous, keep and supervise their wives too thoroughly, even locking them up when they leave.…At the approach of this festival and all the noise surrounding it, many merchants go to Bulāq,⁶⁸ the port of Cairo, to look at this crowd of Turkish women leaving on vessels and boats, and returning....Some of them are followed by those who are curious to see in which houses those most richly dressed prostitutes lived.⁶⁹

It is difficult to assess the veracity of this fantastical story,⁷⁰ which Gonzales heard through another source. One is left to wonder, however, whether such a festival indeed took place in the Delta around the cult of a female saint and whether the description of the liberal attitudes by and towards women was partially authentic. The festival of Dimyana, as will be described below, was a hubbub of activity, and women who attended were lax in their behavior, which in turn was partially tolerated.

Still, one of the more compelling reasons for the rise of the Dimyana cult in the Delta during the Ottoman period might be related to Coptic-Muslim conflicts over an ancient springtime festival celebrated in Egypt. This is one point which has been thus far

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⁶⁸ Bulāq was a port on the Nile used for traffic in-between Cairo and Lower Egypt during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. Today, it is a neighborhood in Cairo. See Jacques Jomier, “Bulāq,” EI² 1.1299.


⁷⁰ The translator into French of Gonzales’ travels, Charles Libois, mentions that we have no other corroboration for this story.
neglected in the literature and, although conjectural, is worth mentioning here. Huda Lutfi’s study of Coptic festivals in the Mamluk era illuminates this discussion. According to Lutfi, one of the most important festivals commemorated by Copts until the fourteenth century was the Festival of the Martyr (‘Īd al-Shahīd), observed annually in Cairo on the banks of the Nile on the eighth day of the Coptic month of Bashans (roughly May). This was an ancient spring festival -- crucial for ensuring a plentiful inundation of the Nile -- which had undergone a “Christianization” process at some earlier point and then had witnessed more changes when Copts came to live under Muslim rather than Byzantine rule. The finger of a male Coptic martyr, symbol of an ancient sacrificial gift, was thrown into the river to assure the Nile’s prosperity. Lutfi writes:

Even though the figure of this martyr could be interpreted as symbolizing the historical experience of collective Coptic martyrdom under the earlier oppressive rule of the Byzantines, this signification seems to have undergone a transformation more specific to the historical experience of Copts under Muslim hegemony. For by the Mamluk period, the figure of the Shahid was believed to have stood for the Coptic martyr suffering from the oppression of Muslim hegemonic power. Here, the figure of al-Shahid symbolizes a specific act of martyrdom experienced under the dominance of Muslim culture; it is the figure of the subversive Copt who, after conversion to Islam, commits the sin of apostasy, thereby deserving elimination from the Muslim community.71

The change in the concept of martyrdom from the period of Byzantine to Muslim rule is not surprising. Moreover, the rituals behind ‘Id al-Shahid are described in detail by al-Maqrizi and are an excellent example of one of the most popular and historic Coptic festivals. The festival’s excessive revelry, according to Lutfi, was cause for alarm among Mamluk officials who, while profiting from the taxes collected from the sale of alcohol,

71 Huda Lutfi, “Coptic Festivals of the Nile: Aberrations of the Past?” in The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society, eds. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 264. The custom of throwing body parts to the Nile was an ancient tradition. In the ancient and
faced outrage on the part of those conservative Muslim clerics who feared the endangerment of Muslim morality and piety. The merrymaking surrounding this feast, described by al-Maqrizi, is so noteworthy for our study here that it is worth citing Lutfi’s translation of his report:

On this day, Copts come from all the villages to watch the ceremony. They ride horses and perform acrobatics on top of them. Residents of al-Qahira and al-Fustat from all classes proceed to the banks and islands of the Nile to pitch their tents. All male and female singers, entertainers, prostitutes, effeminate males and reprobates of all types eagerly participate in the festival. Infinite numbers of people congregate; only the Creator can estimate them. Countless sums of money are spent, and numerous sins are performed in excess. Chaos erupts and some people get killed. Over one hundred thousand silver dirhams worth of wine is sold on this day, of which five thousand gold dinars are appropriated as tax. One merchant sold what is worth twelve thousand silver dirhams of wine. The congregation of festivities always took place in Shubra, one of the districts of al-Qahira. Thus the peasants of Shubra paid their kharaj tax to the state from the revenue which they procured from the sale of wine on the feast of the martyr.72

This festival ultimately met its fate in 755 AH/1355 CE when officials took hold of the finger of the martyr and had it burned. Its ashes were then thrown into the Nile. The abolition of this celebration, according to Lutfi, “cannot be viewed simply as a manifestation of Muslim repugnance at non-Islamic popular practices” but was also linked to the Mamluk state’s intention to overtake key Coptic properties and relieve itself of financial ruin.73

What must be noted here, however, is that the Festival of the Martyr occurred in Cairo at a time when Copts still constituted a visible part of the Egyptian population. Soon after, in the fourteenth century, a large number of Copts converted (voluntarily or

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73 Ibid., p. 268.
involuntarily) to Islam as a result of systematic oppression by the Mamluk state. Other Coptic festivals, according to Lutfi, either died out during this era or were suppressed and confined to the boundaries of Coptic churches and/or homes. This period was a detriment to many public Coptic popular practices in Cairo. It is for this reason that I suggest the rise in subsequent years of an alternate geographical focus of Coptic festivities. It is no small coincidence that the most famous Coptic spring festival of the Mamluk era, centered on the cult of a martyr, would be displaced in popularity, decades later, by another spring festival, celebrated within days of the previous one, also in the Coptic month of Bashans and also focused on the cult of a martyr. Moreover, the celebration associated most historically with the Dimyana feast occurs on the 12th of Bashans (roughly 20 May), on the day commemorating the consecration of her church rather than the day of her martyrdom (13 Tūba/21 January) as was customary with most other saints. This illustrates a deliberate decision to observe the festivities in the spring.

It was logical that such a large, bustling and potentially disruptive festival would be removed to a relatively remote region in the Northern Delta, at a distance from the eyes of conservative Muslim clerics, where all Egyptians, Copts and Muslims could share in this ancient spring festival. Certainly, festivals continued to be celebrated in Cairo in

74 For more on this topic, see Donald P. Little, “Coptic Converts to Islam during the Barī Mamluk Period,” in Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, 8th-18th centuries, eds. M. Gervers and Ramzi Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), pp. 263-268.

75 An excellent example of this sort of “peripheralization” of shrines and festivals is discussed by Dina Rizk Khoury. Khoury mentions that during the eighteenth century in Ottoman Mosul, there was a gradual move towards mausolea that were located outside the city walls. Khoury writes that this move had “mixed results,” particularly for women pilgrims. “On the one hand, it allowed women to gender these spaces by attributing meanings relevant to women to the intercessionary powers of their saints. Thus, the saints’ tombs of the northern part of the city which lie outside the city’s walls, were favorite spaces for picnics and pilgrimages….On the other hand, the peripheralization of some ‘Alid mausolea which were especially popular among women and commoners in general isolated women from the center of the city, and placed their ritual and cultural life at a distance from the male-dominated and more ‘orthodox’ rituals of the sacred
subsequent centuries; celebrations centered on the Nile (of which there were a few) regularly took place under the supervision of the Ottoman governor of Egypt. However, after the fourteenth century, there was a visible absence of the Coptic organizational component in Cairene festivals, as many Copts relocated their celebrations to their homes, churches, or to more peripheral locations. This point, taken into consideration along with the other hypotheses above, helps us understand why, by the Ottoman period, the Dimyana cult had become the most significant Coptic popular mūlid in Lower Egypt, if not in all of Egypt.

The Festival of Dimyana

Evidence for the pilgrimage and festival at Dimyana’s shrine near the town of Bilqās during the Ottoman period is sparse. One must therefore be cautious in comparing information drawn from various historic periods and in formulating conclusions based on sources that are relatively scattered. The information about this festival is mostly furnished by memoirs of European travelers and not by Coptic-Arabic sources. Moreover, a number of written documents from the official perspective of literate churchmen overshadow the fact that the viewpoint of the faithful has rarely been self-documentated. For Copts living under Ottoman rule, we must decipher accounts that were written by western travelers and missionaries who came from Christian traditions that were struggling to purge the faith of its seemingly arcane “popular” practices, and who

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76 Antonius Gonzales describes one of these festivals, celebrating the Nile’s rise to completion, at the end of July 1665. The Ottoman governor assumed an active role in these celebrations, which lasted, according to Gonzales, three to four days. See Gonzales, Voyage en Egypte, vol. I, pp. 356-357.
therefore wrote with numerous biases against the cult of the saints. Since they open a window onto the traditions of the Coptic community in an era about which little is known, however, these accounts must be carefully considered. In this context, a picture of the festivities in one particular year or even in one century cannot be easily painted, as the wide variety of sources utilized here span four centuries. However, through this analysis, I hope to offer a glimpse of the experience of pilgrims during this feast, as an example of Coptic popular practices of piety and religious festivity.

In the Coptic context, shrines, and the festivals surrounding their namesake patrons, brought to life the faith in a way that coupled the distant and illusively glorious past of Roman-era martyrs, such as Saint Dimyana, and of monastic founders, such as Saint Anthony, with a present that was in contrast spiritually depressed. The Egyptian terrain has been dotted with numerous religious shrines since ancient Pharaonic times. In Christian and, subsequently, in the Islamic eras, many of these places were reconstituted under the care of new masters, and additional shrines were invented around martyrs and/or holy figures who, in some form, had contributed to building and promulgating the faith. These new shrines, on the whole, were set “on the edge of town and therefore somewhat outside the control of the family, the church, and society as a whole,” as Janet Timbie writes.\textsuperscript{77} Such places were “typically located on the outskirts of a town to facilitate the pilgrims’ break with conventional social structure and foster the creation of new, shared experiences.”\textsuperscript{78}


\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p. 419.
In Christian Egypt, martyr shrines were notorious for pilgrims’ rambunctious practices during the saints’ festivals. These “funerary rites” were marked by excesses of “feasting, libertine behavior, [and the] misuse of the Eucharist.” Pilgrims were drawn to a shrine specifically because of its bustling festival, usually celebrated on a saint’s feast day (or martyrdom date) and lasting up to seven days. The celebrations were clearly a time when the boundaries of prevailing social norms could be overstepped and redefined, but the Church has customarily attempted to exercise some control over these boisterous occasions. In earlier centuries, as in the modern era, a martyr’s feast often included a more structured or “liturgical” side, determined by ecclesiastical authorities. It was common to have a reading of a homily about a saint, written by an esteemed father of the church and read by the leading preachers of that day, which included a narrative of the saint’s sufferings and a description of the miracles performed at her shrine. A festival was also characterized by the chanting of hymns in praise of the saint in question or of psalms that were believed to have a healing value imbedded in their words. Often, “[p]rocessions around the site were accompanied by chanting; and religious services conducted at the sanctuary of course had their musical component.” Leslie MacCoull maintains that this continued to be the practice in the Islamic period, as evidenced by examples from the ninth century, when, at one active shrine, pilgrims even chanted

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79 Ibid.

80 There were important exceptions to this pattern, as we witness in the case of Dimyana, whose festival was celebrated on a non-feast day. See Gerard Viaud, “Pilgrimages,” *Coptic Encyclopedia* 6.1968-1975.


designated texts at various stations in the sanctuary.\textsuperscript{83} In the Muslim period, rituals performed in earlier years, in addition to new ones that were continuously added, became part of what defined a Coptic martyr festival. Moreover, the idea of celebrating festivals in remote geographic regions, away from the censure of Muslim clerics, was again reestablished, as was the case with the springtime Festival of the Martyr discussed above.

Aside from the festive atmosphere, what drew most faithful -- irrespective of their religion -- to Egyptian shrines and to saints’ celebrations was the belief in those saints’ supernatural ability and in the effectiveness of their intercessions. Through prayer and also through the act of nadr or vow-making, believers hoped that the most powerful of these saints would intercede with God on their behalf and help them in their times of need. Made daily, weekly, monthly or annually, depending on geographic location, a pilgrimage was a journey to the “homes” of saints who were considered to be “extended family members”\textsuperscript{84} or patrons of whom one can ask a favor. The believers, in essence, took their concerns, problems, and offerings to the saints and not to God.\textsuperscript{85} This inherent heterodoxy embedded within the cult of the saints, whether in Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, has been the point at which official and scriptural authority intersected and sometimes collided with popular practices of the faithful.\textsuperscript{86} However, for the Coptic case,

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 404.

\textsuperscript{84} Georgia Frank, “Miracles, Monks, and Monuments: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto as Pilgrims’ Tales” in Frankfurter, ed., Pilgrimage and Holy Space, p. 483.

\textsuperscript{85} See Marc Gaborieau’s discussion in “The Cult of Saints among the Muslims of Nepal and Northern India,” in Wilson, ed., Saints and their Cults, p. 299.

\textsuperscript{86} For example, for the cult of the saints among Muslims, Joseph Meri writes, “turning to intermediaries for intercession was perceived as contrary to the monotheistic message of Islam. Indeed, it is condemned in Scripture when God proclaims, ‘To God belongs exclusively the right to grant intercession: to Him belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth: In the End, it is to Him that ye shall be brought back.’ The Qur’an warns against seeking intercession from those other than God on the Day of Judgement, and against
while many popular traditions evolved at a local, grassroots level, historically Coptic clergy have also promoted a culture of saint veneration and pilgrimage among the faithful. Saint veneration strengthened the Church’s time-honored assertion that it was founded upon the blood of martyrs by keeping alive the memory of these saints. Pilgrimage fostered the ties between believers and their local churches, shrines, and sanctuaries. Ultimately, then, a martyr shrine provided a physical stage for the dictation and the performance of sanctity in a landscape anchored in holiness and blessings.

To sustain danger or experience adversity in the course of reaching the shrine of a venerable saint was a significant aspect in intensifying the pilgrimage experience. For instance, traveling to the shrine in Bilqāṣ, a relatively remote area in the Delta, was the first challenge facing pilgrims to the Church of Dimyana. In his travel memoirs, Carsten Niebuhr wrote in the late eighteenth century, “The eastern part of the Delta, which has been, as yet, but little frequented by the European travelers, is not less rich in antiquities than that which is better known. The frequency of robbers, and the looseness of the police, in that remote district, deter the curious. Yet one might visit those parts without danger, by accompanying the Copts, of whom great numbers go every year, in pilgrimage to an ancient church, near Gemiana.”


festival. The isolation of this shrine might also explain why we have only a few western travelers’ accounts of this festival, considered to be one of the greatest among Copts.  

Much as in early Christian times, pilgrims in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries came from great distances to receive the blessings of the Dimyana shrine. In order to reach this region from Cairo, the German Orientalist Johann Michael Vansleb (d. 1679) described in detail the somewhat arduous journey he performed in 1672:

> When the time was come that the Copties [Copts] observe the Festival of the Apparitions of the Saints at Gemiane….I went from Cairo on Monday the 9th of May…with several Copties who came in our Company….We went aboard at Boulac, and set sail for the Town of Mansoura, where we landed the 12th of the same Month. The next day we left Mansoura, taking a boat for Diast, a little village situate upon the West-side of Nilus; for here all travellers that go to Gemiane from Cairo are wont to land. It stands about four hours journeying from Mansoura. At our landing, we left our boat and went by land to Bossat inossara, a little mile distant from the river, in the land; we spent there the night, and lodg’d in the church of S. George, with several other Copties whom we found there, who were bound also, as well as we, for Gemiane. The 14th day very early we proceeded on towards the third branch of Nilus…which it hath pass’d near the town of Mohelle Kebire, or Great Mohelle, and near Gemiane it discharges itself.

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88 Claude Sicard described the Dimyana festival as follows, “I have been back for eight days from a voyage made in the isle of the Delta. Here is the reason and a short relation. After the alleged holy fire of Jerusalem there is nothing which is more venerated among Copts than another alleged miracle which is done every year in the Church of Gemiane located in Garbie [sic] province of the Delta. There, about May 18, which is the feast day, a multitude of Christians go, from all parts, especially from Cairo and Lower Egypt. I wanted to take part in examining these things up close, to inform and preach in the place of solemnity, to make mission in the heart of the isle Delta.” See Claude Sicard, Œuvres, vol. II, ed. Maurice Martin (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1982), p. 31.

89 Johann Michael Vansleb had visited Egypt numerous times and was particularly interested in studying the history of the Coptic Church. His firsthand observations of Coptic life during the Ottoman period are recorded in The Present State of Egypt; or a New Relation of a Late Voyage into that Kingdom Performed in the Years 1672 and 1673 (London: R. L’Estrange, 1678) and in Histoire de l’Église d’Alexandrie (Paris: Chez la Veuve Clouzier et Pierre Promé, 1677); they constitute a most significant source for historians of Egypt and of the Copts. See Maurice Martin, S.J, “Vansleb (Wansleben), Johann Michael,” Coptic Encyclopedia 7.2299.

90 This is a town in the Nile Delta, west of the Damietta branch of the Nile River and northeast of Tanta. In the fourteenth century, under Mamluk Sultan Burqûq’s rule, al-Maḥalla al-Kubra became the center of the “wilaya” or province of Gharb. See Johannes Hendrik Kramers, “Al-Mahalla al-Kubra,” EtP, PP. ???
into the Sea at Brullos. We march’d on into the Country, and when we came to this branch of the River we found several boats ready to carry us with the current to Gemiane, where we landed about the evening, not without suffering many crosses and inconveniences; because the master on the boat, an Arabian, was a wicked Rogue.\textsuperscript{91}

The presence of boats, ready to take pilgrims directly to the shrine, indicates in part the economic profitability of the Dimyana festival to locals in the Delta. It also alludes to a sort of organization on the part of indigenous inhabitants: Coptic festival organizers, villagers, and bedouins communicated with one another regarding the festival and consequently, as will be further discussed, this celebration was prepared for and anticipated.

Once a pilgrim arrived, any discomfort experienced on the trip was seemingly forgotten. The shrine was located in a fertile and lush region, a picturesque scene for the weary traveler, particularly for those arriving from large towns. Vansleb mentions that the shrine was surrounded on the east and the west by branches of the Nile that rendered it bountiful. Writing a few decades later, Jesuit missionary Claude Sicard described this area as a plain, covered all year with vegetation as the Nile waters flooded and fertilized it, creating a suitable grazing ground for oxen and sheep that were kept by herdsmen.\textsuperscript{92}

Even from a distance, the Church of Dimyana was a visible and impressive sight. Vansleb wrote that during his visit in 1672, the church was “not yet finished,” possibly indicating that renovations to the shrine were ongoing. He describes it as beautiful yet architecturally asymmetrical, with its twenty-five arches or domes unequal in size.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{91} Vansleb, \textit{The Present State of Egypt}, pp. 94-95.

\textsuperscript{92} Sicard, \textit{Œuvres}, vol. II, p. 34.

\textsuperscript{93} Vansleb, \textit{The Present State of Egypt}, p. 96.
Claude Sicard, writing in 1712, remarked that the church had twenty-two domes which were discernible from afar. At the time of Vansleb’s visit, the church had one chapel where the apparitions of the saints, as will be noted shortly, took place; windows located in each arch adorned the inside of church. There was only one altar, as typical of Eastern Orthodox churches. Vansleb positioned his readers inside of the church by mentioning that “the chappel where the apparition happens is on the north-side, on the right hand as one enters in, and over against the door.”94 The church complex, made of white limestone and situated in the midst of the green pastures, constituted a picturesque scene.

Once the pilgrims made the journey to Bilqāš, the festival of Dimyana continued for several days. One account mentions that it lasted between eight and fifteen days, with the final day being the martyr’s feast.95 As pilgrims arrived at different times and settled into encampments surrounding the shrine, the celebrations began to exhibit a certain energy. On the one hand, this was the time when individual believers could visit the tomb, bringing their offerings or making supplications to the saint. On the other, both profane and religious rituals marked the collective celebrations. Claude Sicard describes the carnivalesque atmosphere as bustling, swarming both with Muslim and Christian visitors, with its highlights being the miraculous apparition of Coptic saints inside the church and the performance of the equestrian exercises (furūsiyya) by bedouin horsemen. In order to sustain this festival for so many days and with such a large number of people, it was necessary for Coptic Church representatives, Ottoman government officials, and

94 Ibid.

bedouin leaders to collaborate and reach an understanding regarding the organization of the proceedings.

Vansleb describes the arrangement made among Coptic leaders, bedouins, and Ottoman officials. At the onset of the celebrations, armed bedouins gathered at the church, awaiting the customary hospitable treatment for the duration of three days, which was funded by revenues from the Coptic Church. “The custome of feeding the Arabians there-about is very ancient,” according to Vansleb; “it comes from their pretending to be the Lords of the Country round about where this Church is built, and therefore for this consideration they hinder not the Christians, as they are able, from coming to this festival.” Hospitality was exchanged for the freedom of not being harassed, and the job of caring for these bedouins’ provisions fell upon the church’s treasurer, who was required to provide for all of their needs: to care for their livestock and to furnish them with food and drink. Moreover, the bedouins performed their furūsiyya games, their warlike exercises, entertaining the numerous crowds gathered at the festival. These games, while appreciated by all, were in fact one of the many “impious” activities that marked the celebrations. On the third and final day of this arrangement, the bedouins were served dinner and were expected to leave within two hours of this meal. If any was present thereafter, they would be severely punished by the “Bey’s Lieutenant,” the Ottoman

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96 Bedouin shaykhs were effectively “masters of much of Egypt’s countryside”; the arrangement which allowed the Dimyana festivities to take place each year is impressive, as Michael Winter reports that bedouin shaykhs and their troops were notorious for their violent acts and looting of the region. See Michael Winter, *Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule, 1517-1798* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 90-91, pp. 98-99.

97 Vansleb also writes, “On this festival day all the Arabians thereabouts meet here, out of an ancient Custome, to be treated for three days with the revenues of this church: when I was there, they could make up near five hundred horse, and five hundred foot. The horse-men were armed with a lance, the foot-men with a club upon their shoulders, pointed with iron.” Vansleb, *The Present State of Egypt*, pp. 98-99.
official representative, the “Lieutenant Governor” of the Province of Malla, who attended the festivities.

The Ottoman security presence at the festival was remarkable. Claude Sicard reported that this “Lieutenant Governor” of the province owned a large home near the shrine of Dimyana. The duty of his “guard of Cavalry” during the festival, as it was in broader Ottoman society, was to ensure peace. Particularly at the Dimyana feast, the guards were to “contain the Arab inhabitants of the desert.” For this reason, according to Vansleb, there was little danger of being robbed among this huge crowd of pilgrims. The guards were dispatched in order to prevent potential havoc, quarrels, and robberies. A vivid example of this security presence is seen in Vansleb’s narrative:

There is here no danger of being robb’d; for the Lieutenant of the Bey of the Mohelle is also at this festival with a good guard of Spahins to prevent disorders, quarrels, and robberies which might happen among rude and barbarous people: so that in this place one may be with as much safety as at Cairo in a house. Upon this account there happen’d a pleasant accident; a poor Arabian had taken from a Christian a handful of Barly to give it to his ass, he was taken upon the fact: the Christians immediately dragg’d him with a great noise, to the Beys

98 “Lieutenant Governor” is the phrase used by Sicard. It is unclear whether this was a kâhya -- the lieutenant of an Ottoman official. See Jane Hathaway, The Politics of Households in Ottoman Egypt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 176.


100 Sipahi (Sipâhiyân) was typically a reference to those cavalry regiments, which initially played a significant role in the Ottoman conquest and control of Egypt. As Stanford Shaw writes, there were two cavalry regiments -- the Gönülliyyân and Tüfenkçiyân -- who accompanied the conqueror of Egypt, Sultan Selim I. Shaw explains that “During the first decade of Ottoman rule, the cavalry corps were the most rebellious and ill-organized of the Ottoman troops in Egypt, and they terrorized town and country.” As a consequence of these rebellious acts, a third cavalry corps was formed in 1524-25; this was a corps made up of Mamluks, and they were referred to as Jemâ’at-ı Çerâkise because of their Circassian origins. This latter group was charged with the responsibility of “carrying out the [Ottoman] governors’ obligations to supervise the cultivation of the lands, maintaining the provincial irrigation systems, and enforcing when necessary the proper division of their waters.” See Stanford Shaw, The Financial and Administrative Organization and Development of Ottoman Egypt, 1517-1798 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 196-197. For detailed information on the wages of these cavalry regiments, refer to Shaw, especially p. 203 and p. 210.
Lieutenant to have him punish’d: While they were leading him a great tumult of people ran to see him; some upbraided him with his boldness and impudency to steal, without apprehending the punishment of the saints that appear’d in their church, and did so many great miracles; another ask’d him whether he did not fear that God would punish him? At which words he answer’d, Ane Baaref rabbene; that is, What, do I know that there is a God? Or, I know not what is God. This caused me to wonder, both at the Copties settled perswasion of the real appariation of their saints, and at the ignorance of the Arabians, seeing that some of them know not that there is a God. At last this wretch was shut up in a cage, and I know not what happen’d to him afterwards.  

While the popular belief was that “Sitt Dimiana can prevent thieves from stealing, or from escaping with what they have stolen…or that if a man here looks upon a woman with evil intent, he will receive an injury to his eyes, or to some part of his body,” it is doubtless that the presence of the cavalry actually enhanced the feeling of security. The guards were also called upon to monitor the gathering at the Church of Dimyana on the days that the appariations of the saints occurred. In times of these appariations, large crowds crammed inside the small chapel of the Church. Guards surrounded the chapel out of curiosity but also to supervise the crowds’ excitement at the appariations.

Although European travelers characterized appariations of Coptic saints, including Saints George, Mina, Victor, the Virgin Mary, and the patron Dimyana, as fraudulent, these appearances were the most popular highlight of the Dimyana festivities and made the celebrations preeminent among pilgrims. Despite their biases, however, Vansleb

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102 Leeder, *Modern Sons of the Pharaohs*, p. 143.

103 Leeder’s later account is no less skeptical than Vansleb’s or Sicard’s. He writes “Some visitors go on to state that Sitt Dimiana used to appear in years past in a small window in an old dome which still remains, and is believed to be the dome of the first church consecrated in the name of Sitt Dimiana. It is said that she appeared after prayer and praise had been offered for several hours. But those who have inquired into this matter say that this might be only the reflection of some people passing along the roof, beside the dome. In short, Moslems, as well as Copts, living in that part, respect this saint considerably, and believe that she is the means of granting them most important benefits, when they address themselves to her. Moslems are usually heard singing to her name, calling her *Ya Sitt ya bint el wali* – ‘You the lady of the Viceroy.’ The
and Sicard furnish a fascinating commentary on the fluid and unrestricted practices of pilgrims at a Coptic martyr shrine during the Ottoman period. What emerges out of their descriptions is the way in which crowds, in a random and “democratic” fashion, decided the identity of the saint they were observing and the emblems by which he or she was recognized. Both the assortment of saints that appeared at the Dimyana shrine and the manner in which they were distinguished was a common feature of Coptic miraculous apparitions during this period. 104 With regard to the details of the Dimyana appearances, Vansleb described his experience in 1672 as follows:

During three days I examined this apparition, and the causes from whence it proceeds as exactly as I could possibly; and found it to be nothing else but the reflection of the objects that went by the church at a convenient distance, which being carried into the chappel, by the air, through the two windows that give light. It represents, over against upon the wall, the shadow which is like the object that goes by: for example, when a horse-man goes by, there is to be seen upon the wall, in a confused manner, a shadow of a man on horse-back. If it be a woman that hath a child in her arms, one may see the shadow of that appearance; and so is it with all other things. Now the people being superstitious and of a dull apprehension, not knowing how this happens, fancy that the saints appear to them. They know and distinguish them, according as they are painted in their churches: for example, when the see the shadow that represents a cavalier, they say it is S. George; for the Copties, as well as the other people of the east, represent him as a man on horse-back, killing a dragon. When they see a woman carrying of an infant in her arms, they say that it is the blessed Virgin, because they see her thus represented in the pictures of their churches. When they see the shadow of a man

first object of keeping these anniversaries in the memory of saints was to urge people to follow their example and their strong faith. The days of the festival used to be spent in worship, prayer, and religious conversations, and in some innocent amusements. But, since the clouds of ignorance darkened the sky of the Coptic Church, these beautiful ceremonies were turned to a considerable extent into play and mere enjoyment. In these days there is an increase of singing, games, drinking, and in the use of words sometimes not very polite. The numbers who attend the services in the churches are not so great, though there are usually a great many people attending the last day’s prayer. In my opinion, some of those who attend the festival offer an insult rather than an honour to the saint. The heads of the church are to be blamed, to a great extent, for this state of affairs.” Ibid., p. 145.

104 Vansleb and Sicard reported that in a neighboring church in the Delta (in the town of Busāt al-Nuṣāra), rival apparitions of similar saints occurred in the same month as the Dimyana festival, potentially boasting a competition with the Dimyana shrine. Vansleb, *The Present State of Egypt*, p. 95; Sicard, *Œuvres*, vol. II, p. 38.
on foot of a reddish colour, they say that it is S. Menna, because they paint him with a red habit. They distinguish the other saints in the same manner. They are so much bewitch’d with the fancy of the reality of these apparitions, that if any person should offer to deny it, he would be in danger to be knock’d on the head…only by chance these shadows have appeared, and been taken notice of. This apparition continues three days following; in which time there is such a great concourse of people, that one is ready to be stifled….When they saw some shadows upon the wall which had a relation with those saints that are painted in their churches, they cry out for joy, in their language, Selam lak Kaddis Filan; I salute you o saint N.N. To this they add an Hymn proper to the saint, and prayers, tying upon the wall some little crosses of wax. Of all the saints that their church worships, I have heard none called upon but the blessed Virgin, S. George, S. Menna, and S. Porter [sic].

This description gives us a portal into the popular worldview of believers present at the festival. The visions were often contested among observers; each spectator, man or woman, saw different saints in the various colors and shapes and yet all attributed their reasoning to the familiarity they had with the saint’s figure from Coptic iconography.

The populace saw the saints as real physical beings, as the local inhabitants of the shrine who, through their apparitions, came to greet the visitors. The ways in which these visions were interpreted illustrates the intersection of the church’s scriptural and pictorial authority (i.e., iconography) with the opinions and beliefs of the populace. Each person could voice his or her opinion and these viewpoints constituted a point of argument and negotiation. “The opinions are all divided,” writes Sicard, but “everyone shouts, disputes and sings hymns; it is an appalling hullabaloo caused by the ignorance and the superstition of Copts, but which brings pity upon those who believe it.”

What “brought pity” for Sicard was in reality a source of joy to the participants at the festival, as through

105 Vansleb, The Present State of Egypt, p. 98. Interestingly, Vansleb does not mention the apparition of Dimyana herself. “Porter” is likely Saint Victor (Coptic, bōkort).

these apparitions, they were touched by the saints’ baraka (blessing).\textsuperscript{107} Moreover, Coptic clergy, it seems, offered no challenge to these claims as the crowds were completely left to their own devices.

Standing among the audience, both Vansleb and Sicard felt that they could neither poke fun of nor challenge the authenticity of these apparitions. Sicard wrote that “I was not however able to speak, because I was not in safety in the midst of a mob unaware of its insane behavior…but the Turkish and Arab soldiers who were there in great numbers…[challenged] the gullibility of the Copts, and by sometimes blocking the window of the dome of the Appearances, sometimes separating the masses on top of the platform, they tried to convince the Christians that the alleged passages of the Saints dispersed naturally.”\textsuperscript{108} The apparitions at the shrine of Saint Dimyana, like the miracle of the Holy Fire in Christ’s tomb in Jerusalem that will be discussed in the next chapter, were reminiscent of a competition over legitimizing the “supremacy” of the Christian faith in the eyes of the Muslim authorities. The Dimyana crowd’s “mob mentality” ensured that these appearances would go unchallenged; even as Sicard describes above, when soldiers intervened trying to discredit the appearances, the crowd was seemingly unmoved.

It appears that Coptic clergy took an active part in the celebratory events of the festival, although not in an overtly official capacity. For most of the celebrations, the

\textsuperscript{107} This literally means “blessing.” In Christianity and in Islam, God confers this sort of blessing on special individuals and saints, who in turn convey the baraka to believers. See Georges S. Colin, “Baraka,” \textit{EI2} 1.1032. For a very engaging discussion of baraka in the context of Judaic and Islamic practices, see Joseph W. Meri, “Aspects of Baraka (Blessings) and Ritual Devotion among Medieval Muslims and Jews,” \textit{Medieval Encounters} 5 (1999): 46-69.

\textsuperscript{108} Sicard, \textit{Œuvres}, vol. II, p. 35.
separation between the broader populace and the clergy was seemingly blurred: the clergy were among the populace. Claude Sicard, as a Catholic priest, was taken aback by this close overlap between clergymen and the faithful. He was offended by the apparent disregard and laxity on the part of church officials towards the liturgical aspects of the festival, and was appalled that there was “neither confession nor communion among the Christians in this festival, although two masses were celebrated in all the days.”

Sicard associated both of those sacraments, confession and communion, with a strong and authoritative presence of Coptic Church officials, and in fact, despite Sicard’s criticism, the celebration of two masses illustrates that the clergy and church officials continued to play a significant role. Still, Sicard’s objections grew when priests from numerous villages in the Delta joined the crowds in their tents for eating, drinking and merrymaking; they, in turn, were “resentful” of Sicard because he had turned down their arak for water. His dismissal of the veracity of the apparitions, in addition to his criticism of the role that Coptic priests should play at the festival, illustrate how the fluid nature of the Dimyana festival was interpreted by some observers: as a hubbub of tumultuous masses.

In spite of the broad intermixing of all classes, religions, and genders, the festival still exhibited prevailing social divisions. Vansleb told of the great feast thrown by the treasurer of the Coptic Church, describing it as an “extraordinary banquet” where he ate “meat [that] was to be torn in pieces between the fingers, according to the custome of the

109 Ibid., p. 37.

110 Ibid.
country.”\footnote{Vansleb, \textit{The Present State of Egypt}, pp. 99-100.} This special banquet was held in honor of esteemed guests, likely to include Ottoman officials as well as higher Coptic clergy. Afterwards, however, the social prescripts of generosity dictated that the treasurer must feed the populace who were gathered around the tent. Vansleb mentions that after the distinguished guests finished dining, “out of the [treasurer’s] tent a long skin of leather was spread upon the ground for the ordinary people, where they were very well treated.”\footnote{Ibid.} This redistribution of food to poorer classes was an important function in Islamic society at large, as well as in Coptic Christian traditions. Ultimately, then, the annual Dimyana celebration was a time for feasting, amusement, and commerce. The broader community, Copts and Muslims, gathered to enjoy a holiday of sorts, to spend their days under the hospitable care of the Coptic Church.

An early twentieth-century account tells that the Church received a significant number of donations during this festival, in the form of jewels, money, and gold and silver plates.\footnote{Leeder, \textit{Modern Sons of the Pharaohs}, p. 144.} In the period under study, such donations likely supported the Church’s financing of the entire event, ranging from supplies for the bedouins to feeding the masses of pilgrims and paying an alcohol tax to the Ottoman authorities in attendance. The festival was also marked by a number of traders and vendors selling their wares. Meats and fresh fish were peddled in great quantities; water and wood were readily available. Later accounts mention that in the days of the festival, “numbers of merchants usually go and hold a bazaar, in which they sell food, drink, sometimes clothing,
ornaments, perfumes, rings, handkerchiefs, sticks, etc., and especially wooden and brass crosses imported from Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{114} It is also possible to imagine the sounds, sights, and smells of the festival. Sicard mentions that “the Javelin, the lute, the dances, [and] the feasts were the common occupation of both religions” at the festival.\textsuperscript{115} The festival was noted by one type of food that has been historically associated with ancient Egyptian spring celebrations. This was \textit{fissîkh}, a small fish that was cured in large quantities of salt. Elie Sidawé describes the pungent odor emitted by the fish: “The nauseous odors of decomposition that are released are made more bitter still by the strong heat of the day.”\textsuperscript{116}

Sidawé’s account, albeit from a later period, also indicates that there was a general laxity in the attitudes by and towards women at the festival. He reports that female Coptic visitors did not veil their faces and that they roamed the festival with a kind of audacity, knowing fully that men would lower their gazes from them because of the protection provided by Saint Dimyana.\textsuperscript{117} In another account, Leeder mentions that women came to Dimyana’s festival specifically seeking to benefit from her power “to give fruitfulness to women, or long life to the children of a woman who has lost many in infancy.”\textsuperscript{118} Moreover, they bought souvenirs to take to their native villages, believing

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., p. 94. This is reiterated in ‘Awad, \textit{Mimar al-shahīda Dimyana}, p. 10. He mentions that “whosoever so much as looks at a woman gets a swollen eye.”

\textsuperscript{118} Leeder, \textit{Modern Sons of the Pharaohs}, p. 144.
that they conveyed a “blessing from Sitt Dimiana,” hoping that their requests for health and fertility would be eventually fulfilled.

At the time of the apparitions and during the period of the festival, the hagiography of Dimyana loomed large. Dimyana’s intercessory powers, in addition to the popularity of her festival, drew numerous pilgrims each year. At the festival, the interpretation of Dimyana’s legend and of her place within the compendium of other Coptic saints was in the end decided by a powerful mob determined to assertively express its opinions without any pastoral instruction. The tensions between “local versus institutional” and “indigenizing versus scripturalizing” took center stage at the festival. While elite Coptic clerical authorities harbored, in hagiographic texts, the image of Dimyana as an erudite virgin and vocal Christian devotee, this was often eclipsed by a more popular version, advocated by both laity and lower clergy, of Dimyana as a homegrown local “girl.” The saint was benevolent to those devotees who patronized her annually at the festival, and she rewarded them with food, festivity, and miraculous apparitions. As David Frankfurter succinctly writes about early Egyptian Christianity, in the eyes of the mass of believers:

The vital martyrs of Egyptian Christianity were ‘our’ kinsmen, natives of particular villages, persecuted by foreign imperial forces, tried and tortured in ‘these’ towns along the Nile, and their bones discovered by ‘our people.’ Such storytelling is very much the process by which a new ideology of religious power is assimilated, situated in the landscape, recognizable to ‘us.’ And the written versions of these legends served the same intermediary function for the world of the literate. A martyr might be disengaged from his native locale and his relics and supernatural presence reestablished hundreds of miles away, all through careful hagiography.119

119 Frankfurter, ed., Pilgrimage and Holy Space, pp. 36-37.
The festival, moreover, was an opportunity to witness the ethereal presence of the saints at the apparitions, but also to loosen restrictions that ordinarily governed day-to-day dealings between Muslims and Copts, and between the faithful and clergy, as well as between men and women. When read at the festival, the Dimyana hagiography provided the populace a story of high entertainment value, filled with images of a triumphant heroine, suggestive sexual encounters, magical realms, and alternative icons of womanhood. It is more than likely that this imagery gave women the audacity to attend the festival unveiled while knowing fully well that their patroness Dimyana protected them. The Dimyana legend and festival also furnished Copts, in particular, with an important connection to a past that was centuries distant and seemingly fantastical; the martyr saint Dimyana herself was alive, and pilgrims could take home her blessings in the form of souvenirs: crosses, oil, and cloth. And just as Dimyana had shuttled between the world of the earthly and the divine, so did the pilgrims, for a brief period, move from their ordinary lives to these magical festivities in the Delta.

Epilogue

Saint Dimyana acts through God’s power and not through human power; therefore she is increasingly loved in the hearts of the people. We are not surprised when we see people’s love towards Saint Dimyana...[such as] those who seek to take the blessing of her icon during a [church] procession, and who crowd at us, tugging right and left, until we are nearly thrown on the ground. But we say that all is forgiven for the sake of the love of Saint Dimyana.121

120 Leslie Peirce has succinctly addressed this point by noting that while it is tempting to understand Middle Eastern societies in the context of demarcated boundaries between the sexes, “such surface patterns, if one fails to probe beyond them, may mask the complex overlapping interaction of male and female hierarchies.” See Leslie Peirce, “Seniority, Sexuality, and Social Order: The Vocabulary of Gender in Early Modern Ottoman Society,” in Zilfi, ed., Women in the Ottoman Empire, p. 169.

121 These are the words of current Bishop Bishoy, bishop of the episcopate in charge of the modern-day convent of Saint Dimyana in Egypt’s Delta region, as he describes a typical festival held annually for Saint
These words of a contemporary Coptic bishop are a vivid reminder of the appeal of the cult of Dimyana well into the present era. They illustrate how believers continue to show their devotion to Saint Dimyana: by seeking to physically handle her relics and her icons, to the point of violence. The procession, a hallmark of Coptic liturgical practices, is a performance marked by the tangible engagement of believers with the saint, one that occurs upon the ceremonial stage that is her festival. Today, the Coptic Church publishes numerous and often heavily edited versions of Dimyana’s hagiography, and the contemporary popular devotion has inspired anthologies of miracles, as the saint continues to heal, cure, and comfort believers. Furthermore, the Church has produced a film of the Dimyana legend, in which her story is retold from a more “clerical” perspective. In this new rendition, priests and bishops dressed in Coptic clerical vestments figure more prominently in the narrative and offer “guidance” and “support” to Dimyana and her virginal companions. In recent years, the convent of Saint Dimyana in Bilqās, intended to recreate the original palace that was build by the saint’s father Murqus, was opened by the current Patriarch Shenouda III and repopulated with nuns from all over the Coptic world. The contemporary Church has thus thoroughly assimilated much of the cult under its direct control, although it has likely underestimated the resilience of the popular interpretation of Dimyana and of her legend and festival.

CHAPTER FOUR

COPTIC PILGRIMAGE TO JERUSALEM IN THE OTTOMAN PERIOD:
RITUAL AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY

As discussed in the previous chapter, pilgrimage constitutes one of the most visible manifestations of Christian religious experience within the Islamic world; therefore a study of pilgrimage provides an unparalleled insight into the beliefs and practices of the Coptic community in Ottoman Egypt. Shrines and pilgrimage have long been -- and still are -- a significant part of Coptic religious practices. Veneration is often manifested in visiting a local holy place (mazār) associated with a miraculous spring or a blessing from an icon exuding oil. Tombs of especially beloved martyrs or monastic holy figure are frequently sought after as a source of blessing and spiritual comfort, and serve as the loci for the collective celebration of feast days. However, the pilgrimage studied in this chapter is perhaps the most distinctive, not only among Copts but for Christians in general.

Certainly, Jerusalem and the Christian Holy Land are no ordinary shrines; they constitute a sensory connection to the biblical life of Christ. There, believers can attempt to transcend the barrier between their physical selves and the ethereal Christ, between the material and spiritual worlds. By transcending physical space to touch the sepulchre of Christ or kneel at his birthplace in Bethlehem, Christian believers also transcend time,
connecting directly and personally with the external power of God. In spite of the popularity of innumerable shrines all over the Christian world, the aura of Jerusalem’s holiest sites is unique. And just as Jerusalem itself was reconstructed by the Byzantine emperor Constantine (306-337 CE), in order “to give visible topography to the legends, sacred books, and developing liturgy,” the devotion spawned by this “physical theatre,” as David Frankfurter remarks, inevitably gave birth to multiple “imitative ‘liturgical Jerusalems.’”\(^1\) As pilgrims from all over the world visited Jerusalem for similar purposes and agendas, they each had their separate, preexisting vision of the Holy Land, as inscribed in their minds from lore, liturgy, and iconography.

One might argue that Copts went to Jerusalem not to fulfill a simple vow or get the blessing of a holy figure but to see the extension of a landscape in which their native lands had played a part. In biblical but more specifically in Coptic traditions, Egypt was a place of refuge for the Holy Family, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (1-2:12); according to the biblical account, Herod (37-34 BCE), the “King of the Jews,”\(^2\) sought to kill the Christ-child, hailed as the future King of the Jews, by massacring all male infants in Bethlehem. Mary, Joseph and Jesus escaped to Egypt where they stayed, according to the gospel writer, until it was safe to return to Nazareth after the death of Herod. The biblical passage about this journey, according to Stephen Davis, is noteworthy for its reference to specific geographic names (Bethlehem, Egypt, and various sites in Roman Palestine). Davis argues that Matthew’s chapter “carries the reader along on a virtual

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2 Herod was in charge of a territory assigned by the Romans; he was therefore a “client-king” of the Romans.
itinerary of geographical locales, an itinerary marked by biblical signposts.” For Copts, the historical memory of a visit that reportedly lasted over three years became vivid in their rituals, literature and art, despite the fact that the Bible is silent about the details of this journey. Thus as Davis notes, the rise of prominent local traditions (both oral and written) concerning which Egyptian sites were visited and what miraculous feats Jesus and his family performed constituted a source for a specific route.

The idea of making a dual pilgrimage to the entire biblical landscapes of Egypt and Palestine dates back to the late fourth-century Spanish pilgrim Egeria, who has been referred to as “one of the great pioneers of the devotion which impelled pilgrims to the holy places.” Egeria had visited Egypt prior to her pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The crossroads between Egypt and Palestine was in reality, according to E. D. Hunt, “a path well-trodden by western visitors to the Holy Land in this period, a path which united the monks of the Egyptian desert and the sacred places around Jerusalem in what amounted to a single devotional landscape when viewed through the pilgrims’ ‘eyes of faith.’” For European pilgrims, a visit to Palestine and Egypt was likely part of a preplanned course to the Orient. Although few Coptic sources mention the visits to holy sites in Egypt en route to Palestine, several references are made to western pilgrims visiting Egypt and the

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6 Ibid., p. 39.
Holy Land as a coupled spiritual journey, the most notable among these being Felix Fabri’s narrative from the late fifteenth century. This chapter focuses on specific kinds of pilgrims: those who were able to afford the journey and those who sought a novel experience of the sacred. In the latter sense, a pilgrimage to Jerusalem was likely performed for the purpose of obtaining blessings (baraka), for participating in the mystical events associated with Easter services, as will be discussed below, and also for the prestige: a pilgrim who successfully made the journey were referred to as muqadas or muqadasa (literally: holy one) upon his or her return. In addition, documentary evidence indicates that the pilgrimage route taken by Copts included stopovers at Holy Family shrines in Egypt. This must have enhanced the experience, as travelers completed a journey that followed ancient biblical plots, beginning with Jesus’ infancy in Egypt and ending with his death and resurrection in

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8 The seventeenth-century economic crisis in the Ottoman Empire is characterized by inflation, overpopulation in the countryside, burdensome military confrontations with European powers, and instability due to the spread of firearms in the countryside. See Jane Hathaway, “Egypt in the Seventeenth Century,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. II, ed. M. W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 34-58. This type of instability, in addition to the threat of bedouin attacks in rural areas, no doubt worried potential Coptic pilgrims who were interested in making their journey to Jerusalem. For these pilgrims, not only was the affordability of the journey a significant consideration in the wake of the economic crisis but their safety to travel was also a major anxiety.
Jerusalem. Finally, the Coptic Church, as will be discussed below, considered pilgrimage to Jerusalem as a farḍ or an “obligation,” in a sense that closely resembles the concept of farḍ proscribing the performance of the annual Muslim hajj to Mecca. I believe that by performing the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Copts could clearly see the role which their church and its sanctuaries played in the broader “physical theatre” which symbolized Jesus’ life. Thus this pilgrimage, which most commonly ended with celebratory Easter rituals and services with fellow Christians in Jerusalem, reconnected members of a small and somewhat diminished community to their broader Christian roots and spiritual heritage.

Keeping the above considerations in mind, in this chapter, I will discuss the status of Coptic pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the period under study (roughly the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries). I shall argue that during this period the Coptic Church in Cairo attempted to reinforce its firm connection to Jerusalem by encouraging the performance of pilgrimage and by endeavoring to secure its properties in Ottoman Palestine. Copto-Arabic archival materials offer an understanding of what the voyage to Jerusalem may have meant to the community. They allow us to reconstruct a typical pilgrimage from this period and to discuss the principal actors involved. In the final section of this chapter, I shall offer some hypotheses regarding the social and spiritual significance of this ritual. As Yehoshua Frenkel writes, “Although Jerusalem was a place of worship and pilgrimage to all three biblical religions, members of each of them worshipped and prayed separately: one Jerusalem for the Jews, another Jerusalem for the Christians, and a
third one for the Muslims.” Indeed, my arguments extend even further than Frenkel’s and are generally imbedded in the perspective that a study of non-Muslims, as individual communities that harbored specific attitudes and beliefs, merits a detailed evaluation, which has been thus far largely absent in secondary scholarship.

Additionally, in the concluding portion of the chapter, I will delve into an analysis of the way in which pilgrimage to Jerusalem among Copts was characterized by a sense of “communal fraternity” and as a means to rejuvenate faith by fraternizing with other Copts whom they encountered along their journey, as well as other Christians whom they met in Jerusalem. The concept of pilgrimage as a collective act of devotion, particularly as understood by Victor Turner, will inform my examination of and conclusions about this ritual during the Ottoman period. Although this pilgrimage will be examined through the lens of Coptic elites who could afford this journey and through a reading of the texts that their journey inspired, as Glenn Bowman reminds us, this “privileged” understanding had significant effects on how non-elites conceived of the holy places in Jerusalem and their meaning. The pilgrimage made by elite Copts created the context for a kind of “second hand” pilgrimage, one that was passed down orally, literally and physically to fellow believers who could not make the journey.

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Pilgrimage to the Holy Land during the Ottoman Period (1517-1798): An Overview

The Copts were only one of many communities that lived in or annually made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The attitude of Ottoman authorities, both on a central and provincial level, towards this age-old tradition clearly influenced its survival. For the most part, Ottoman rulers wished to maintain Christian and Jewish pilgrimage to Jerusalem, since it was financially beneficial not only to the government in Istanbul but also to lesser rulers along the way: to the bedouins and the suppliers of food, lodging, and transport, as well as provincial and district governors. On the other hand, there was a clear sense on the part of both local Muslims and the Ottoman authorities that pilgrimages should not become a spectacle that detracted from the predominantly Muslim aura of the region. Amnon Cohen aptly summarizes the status quo as follows:

No attempt, systematic or otherwise, was made by the Ottoman authorities to prevent any of the Christian communities from exercising their historically acknowledged rights of free passage into Jerusalem or to interfere with the practice of their rites in their respective places of worship. The Ethiopians, Copts, Greek Orthodox, Catholics and Christians of other denominations ran their internal affairs, nominated the ‘heads’ of their communities, collected the taxes due and conducted their spiritual and earthly affairs without any interference or even major protest from the Muslim majority.  

In his recent pioneering work, Oded Peri implicitly challenges Cohen’s last point regarding the interference of the Muslim community in the affairs of Christian denominations in Jerusalem. Peri gives two examples that serve our purposes here: one involving the opposition of the Muslim populace in Jerusalem to the performance of

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public rituals by Christian groups, the other the vehement resistance, again by locals, to allegedly unlawful restoration projects. In the first instance, an example is given of locals opposing the annual Palm Sunday procession in which the Franciscan community publicly relived Christ’s entry into Jerusalem with “palm branches in hand, chanting psalms and hymns, with their abbot mounted on a donkey right in the midst [of the procession].”\(^\text{12}\)

The second case involved an attempt by local Muslims to encroach upon the Church of the Nativity, claiming that extensive renovations to that church removed a section which they, as Muslim pilgrims to Bethlehem, had used as a place of accommodation when visiting Jesus’ birthplace. In both cases, the Ottoman authorities were quite prudent in their decisions: ultimately the rights of the Christians were protected while the tenets of Islam were simultaneously upheld.\(^\text{13}\)

Peri argues that the “protection” offered to Christians in Jerusalem and to the venerable sites in the Holy Land in such instances was not necessarily indicative of a general policy of Ottoman rulers but was specific to these contexts. The Ottoman state had much to gain by following this approach: for one thing, “the assurance of the continuance of these sanctuaries under Muslim sovereignty served the theological and political need of Muslims to reiterate the legitimacy and superiority of their own belief-system;” in addition “any grave injury inflicted upon these sites would necessarily result in Christian resentment and even outright hostilities by numerous Christians within and


\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 72.
Thus it can be added that a major part of this Ottoman “strategy” involved safeguarding the passage into Jerusalem in addition to protecting Muslim encroachment upon Christian holy sites. Maintaining routes into Jerusalem not only served the purposes of Christian pilgrims but also directly benefited Muslim pilgrims who came to visit the third holiest site in Islam.

The extent of the interference by Ottoman authorities in the affairs of local communities in Jerusalem was determined by whether squabbles occurred between Muslims and Christians or among different Christian sects. Using registers of Ottoman fiscal surveys (tahîr defterleri), Cohen mentions a court case from September 1564 in which Muslims from the community in Jerusalem questioned Coptic property rights of Dayr al-Khiḍr (the Monastery of St. George). After the presentation of official documents and a sultanic decree previously sent from Istanbul, the Coptic ownership of this site was proven and the qâdî declared that “no one should undertake any steps that might interfere with the full and unimpeded exercise of Coptic rights in their place of worship in Jerusalem.” As will be discussed below, only when this monastery fell into utter disrepair were the property rights of the Copts again questioned. On the other hand, for the most part, Ottoman authorities ignored squabbles among Christian communities and to a great extent this attitude fostered a kind of power balance among stronger groups

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14 Ibid., pp. 74-75.
vying for power, specifically the Greeks and Armenians, though it also made smaller communities, such as Copts and Abyssinians, pawns in this competition.

Protection did not necessarily translate into exemption from extraordinary taxes, and Ottoman authorities are accused in Christian annals of levying great amounts of taxes upon pilgrims. This was recorded in Yusuf Abudacnus’ history of the Copts, where he reports that Copts had to pay various taxes during their journey:

[B]efore they arrive [in Jerusalem] they are to enter into the City of Gaza and then Catea and Ravilay, in which three mentioned places they are to pay a Toll or Custom to the Turk, such as are Subjects, eight French Crowns, the rest double, to wit, sixteen: Again, when they are come to Jerusalem, four Crowns are to be given by the Subject, eight by the rest.

Amnon Cohen notes that various taxes were indeed levied on travelers, including the road-tax (ghafar) charged at particular checkpoints, and that the rates of this tax were actually determined by central administrators in Istanbul. Moreover, Christian travelers to Palestine, regardless of whether they were merchants or pilgrims, were likely to pay 30-

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16 According to Kevork Bardakjian, the Armenian patriarchs of Jerusalem often traveled to Istanbul in order to “renew old berats [warrants] or obtain new ones overruling the governors’ unfavorable decisions in the perennial disputes over the Holy Places.” They frequently attained a more favorable treatment with the help of prominent Armenians living in Istanbul (this was also true for the Greek case); thus official business with the Porte could be conducted with relative ease and gave those two communities an edge over others. See Kevork B. Bardakjian, “The Rise of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople,” in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 1, eds. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982), pp. 95-96.

17 This was a monograph published in the mid-seventeenth century which has to be read with some caution as it was written by a Copt who converted to Catholicism and moved to Europe at a relatively young age.

18 Located northeast of Cairo, in Lower Egypt, between al-Saliхиyyah and al-‘Arїsh, this ancient town was later known as “al-Katieh.” It is quite close to al-Farїma (see Chapter Two). It is likely that Abudacnus was confusing the location of this town.

19 This is probably a reference to the town of Rafah, which is located twenty-seven miles northeast of al-‘Arїsh. Again, Abudacnus confuses the location of al-Katieh and Rafah, believing them to follow and not precede Gaza.

40% more than were Jewish travelers. Cohen explains this discrepancy based on the authorities’ evaluation of the affluence of a particular community.\footnote{21} It seems that the authorities also differentiated among various Christian sects, a point validated by Oded Peri’s study. He points out that the Ottoman policy of levying taxes on Christian pilgrims entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was based solely on their place of origin. Interestingly, according to his evaluation, among pilgrims from Europe (western, eastern, and central), Anatolia, Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Bilād al-Shām, and Egypt’s pilgrims paid the least of all.\footnote{22}

The burdensome taxes paid along the road to Jerusalem, in addition to the fees paid in order to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, likely hindered the ordinary believers’ ability to make this journey. Beyond payments at various official checkpoints, Peri points out, the pilgrims had to deal with “non-official, piratical road-blocks set up by bedouin or rural šeyhs who sought to share with the state in the revenues accruing from the pilgrim traffic.”\footnote{23} These charges were so numerous that many pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem, as Peri notes, stripped of their clothing and penniless. They were left begging in pathetic desperation outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, pleading with their rich brethren for help; even the Ottoman records indicate that a special category was made in the collection registers for paupers.\footnote{24} However, despite these burdensome expenditures, it


\footnote{22} Peri, Christianity under Islam in Jerusalem, pp. 163-164. We understand from Peri’s calculations that from the mid-sixteenth century, pilgrims from Egypt paid the least (84.00 paras) while those from central and western Europe paid the most (327.50 paras). This could mean, following Cohen, that Copts were the poorest Christian community.

\footnote{23} Ibid., p. 171.

\footnote{24} Ibid., p. 172.
seems that some Copts regularly made the pilgrimage. Peri calculates that an average of 
100 Christian pilgrims traveled annually from Egypt to Jerusalem in the late sixteenth 
century.\textsuperscript{25} In the seventeenth century, there is evidence that this tradition also continued 
in spite of the widespread economic crisis of this period. For instance, Yusuf Abdacnus’ 
work, which references the status of Copts in the early seventeenth century, describes in 
some detail their motivation for the pilgrimage:

The Jacobites [Copts] are used to go on Pilgrimage upon a Religious account: for 
to say in a word, there are many places in Egypt, where the Bodies of Saints, and 
Images of the blessed Virgin are kept, which they believe to perform many 
extraordinary Miracles. But about the middle of Lent for the most part, they are 
wonted to travel to Jerusalem and because the Road is infested with Thieves and 
Arabs, they use all to gather together in the Metropolis of Egypt whether 
Jacobites, Greeks, or Europeans, Merchants or Artisans, Pilgrims, & c. and there 
join in one Body, or Caravan, as they call it, and the number of Pilgrims is so 
great that it sometimes exceeds sixty thousand men [sic].\textsuperscript{26}

Abudacnus’ estimate of sixty thousand may be exaggerated and yet the organization and 
planning behind the pilgrimage, by multiple communities in Egypt, indicates a kind of 
determination and financial capacity for making this journey, although it is not certain 
that the gathering of various community resources was an annual custom.

However, there does seem to be an overall decline during the seventeenth century 
in the Coptic connection to Jerusalem, no doubt due to the tumultuous nature of this 
period. Indeed, there were special taxes placed upon the Copts and Abyssinians on 
account of a monastery that they owned in the vicinity of the Church of the Holy

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 170.

\textsuperscript{26} Abudacnus, \textit{The True History of the Jacobites}, p. 27. This estimate seems to exaggerate the number of pilgrims.
Sepulchre (likely to be Dayr al-Sultān). Travelers also report that by the late seventeenth century, Copts living in Jerusalem were quite destitute. Both Nau and Goujon, in 1666 and 1670 respectively, mention the small numbers of Coptic caretakers of the Church. However, European travelers also reaffirmed that despite their dwindling numbers, Copts still participated in the holiest of the ceremonies performed during Holy Week (the week prior to Easter). The “Miracle of the Holy Fire,” referring to the fire which reportedly emanates out of Jesus’ tomb every (Orthodox) Easter and is passed around to all the pilgrims who light a myriad of candles, was the highlight of a week of intensive prayers and ritualistic services performed by the Orthodox Christian communities in Jerusalem. The fact that only one monk represented the Copts during this significant ceremony, as Maundrell states in 1697, indicates a diminished presence and yet it also testifies to the fact that Coptic attendance was respected by other communities to the extent that their ceremonial rights were not affected. And while Copts may have struggled for some time, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, they resumed making the pilgrimage with noticeable pageantry. Their status was likely improved seeing as the early eighteenth century was a time of economic prosperity in the Ottoman Empire.

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28 For an excellent summary of all traveler reports from this period which make mentions of Copts, see Meinardus, *The Copts in Jerusalem*, pp. 31-36.

29 In the eighteenth century, Egypt was the richest province of the Ottoman Empire. For detailed information on Egypt’s economic prosperity in the eighteenth century, particularly as it dramatically
Why did Coptic Church authorities encourage pilgrimage to Jerusalem and, more importantly, what was the socio-political context for this annual event? For the first point, we examine what steps were taken by the church to ensure a steady flow of pilgrims to the Holy Land, one that would safeguard its properties and community there. In an ensuing section, the extent to which this pilgrimage was facilitated or hindered by Muslim majority in Egypt, by the surrounding Muslim population in Jerusalem, and by Ottoman authorities in both places will be explored.

There are a number of reasons that the leadership of the Coptic community, clergy and laity, may have been interested in making the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Among these reasons are traditions of piety, demonstrating and gaining standing in the community, reaffirming connections with the Jerusalem Coptic church, and upholding claims to property. Two sermons, one from the thirteenth century and another likely from the Ottoman period, provide us with diametrically opposed methods of “the call for pilgrimage” among Coptic believers. Despite their differences, both sermons illustrate the uniquely Coptic feature of constructing pilgrimage as an “obligation” (*fard*), to be carried out by all dutiful believers, perhaps reflecting the infiltration of Muslim beliefs regarding the pilgrimage to Mecca. It should be noted that the idea of announcing the “pilgrimage season” to the believers was also common among Muslims who prepared to make the annual *hajj* to Mecca.

contrasted with the seventeenth century, see Sevket Pamuk, *A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), particularly Chapter 11.
In a thirteenth-century sermon written by a well-known Coptic jurist and theologian, Abū Ishāq al-Mu’taman ibn al-‘Assāl urges his congregation to make the “hajj ’ila al-Quds al-Sharīf” (“the pilgrimage to noble Jerusalem”). He does so by enticing them with a description of Jerusalem as the place of biblical tales and exploits. David and Solomon had constructed and beautified this city under divine command, he tells them. Could they forget that it was in nearby Bethlehem that Jesus was born or that the Holy Land was the stage for Jesus’ miracles, where he cured a blind man, a leper and a paraplegic, and also commanded the wind and water to calm their force? “Let us proceed to [God’s] holy city like bees hovering to pick fruits so that you may pick from the palm trees of paradise [which are] ripened with spiritual [fruits].”

He finally justifies the journey to prospective pilgrims in the most practical terms by telling them that whatever funds they spend in making this trip will be recompensed to them one hundred fold here on earth and in heaven, where they will receive eternal life.

During a time when pilgrimage had diminished, another writer, in a text likely dating to the seventeenth century, maintains that anyone who can afford to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, unless he or she has a binding excuse, must visit the “sites of our Master’s suffering and look upon the place of his death and know that everything is true and right.” One can only picture the speaker as he stood behind the pulpit, beseeching the congregants and stating that those who could not make the journey (in


31 While we do not know who the original author was, the scribe who signs this manuscript is a priest by the name of Nasim Abādir.

32 Patriarchal Library, MS Canon 21, 176r.
spite of its being an obligation or *farḍ*[^33] should contribute by making “offerings” (*qarābin*). Hoping to win their sympathy, he paints a dismal picture of the dilapidated Coptic holy sites in Jerusalem and also of a wretched community whose status depends entirely on the contributions of kind parishioners. Items such as gold, silver, clothes, iron, copper, and liturgical instruments are specifically requested. The pilgrimage or any donations would yield a huge blessing for the benefactors, he insists, since they are considered to be “*sunna hasna’ quddām Allah*” (“a good practice in front of God”).[^34] In hopes of instilling the fear of God in those who are indisposed, he couches his demands in terms of good and evil and dismisses the congregation with the final thought that anyone who disobeys these orders (which are delegated by God) risks being a violator of God’s *namūs* (law) and of being cast aside as a heretic and an agent of Satan.[^35]

Rather than “enticing” his audience, as Ibn al-‘Assāl did in the earlier sermon, this author is less diplomatic in his approach. The tone of the short sermon is bold, reproachful, and at the same time somewhat desperate. Little tolerance is shown towards those who are uncooperative in the endeavor to raise financial support for the Holy Land parishes. The writer, likely a priest, bishop, or even a patriarch, uses his authority to judge and condemn any believer who is unwilling to extend assistance. Taken together, these two distinct approaches to pilgrimage, while arising from different historical contexts, point toward an understanding of this practice during the Ottoman period. They

[^33]: The idea of describing pilgrimage to Jerusalem as a “*farḍ* or an “obligation” does not exist among any other Christian community and closely resembles the *farḍ* for making the *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca, one of the five pillars of the Islamic religion.

[^34]: Patriarchal Library, MS Canon 21, 176v.

[^35]: Ibid., 177v.
help us determine the Coptic establishment’s perspective on the topic, and they indicate that most Coptic believers could not afford to make the pilgrimage and had to be coaxed at least to support it with some material provisions.

It is plausible that the Coptic Church, like its sister Armenian Orthodox Church, had functionaries whose main duty was to organize the pilgrimage and to circulate among different parishes, reading pleas from the patriarchate and trying to raise funds for the pilgrimage and for the Jerusalem archbishopric. There is an example of such a plea from one of the sermons of Patriarch Yuḥanna XVIII (1769-1796 CE), a statement that may have likely circulated among various parishes all over Egypt in the 1790s. This is a homily that calls upon the Copts to contribute funds to repair the Monastery of St. George in Jerusalem. The patriarch claims that “local Muslim rulers” in Jerusalem threatened the community, stating that if they did not rebuild this property, other Christian sects would be given its charge or, even worse in the eyes of the patriarch, the Monastery might be converted to a mosque. Thus the overture is made to protect Coptic holdings in Jerusalem; the patriarch urges his congregation to give money and entices them with a

36 The Armenian emissaries seem to have been very active, beginning in the sixteenth century, and were referred to as hraviraks (“inviters to the Holy Land”). They traveled with a kontak (an encyclical) that was read from the altars of various Armenian churches: much like these Coptic sermons, “The kontak described the Holy Places, the economic plight of the patriarchate, solicited funds for the upkeep of the Holy Places, and urged every Armenian believer to perform the holy acts of pilgrimage.” See Kevork Hintlian, “Travellers and Pilgrims in the Holy Land: the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem in the 17th and 18th Century,” in Anthony O’Mahony, ed., The Christian Heritage in the Holy Land (London: Scorpion Cavendish Ltd., 1995), p. 151.

37 The manuscript does not specify who instigated these threats.

38 This is an interesting (and not uncommon) departure from the Pact of ‘Umar discussed in the Introduction. In this agreement, non-Muslims were prohibited from repairing or rebuilding their houses of worship. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, often this agreement was ignored and not enforced.
familiar tune, declaring that the rewards for these donations are as great as and equal to those for making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{History of the Coptic Pilgrimage to Jerusalem}

It is difficult to be precise about the exact beginning of the Coptic pilgrimage and of the establishment of satellite churches in the Holy Land. Most likely, however, Copts were among the earliest of Christian pilgrims, from the time of Egeria in the fourth century. By the ninth century, Copts had firmly established a small community; this came to pass, according to Otto Meinardus, during the papacy of Patriarch Ya‘qūb (810-830 CE) who constructed the Church of the Magdalene, thereby making Coptic presence more visible.\textsuperscript{40} The Copts even shared their churches and chapels with their co-believers, the Syrian Orthodox. Nevertheless during the tenth and eleventh centuries, Copts apparently abandoned the pilgrimage altogether due to the political instability of the region, heightened by Fatimid caliph Al-Ḥākim’s (996-1020 CE) order in 1008 CE to destroy churches in Cairo but more consequentially to demolish the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This latter calamity was devastating to all Christians in the Holy Land. On the whole, however, Muslim rulers generally tolerated Christian pilgrims. The pilgrims, as discussed earlier, were a valuable revenue source, not only because of the fines they paid to visit Christian shrines but also because they generated proceeds at local stopovers along their way.

\textsuperscript{39} Patriarchal Library, MS Lahūt 134, 79f.

\textsuperscript{40} Meinardus, \textit{The Copts in Jerusalem}, p. 12.
Ironically, the Christian Crusader kingdom (established in 1099 CE) which was more restrictive, limiting access to holy sites for fellow Christians they deemed to be heretics. After an initial prohibition, some of the eastern sects were allowed to return to Jerusalem and then only with the blessing of Crusader rulers. The Crusaders offered to allow Syrian and Greek Orthodox back after the city was purged of its Muslim inhabitants, but apparently the Copts (referred to at times as Jacobites\textsuperscript{41}) were explicitly forbidden from performing the pilgrimage since they were considered heretical Christians because of their monophysite beliefs. It seems, however, that this ban was relatively short-lived since one traveler in 1165 CE and another in 1172 CE reported that Copts were among those groups residing in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{42} Other chronicles, notably the work by Abul Makārim/Ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Armanī, report that Copts regained their pilgrimage rights during the reign of Șalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (1171-1193 CE), who reportedly took measures to appease a community that still constituted a significant proportion of Egypt’s population. This reasoning is uncertain, however, since Șalāḥ al-Dīn also lifted road taxes that had been placed upon various Christian pilgrims, including Greek Orthodox and Abyssinians, along with Copts.\textsuperscript{43}

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\textsuperscript{41} As Meinardus notes, “Originally, the term ‘Jacobites,’ from the Syrian monk Jacob Bardaeus, who died in 578 [CE] as Bishop of Edessa, was applied to Syrian Monophysites. However, in the Middle Ages the Copts are also referred to as ‘Jacobites’ and the Canons of Cyril III ibn Laqlaq (1235) speak of the Coptic Jacobite Church.” See Meinardus, “The Copts in Jerusalem and the Question of the Holy Places,” in O’Mahony, ed., \textit{The Christian Heritage in the Holy Land}, p. 114, fn. 9.


\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. pp. 21-22.
The instability of the diocese in Jerusalem and the fear that other ambitious sects might take over Coptic holdings prompted Patriarch Cyril III (1235-1243 CE) to appoint a permanent archbishop in Jerusalem (Basilios I, 1236-1260 CE) whose presence would ensure that community possessions remained unharmed and who would oversee the pilgrims who made the annual visit. Dimitri Rizq considers this move a sign of independence for the Copts and for their properties, both in Jerusalem and in Bilād al-Shām, from the control of the See of Antioch. He argues this point by relating an anecdote from 1236 CE, the year of Basilios I’s appointment, recounting the resentment felt by the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch against Cyril for appointing an archbishop to a diocese that was ostensibly outside of Cyril’s domain and without the customary approval of a holy synod. Reportedly Cyril responded that he had chosen a bishop according to the needs of his community and that, in any case, the city of Jerusalem was a bishopric that was not under the authority of any of the traditional four sees (i.e., Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople). Eventually, it seems, Cyril’s argument was accepted.

A capable and well-established diocese was needed in order to withstand the pressures placed upon Coptic churches, chapels and shrines in the Holy Land. However, the extent to which the mother church in Cairo intervened in the affairs of this diocese is disputable. One source indicates that the Archbishopric of Jerusalem eventually fell under the administrative management of another Egyptian diocese, that of Damietta and that the

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44 Ibid. p. 25.

45 From Kāmil Šāliḥ Nakhla, Silsilat tārīkh al-bābawāt batārik al-kursī al-Iskandarī, (Al-Suryān, Egypt: Matba‘at Dāyr al-Sayyida al-‘Adhrā‘, 1954), vol. 1, pp. 82-88, cited in Rizq, Qissat al-Aqbāt fīl-ard al-mugaddasa, pp. 26-29. The accuracy of this report may be questionable since Nakhla’s primary sources are not always referenced in an accurate way. What matters, here, however is that Patriarch Cyril’s action did likely provoke tensions with other patriarchs over the legitimate supervision of holy sites in Jerusalem.
bishop of Damietta would annually visit Jerusalem before Christmas, remaining there until Easter time. Another source indicates that it was Damietta which was under the administrative management of the Archbishop of Jerusalem. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine which is accurate and it is possible that the administration regularly changed hands depending on the relative authority of the bishop in charge.

While their presence in Jerusalem may have abated towards the end of the fifteenth century, corresponding with a period of repression under Mamluk rule, in the years following the Ottoman conquest of Egypt (1517 CE), several travelers mention Copts as being one of the established communities. An example of this can be found in a letter which Germanus, Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, wrote to Russian tsar Ivan IV (“the Terrible,” 1553-1584 CE), wherein he told of the dismal state of his own sect as compared with that of the Armenians and Copts. Was the termination of the last bloody wave of Coptic conversion and persecution under Mamluk rule an impetus for a sort of momentary “breath of fresh air” when the Ottomans invaded? This certainly seems to have been the case, as the sixteenth century appears to have given rise to a period of enterprising patriarchs who, beginning with Patriarch Ghubriyāl VII (1525-1568 CE), invested in rejuvenating the community, in Cairo and in Jerusalem, after decades of disintegration resulting from ruinous late Mamluk policies towards the Christians of

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48 Meinardus, *The Copts in Jerusalem*, p. 29. Germanus was likely exaggerating the dismal status of his church in order to acquire financial assistance from Tsar Ivan.
Egypt.\textsuperscript{49} The enduring contact between the Cairo and Jerusalem parishes is exemplified in Patriarch Murqus V’s (1602-1618 CE) visit to the Holy Land, when he reportedly ministered to his congregation and surveyed patriarchal properties, appointing Qumus (Hegumenos) Ya‘qūb to be in charge of Coptic possessions there.\textsuperscript{50}

Furthermore, the incorporation of the archbishop of Jerusalem into the ceremonial consecration of Coptic patriarchs in Cairo can also be dated to this period. The first recorded incidence of this participation was during the reign of Archbishop Zacharias I (1575-1600 CE), who administered the patriarchal proceedings for the appointments of two Coptic patriarchs, Ghubriyāl VIII (1586-1601 CE) and Murqus VI (1646-1656 CE). The subsequent involvement of other archbishops is more than probable, as their participation became a key custom in patriarchal consecrations within the Coptic Church.\textsuperscript{51} The leverage that this practice gave the archbishopric of Jerusalem cannot be underplayed and it is further illustrated through a much later example: Archbishop Abraham I (1820-1854 CE) was so influential that he succeeded in obtaining the appointment of Cyril IV (1854-1861 CE) to the patriarchate.\textsuperscript{52} Ultimately, by having an archbishop in Jerusalem, the connection between Cairo and the Holy Land was solidified.

\textsuperscript{49} For more information on these Mamluk policies, refer to my discussion of the political background to the hagiography of the martyr Șālib in Chapter One.

\textsuperscript{50} Nakha\textsuperscript{a}, Si\textsuperscript{s}ilat t\textsuperscript{ā}r\textsuperscript{k}h al-b\textsuperscript{ā}b\textsuperscript{ā}w\textsuperscript{ā}, vol. 4, p. 89.

\textsuperscript{51} In a modern description of the consecration of the current Patriarch Shenouda III, the Metropolitan who crowned the patriarch was Archbishop Basilios, Metropolitan of Jerusalem, who, while placing the crown on the patriarch’s head, said the following words: “The Lord reigns.” See Maged Attiya, \textit{The Silver Jubilee of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III (1971-1996)} (Sydney: The Bishopric of Youth Library, 1996), p. 20.

\textsuperscript{52} Archbishop Basilios, “Jerusalem, Coptic See of.”
Reconstructing a Typical Pilgrimage: Landmarks and Obstacles

With this backdrop, we can now turn our attention to reconstructing the Coptic pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to the details of this journey. The discussion in this section is primarily, but not solely, based on one source -- a narrative that relates the Coptic community’s planning of the pilgrimage and describes the pilgrimage made in 1704 CE by Patriarch Yuḥanna XVI (1676-1718 CE). The pilgrimage is recorded in Coptic annals as a “miracle.” On the first page of this manuscript, there is a scribal note remarking that “Blessings such as the renovation of the Mu’allaqa [church] and the visit of the father Patriarch Yuḥanna 103 to Jerusalem occurred close to each other in time and God eased the way for them and yet they do not represent the norm; hence they are considered as miracles.” Although this account is unique, many features it describes were common to all pilgrimages, as the scattered evidence from other sources attests. Until other

53 There are two copies of this narrative, which was originally written by the scribe ‘Abd al-Masih, assistant to the patriarch, who accompanied him on the journey. I am using here the older version of the manuscript, currently housed in the Coptic Museum in Cairo (Coptic Museum Archives, Liturgy 128). The version from the Patriarchal Library was copied in 1777 by a priest named Jirjis al-Jawhar al-Khānānī, who was pastor of the Church of the Virgin in Hārit al-Rūm. The manuscript contains two separate works, the first being another “miracle”: the consecration of the “Chrism” (holy oil), a vitally important ritual in Coptic traditions. The second part includes the miracle we are studying here. It is believed that al-Khānānī utilized the only other known manuscript, which was originally composed in 1704 by ‘Abd al-Masih, pastor of the Church of the Virgin at Minyat Ṣurd and copied by him in 1710; this copy is known to us today as Coptic Museum, MS Liturgy 128. See Khalil Samīr, “Jirjis al-Jawharī al-Khānānī,” Coptic Encyclopedia 4.1334-1335.

54 Yuḥanna was the 103rd Patriarch of the See of Alexandria (the official title of Coptic patriarchs); thus he is regularly referred to in the text as “Yuḥanna 103.”

55 This notation, likely in a later hand, reflects a perception that that the pilgrimage was a “rare” occurrence, although there is evidence to contradict this point. For instance, French traveler Antoine Morison notes the presence of Coptic pilgrims in Jerusalem in the year that he performed his journey (1699). See Morison, Relation historique, d’un voyage nouvellement fait au Mont de Sinai et Jerusalem (Paris: Chez Antoine Dezallier, 1714).
sources are unearthed about this topic, this manuscript remains one of the few windows onto a highly significant ritual.

What was the impetus for making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and what were the steps taken into consideration in planning this trip? At the outset of our narrative, the writer mentions that the idea for the pilgrimage of 1704 came from al-Mu’allim Jirjis Abū Maṅṣūr, who at the time was the head of the Coptic community and held the honorific title of “al-arkhun al-ra’is.” Jirjis had received word informing him that, after a long lapse, the road from Cairo to Palestine was now secure for travel. So it came about that the planning for the pilgrimage was devised by one of the wealthiest Copts in Egypt, Jirjis Abū Maṅṣūr, who on January 6 (29 Kiyahk - Coptic Christmas Eve) informed the Patriarch that he would accompany him to Jerusalem. From the narrative, it seems that Abū Maṅṣūr had previous experience in making this journey since he sent detailed instructions to the patriarch, asking him to write letters to all the Coptic bishops, in both Upper and Lower Egypt, informing them of the trip and asking the community for

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56 “Archon” is the old Greek word for official, magistrate or ruler. In the Ottoman period, however, it often referred to influential Coptic notables. In this context it came to signify “a lay member of the Coptic Church who through long years of experience and dedication to the church has earned honored status as a leading member of the Coptic community. See Randall Stewart, “Archon,” Coptic Encyclopedia, p. 229. In his article, “Athār al-arāḥkhina ‘ala awdā‘ al-Qibṭ fil qarn al-thāmin ‘ashr” [“The Effect of the Archons on the Position of Copts in the Eighteenth Century”], Annales Islamologiques 34, no. 2 (2000): 23-44, Magdi Girgis discusses the ascent of Coptic financial agents (mubāshirs) in Egyptian society during the Ottoman period, especially in the eighteenth century when these were highly lucrative posts. As a result, some of these men were so prominent that they were considered in the eyes of both the government and the community as the official leaders of the Copts.

57 Isma’il Kāhya had apparently received letters from Mehmed Pasha, governor of Gaza, and from the heads of Arab villages (shuyūkh al-‘arab) in that area informing him of these developments. The Pashas that governed Gaza in the late seventeenth century apparently had succeeded, at least for some time, in putting an end to the destructive raids of the bedouins while also maintaining good relations with the Christians and Europeans. Gaza, at that time, had reached its height during the Ottoman period, almost acting as the capital of Palestine with its metropolitan character. See Dominique Sourdel, “Ghazza,” EI² 2.1056-1057.
indār, i.e., to contribute funds. The patriarch was quick to comply and the letters were sent out only two days later.

Soon after, other Coptic notables began to offer their expertise and material help in making the preparations. A notable by the name of al-Mu'allim Karamallah Abū Fulayfil knew, from past pilgrimages, which provisions needed to be collected, and in a meeting at the home of another notable, al-Mu'allim Luṭfallah Abū Yūsuf, the preparation for the trip was determined. Even though Luṭfallah was not intending to accompany the caravan, he volunteered to gather supplies for the trip, specifically to furnish the liturgical instruments used for the ceremonial blessing of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This probably included items such as the censer, a metal bowl in which incense is added to hot coals; a cross, which would be held by the patriarch, bishop, or priest during prayers; a cruets for holding sacramental wine as well as chrism oil; the eucharistic bread basket; a gospel which was to be used in prayers of the liturgy; and possibly an incense box. These items are considered fundamental for the performance of liturgical services. The fact that they had to be taken from Cairo to Jerusalem indicates either that the diocese in Jerusalem was not properly equipped with basic liturgical items or that special objects were utilized only during Easter services and were thus housed in Cairo.  

Luṭfallah also obtained a ferman from the “vezir” (governor of Egypt), an order that ensured the safety of the patriarch and the caravan. In addition, he secured letters from various regimental officers and beys in Cairo, which were addressed to the

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58 For more information about this topic in general, see Archbishop Basílios, “Liturgical Instruments,” Coptic Encyclopedia 5.1469-1475.
custodians of different fortresses along the road, as well as to bedouin leaders.\textsuperscript{59} Finally, he sent supplies and provisions to two important stopping points for the caravan: Damietta and al-‘Arish.\textsuperscript{60} For nearly two and a half months, Luṭfallah gathered all of the necessary provisions.\textsuperscript{61} When it came time to depart, during the second week of Lent, the travelers, including a considerable number of pilgrims from Upper Egypt, gathered in Cairo. Although it is difficult to discern exactly the size of the caravan, it seems that the convoy was so large that they separated it into two smaller convoys. This narrative, as opposed to a later one discussed below, does not describe where the pilgrims congregated and what kind of ceremonies took place upon their gathering. Thus in order to give more details about these points, we turn to al-Damurdāshi’s chronicle, \textit{Al-Durra al-musana fi akhbār al-kināna}, wherein the author describes what seems to have been a typical beginning to the pilgrimage: a caravan led by Patriarch Murqus VII (1745-1769 CE) out of Ḥārit al-Rūm in 1748,

\textsuperscript{59} Suraiya Faroqhi provides a table of payments made to bedouin individuals and to bedouin tribes by Egyptian caravan leaders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These pavements were made in order to “buy” the protection of the pilgrimage caravan. See Suraiya Faroqhi, \textit{Pilgrims and Sultans: The Hajj under the Ottomans, 1517-1683} (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 55-56. Bedouins were also used as “desert pilots,” who accompanied the caravan in order to navigate the way. See Faroqhi, p. 34.

\textsuperscript{60} This is quite similar to the procedures taken for the \textit{hajj} to Mecca. As Faroqhi writes, “Food for the return journey was sometimes deposited in desert forts protecting the caravan’s stopping points. If these supplies were not in the meantime plundered by Bedouins, this was a convenient arrangement.” See Faroqhi, \textit{Pilgrims and Sultans}, p. 43.

\textsuperscript{61} In that regard, Mu’allim Luṭfallah’s job as pilgrimage organizer is quite comparable to the job of the Muslim \textit{hajj} caravan commander known as \textit{Amir al-Hajj}, whose duties were to raise expenditures for the pilgrimage, to acquire and organize the supplies for the trip, to send gifts to the bedouins in order to insure the safety of the caravan, and to deliver contributions (\textit{surre}) to Mecca and Medina. This commander also directly received revenues from the Porte. This position is well-described by Stanford Shaw, \textit{The Financial and Administrative Organization and Development of Ottoman Egypt, 1517-1798} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 241-254.
We turn to the incident of the Coptic Christians. Their patriarch wished to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre [al-Qimāma al-Qudsīyya], to celebrate the Saturday of Light [sibt al-nūr], and to visit Bethlehem. So he sent agents [mubāshirīn] to the bedouins to persuade them to allow the patriarch to visit Jerusalem. The wives of the agents said, “We will accompany the patriarch by land.” Thus some of them purchased camels and provisions. They constructed wooden carriers, decorated them, and prepared their provisions. They sent them [the provisions] to al-‘Adiliyya,62 along with supplies, tents, and equipment. Young boys [ghilmān - sic] led the camels and the patriarch, who rode a mule. Behind them were the agents, ‘Abd al-Malāk, the clerk for the imperial granary, and others, [as well as] the women who covered their heads with Kashmiri shawls. In front of them were the dancers [cenk] and behind them a Turkish band, and young boys with torches wrapped in zardakhān towels.63

They departed from Ḥārit al-Rūm to al-‘Aqqā’dīn64 and to al-Ghawriyya65 with this procession, where our masters, the ‘ulama’, saw them and said “[This sight] is an innovation [bid‘a]. How dare they emulate the Muslims?” They obtained a ferman from the qa‘īm maqam addressed to the Janissary agha so that he would prevent them from traveling by land and to take possession of all that they were carrying. He gave them the ferman, and the Janissary agha as well as the wālī [the chief of police] departed for al-‘Adiliyya. ‘Uthmān Bey Abū Sayf was sitting in charge of Sabīl ‘Allām [at that time] and the Christians went to him and begged him to help save their possessions, and he did. When the agha and the wālī arrived to al-‘Adiliyya, they found no Christians. They announced that no Christian would travel by land, and that he who violates [this order] would deserve whatever happens to him. They returned to Cairo. It was an ill-omened year for the Coptic Christians.66

One is immediately reminded of the Islamic prohibitions against any kind of pageantry or any sort of public display of religion by non-Muslims. And while exceptions to this rule


63 As defined in Socrates Spiro, Arabic-English Dictionary of the Colloquial Arabic of Egypt (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1980[1895]), zardahkan is a “Persian towel.”

64 This is north of Ḥārit al-Rūm and south of the district of al-Ghawriyya.

65 This Cairene quarter, named after Mamluk sultan Qānsūh al-Ghawrī, is located due west of the famous al-Azhar mosque and north of Ḥārit al-Rūm.

66 Al-Damurdāshī, Al-Durra al-Muṣāna, p. 347 [my translation]
were not uncommon, whenever local officials or community leaders wished to enforce this principle, it was difficult to stop them. The Ottoman authorities’ measures to protect the Franciscan Palm Sunday procession in Jerusalem must be regarded as an aberration, as circumstances were not so favorable for the Copts in 1748. One reason was likely the similarity between this pageantry and Muslim ceremonial displays of the period, specifically the annual hajj caravan processing out of Cairo. The Coptic display also seems to have been typical of contemporaneous public parades, like the ones put on by the Ottoman central authorities in Istanbul. Suraiya Faroqhi gives examples of such festivals, particularly those held by various artisan and guild groups and reminds us that those festivals in Cairo or Damascus, which were not ordered by the sultan, took special care to underscore the hierarchical relationship between provincial officials and the sultan.

Perhaps the Coptic procession in 1748 did not follow a sort of customary “modesty” and thus agitated certain members of the Muslim community. It may also have been the case that Coptic popular festivals and rituals had for numerous years been conducted out of public sight and that the seemingly pompous display rattled long-

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67 This is described by the Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi and retold by Suraiya Faroqhi as follows: “The high point of the departure ceremony came when the caravan commander appeared on the square of Kara Meydân, which was normally used for military exercises and parades. He was accompanied by a numerous suite of soldiers and officers, while the band played, and the janissaries and other soldiers saluted their commander. The caravan commander then visited the governor of Egypt in his tent, which must have been put up in this place for the occasion. Now artillery was brought to the square, presumably the cannons which the commander was to take along with him on his desert journey. The flag of the Prophet, a major relic, was paraded about the grounds along with the palanquin symbolizing the Sultan’s presence, which was to accompany the caravan to Mecca; the palanquin was carried a camel.” See Faroqhi, Pilgrims and Sultans, pp. 37-38.

established social customs.69 Indeed there is evidence to this effect. Muḥammad ‘Afifi’s study offers excerpts from the personal documents of a French consul, who lived in Egypt during the time described by the Damurdāshī narrative and recorded his own version of the story. The consul mentions that a man by the name of İbrahim Çavuş70 had received a bribe from the Coptic patriarch guaranteeing the communal right to make the pilgrimage; however, İbrahim Çavuş al-Qazdağlı was reportedly so greedy that he forced every Copt to pay an extra tax in exchange for the right to travel. Upon hearing this news, the al-Azhar shaykhs were so incensed that they refused to allow the Copts to parade in a caravan that was so closely patterned after the Muslim hajj caravan. According to the consul, the situation ended with Copts and Muslims clashing, with the dissolution of the pilgrimage caravan, and with the engagement of soldiers (‘askar) to restore order. Ultimately the patriarch was also forced to pay thousands of dinârs to the shaykhs in order to win protection from potential retaliatory actions against Copts.71

The accuracy of this report is backed up by the only other example we have of Copts being impeded from performing their pilgrimage, recorded by al-Jabarti. He references the year 1751 CE/1164 AH as the date of the intended pilgrimage which was

69 As Huda Lutfi argues for the Mamluk period, by the fifteenth century, it appears that many Coptic popular rituals, which were often celebrated by Muslim Egyptians as well, had been displaced from the public to the private sphere. See “Coptic Festivals of the Nile: Aberrations of the Past?” in The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society, eds. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 263.

70 This is almost certainly İbrahim al-Qazdağlı who became Janissary Kâhya (regimental officer) in that year and whose leadership of the Qazdağlı household dates from 1748. For more on this character, see Hathaway, The Politics of Households, esp. Chapter Five, “The Ascendancy of İbrahim Kâhya al-Qazdağlı and the Emergence of the Qazdağlı Beylicate,” pp. 88-106. Kethuṭā (or kâhya) is “a regimental officer, ostensibly second in command to the agha [the highest officer in an Ottoman regiment] but typically holding real authority; also, the lieutenant of an Ottoman official.” Hathaway, p. 176.

disassembled by Muslim protesters, and yet the stories of 1748 and 1751 sound so peculiarly similar and share so many details that it is difficult not to assume, as Muḥammad ‘Afīfī indicates, that they are one and the same, with some errors in the later version. In any case, it is important to give al-Jabartī’s version here since it only adds more dimensions to our original story. Al-Jabartī refers to the Coptic community leader at the time, al-Mu‘allim Nayrūz Abū Nawnār, who was “kabīrahum” or “kabīr al-aqībat” (“the elder among them [the Copts]”), as being the driving force behind the pilgrimage. Al-Mu‘allim Nayrūz approached the Azhari Shaykh ‘Abdallah al-Shubrāwī, informing him of the intended pilgrimage and also gave him a “gift” of 1000 dinārs. Therefore the shaykh wrote a fatwa declaring that ahl al-dhimma were not to be hindered from making their pilgrimage. When it came time for the trip, al-Jabartī reports that the Copts formed a great procession and marched with their women and children through town, and with them were drummers and the zumūr (reed musical instrument) players. They also reportedly paid bedouins to escort them along the way for protection. When news of this commotion spread to Muslim religious leaders, Shaykh al-Shubrāwī was asked to defend himself. After initially denying his acceptance of a bribe, he was confronted by ‘Ali

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73 According to Egyptian chronicler al-Jabartī, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Shubrāwī (1092-1171 AH/1681-1758 CE) was a descendent of a family of Azharite scholars. He was appointed as the Shaf‘ī muftī in 1137 AH/1725 CE. He was well-learned and highly respected, as attested to by the lavish funeral held in his honor at al-Azhar. See ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Jabartī, ‘A‘ṣā’īb al athār fil-tarajim wa]-akhbār, vol. 1, (Beirut: Dār al-Fāris, 1960s), pp. 295-297.
Efendi, brother of Shaykh al-Bakrī, who implicated him and warned how the populace would react to the idea of a Christian pilgrimage procession imitating the hajj caravan. Feeling both angry and humiliated, al-Shūbrāwī announced to the public that they were free to loot the caravan. Thus the people in neighborhoods near al-Azhar mosque gathered around the Copts, stoned them, beat them with sticks and whips, stole their belongings, and even plundered a nearby church. Despite the catastrophic results of this incident, it seems to have been an exceptional circumstance, counteracted by many indications of the relative stability of the ritual.

In all cases, we are able to learn much from this story as it shows the pilgrimage at its height during the eighteenth century. The spectacular procession advanced from the patriarchal headquarters at the Church of the Virgin Mary in Ḥārit al-Rūm, a neighborhood that was also the home of many wealthy Copts and then continued straight to al-ʿAdiliyya. The supplies and equipment were sent ahead of the procession to (1) al-ʿAdiliyya since it was to be the official point of departure. All of this is echoed in our 1704 text where two caravans proceeded from Cairo to al-ʿAdiliyya, one led by Jirjis Abū Manṣūr, the Coptic community leader, and another by Patriarch Yuḥanna himself. Assuming that the 1704 pilgrimage was “ordinary,” we expect that the pomp and display visible in 1748 were toned down and that, for the most part, the journey out of Cairo was

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74 Shaykh Sīḍī Muḥammad al-Bakrī was shaykh al-sijāda (head of all Sufi mystical orders). In his obituary, al-Jabartī indicates that there was a close friendship between Shaykh al-Shubrāwī and Shayyk al-Bakrī. It was in the habit of al-Shubrāwī to visit al-Bakrī’s home every day before sunrise, to sit with him for one hour, and then to depart to al-Azhar mosque. Al-Bakrī died in 1171 AH/1758 CE. See al-Jabartī, Al-ʿAjaʿīb wal aḥār, vol. I, pp. 304-305. For more discussion on the al-Bakrī family, see Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, “The Ulama of Cairo in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 149-165.
made with little trouble. After reaching al-‘Adiliyya and spending the night there, they headed the next morning to (2) al-Maṭariyya, and the scene described there is quite vivid and telling. In this well-known locale, the patriarch visited the sites associated with the Holy Family’s journey and took blessings from them. At the sight of the caravan, many locals gathered, old and young, notables (aʿyān) and lay community elders (arākhuna), to greet the patriarch and his entourage and wish them well on their journey.

Following this exchange, the patriarch headed towards what is referred to as (3) Al-Khānqah al-Yarqutsiyya. This seems to have been the major meeting point for all travelers, merchants and pilgrims going to Jerusalem. When the caravan left the khānqah the next morning, more crowds came to greet it. The pilgrims must indeed have been an interesting sight, as they were old and young, men and women, archons and

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75 Ibid., pp. 278-279.

76 Maṭariyya is a suburb of Cairo close to Heliopolis. Historically, it has been considered a holy site by Copts, who report that it was in this area that the Holy Family took shelter under a sycamore tree. It is also said that Jesus created a well of water here, and that Mary used the water to bathe Jesus; at that spot where she bathed him, the water sprouted a balsam tree. The blessing of this “miracle” continued when Copts began using the fragrant balsam plant for making the holy chrism (mayrān). See Cornelis Hulsman, “Tracing the Route of the Holy Family today,” in Gabra ed., Be Thou There, pp. 59-60. Otto Meinardus also mentions that this was a village that was a resort for wealthy Mamluks, such as amir Yashbak, who build a house here and occasionally entertained his master Qaytbay (1468-1496 CE). Pilgrims, if they wished, could pay six ducats to enter the garden and bathe in the pool, whose waters were considered to be healing by both Muslims and Christians. See Meinardus, Christian Egypt, Ancient and Modern (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1977), p. 624.

77 According to Leonor Fernandes, the term khānqāh, during the Mamluk period, generally referred to “a foundation which provided a makan (place) for Sufis to meet. It may have quarters with a number of buyut or tibaq for lodging, a matbakh (kitchen) a hammam (bathhouse), an ablution fountain (midaʿa), and a qaʿa or riwaq (apartment for the shaykh).” See Leonor Fernandes, The Evolution of a Sufi Institution in Mamluk Egypt: The Khanqah (Berlin: Klaus Schwartz Verlag, 1988), p. 16.

78 Earlier, I cited a reference from Abudacnus’ work, which hints at the existence of a similar place. This may be the precursor for the place later referred to as “Rabitat al-Quds,” an institution reportedly established in 1944 near the Azbakiyya district of Cairo. This institution provided assistance to pilgrims going to the Holy Land. I was told during my research that although the current building is quite modern, it was built on an historic site that traditionally served a similar function. See Archbishop Basilius, “Rabitat al-Quds,” Coptic Encyclopedia 7.2049.
notables, priests and laymen from all over Egypt. After bidding farewell to the locals, the patriarch’s caravan took to the road again and arrived at (4) Bilbays, approximately thirty miles northeast of Cairo, where they set up camp. Copts believed that the Holy Family stopped at Bilbays during their sojourn in Egypt and that there, the infant Jesus miraculously raised a dead man. After a brief stay, they moved northeast of Bilbays to (5) al-Qartān where they camped, and then the next day to (6) al-Ṣāliḥiyya, where they stayed for two days. During these stops, more people congregated around the caravan, including a number of Copts from Lower Egypt but also a number of bedouins, who apparently gathered out of tradition to receive the hospitality of the pilgrims. Our narrator tells us that al-Mu‘allim Jirjis Abū Maṣūr, as well as his brother, were quite hospitable in that regard and provided enough food and drink for the numerous masses. The leisurely pace at which the caravan traveled and its many stops indicate a philanthropic side to this pilgrimage, one that involved the patriarch and communal leader ministering to the broader community along the journey.

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79 Bilbays is at a crossroads between the desert and the Delta. It is likely to be a pre-Islamic city as it is mentioned in ancient Coptic texts, and it is also listed as one of the old Egyptian bishoprics. The Holy Family’s visit here was described by a seventh-century Bishop Zacharias of Sakha. Not much is known about Bilbays during the Coptic period, but it appears that in 1168, the Crusaders took the town under the leadership of King Amalric of Jerusalem. Later, in the Mamluk era, Bilbays was restored as a Coptic bishopric. See Randall Stewart, “Bilbeis,” Coptic Encyclopedia 2.391, as well as Hulsmann, “Tracing the Route of the Holy Family Today,” pp. 39-41. According to Gaston Wiet, Bilbays was a major traffic center during the Middle Ages. Because of the town’s location, it was besieged numerous times, under the Arabs in 640 and then by the Crusaders. It was also known to be along the road of the mail couriers and to have had a center for carrier pigeons. See Gaston Wiet, “Bilbays,” EI² 1.1218. There is evidence, moreover, that at least during the seventeenth century, there was a courier route between Cairo and Damascus which went by way of Bilbays, Gaza, and Ramallah. See Faroqhi, Pilgrims and Sultans, p. 41. From these accounts, it makes much sense that this would have been the first stop along the Coptic pilgrimage route to Jerusalem. Moreover, Bilbays was a lucrative tax farm held by Shaykh ʿAbdallah al-Sharqāwī in the 1790s.

80 Al-Ṣāliḥiyya was a town northeast of Cairo, close to the Mediterranean Sea, which served as a well-known stop for travelers and armies en route to Ottoman Palestine.
On Saturday, March 30, 1704 (23 Baramhāt), one week after it had left Cairo, the Archbishop of Jerusalem, Ghubriyāl, joined the caravan. Although the text does not mention where the Archbishop encountered the caravan, it is likely that he joined it near (7) Damietta.  

It is not unlikely that the caravan from Cairo made a stopover at the shrine of Saint Dimyana, one of the most popular patron saints of the period, and then headed to Damietta, where it rendezvoused with the Archbishop. Subsequently they likely visited the Holy Family shrines in Tell al-Farama, along the Mediterranean Sea, and another at al-‘Arish, where provisions had been sent weeks before, and then finally reached (8) Gaza. At Gaza, Abū Mašūr inquired about meeting with Mehmed Pasha, the governor of the district, but the Pasha was in Ramallah, so instead Abū Mašūr met with the governor’s kâhya (lieutenant) and his qā’im magām (deputy governor). He gave both appropriate gifts, and in exchange they gave him assurances of safe travel. A similar meeting took place with the leader of the bedouins in the area.

After a leisurely reprise in Gaza, the Copts arrived in (9) Ramallah on April 4, 1704 (28 Baramhāt), and set up camp. It seems, however, that Abū Mašūr was worn out by the nomadic lifestyle. Thankfully monks from a nearby Armenian monastery agreed to host the pilgrims; they remained there for four days. This hospitality was likely due to the

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81 While this point is somewhat uncertain, it seems, according to Otto Meinardus, that from the establishment of the office in the thirteenth century and until the 1940s, the Archbishop of Jerusalem had jurisdiction over large sections of the Nile Delta, including the provinces of Daqaliya, Gharbiya, Sharqiya, and Damietta, including the Monastery of Saint Dimyana at Bilqās. Otto Meinardus, “The Copts in Jerusalem and the Question of the Holy Places,” p. 124.

82 According to Meinardus, the Copts had a Church of St. Mary in Gaza during the first part of the fifteenth century. See Meinardus, The Copts in Jerusalem, p. 22.

83 Qā’im magām was the deputy or substitute for an absent ruler (wāli). See Shaw, The Financial and Administrative Organization, pp. 185-186.
fact that the Copts and Armenians were officially in communion. On Sunday morning, the Copts and Armenians prayed mass together. In the evening, Coptic leaders met with Mehmed Pasha, governor of Gaza, and presented him with fittingly lavish gifts. With all of these ceremonial duties out of the way, the road to Jerusalem was finally clear. On Monday, at the beginning of the sixth week of Lent, the patriarch’s and Abū Manṣūr’s entourage headed out of Ramallah and entered Jerusalem on the third day of Barmūda at dawn.

This was a long journey, and yet according to the narrator, as soon as the Copts arrived in Jerusalem, they opened up their churches for prayer. Near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, three chapels were made accessible: the Church of the Four Incorporeal Beasts, the Church of the Angel, and the Church of Saint George. All of these were in Dayr al-Sulṭān, the ancient Coptic monastery which was to be their main place of lodging in Jerusalem. Also soon after their arrival, a meeting was arranged between Coptic Patriarch Yuḥanna and the newly-appointed Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, who had recently arrived from Istanbul and came to lead his community in Easter celebrations. The Greek Orthodox community was the most influential of all the Christian groups present in Jerusalem during that period; thus a meeting between the Coptic and the Greek patriarchs ensured that the Copts were in good standing with the appropriate Christian religious leaders. Indeed our narrator indicates that after this meeting, both the Armenians and the Roman Catholics were especially generous in their treatment of the Coptic patriarch. What is truly noteworthy here is that not only did Copts have to ingratiate themselves with Ottoman authorities and Muslim leaders during their journey; immediately upon their arrival in Jerusalem, they were obliged to act in the same manner
with Christian higher-ups. This example of ceremonial deference among Christian communities seems to have taken place exclusively in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{84}

On Sunday, April 13, 1704 (8 Barmūda), the Greek Orthodox patriarch opened the doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as was the common custom. The narrator describes the order in which the Coptic entourage entered: first, the lay community leader Abū Manṣūr went in, along with the archbishop of Jerusalem Ghubriyāl. They were followed by Patriarch Yuḥanna and a number of priests\textsuperscript{85} who were dressed in their ceremonial clothing (\textit{baranīs}), and who formed a customary procession. There were a total of eighty Coptic deacons and priests in front of the patriarch, holding icons and singing hymns of praise, as the patriarch entered the church holding the censor in his hand. They processed around the interior of the church until they reached the Coptic chapel near the tomb of Christ, where they prayed mass. Afterwards, everyone took blessing at Christ’s sepulchre, and for the remainder of the day and all that week, the pilgrims visited holy shrines all over Jerusalem. Their rounds, according to our narrator, included a stopover at ‘Ayn Silwān\textsuperscript{86} [sic] where they drank from the holy water. Next they proceeded to Bīr Ayyūb (Job’s well)\textsuperscript{87} and then they climbed Jabal al-Suʿūd\textsuperscript{88} (the

\textsuperscript{84} It should be noted here that Copts, Greek Orthodox, Syrians, and Armenians celebrated Easter on the same day, while the Catholics followed the Gregorian calendar.

\textsuperscript{85} In a later part, the narrator informs us that eleven priests from Egypt accompanied the patriarch to Jerusalem and that there were already, at that time, three priests residing in Jerusalem.

\textsuperscript{86} This pool of water is known as Siloe, Siloah, or Siloam. It was located outside the south wall of Jerusalem, where Jesus performed the miracle of giving sight to a man born blind (John 9:1-7).

\textsuperscript{87} Located southeast of the city, Bīr Ayyūb (“Job's Well”) was a major source of water for the city of Jerusalem from the time of the Crusaders until the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{88} The ascension of Jesus occurred, according to biblical references, on the fortieth day after Easter Sunday. Tradition designates that this event took place on top of the Mount of Olives outside of the Old City of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{171}
Mount of the Ascension) where the footprints of Jesus are reportedly are imprinted on a rock. Later, they visited the tomb of the Virgin Mary in Gethsemane, where they prayed mass on the spot.

In the following week, on the seventh Sunday of Lent, the celebrations of Palm Sunday were conducted inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The narrator explains that the Copts prayed their own mass early in the day, and then after communion, they prayed the traditional Pascha\textsuperscript{89} litanies associated with Holy Week. At this point, all Christian communities joined together to perform a Palm Sunday procession which was led by the Greek Patriarch, who circled the church with his entourage three times and then entered the church to pray. The Greeks were followed first by the Armenians, then by the Copts, and finally by the Syrian Orthodox. The Coptic patriarch wore special ceremonial clothing for this procession, as did the accompanying priests, and they held in their hands palm branches as well as bibles. Once these ceremonies were finished, the traditions associated with Holy Week, the week before Easter celebrations, had officially begun. On Monday and Tuesday, the patriarch and most other Coptic pilgrims journeyed to the Jordan River (Bah\textsuperscript{r} al-Shari\textsuperscript{a}) to get the blessings of the water in which Jesus was baptized. During that week, they also prayed traditional services in their own chapels, until the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was reopened for communal prayer on Good Friday.

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\textsuperscript{89} This term has its origins in the Hebrew word “Pesach,” which means Passover. Eventually it came to refer to the Passion and death of Christ and later the resurrection and ascension. In the Coptic context, however, all of Holy Week, beginning at Palm Sunday and ending on Good Friday, is considered the week of Pascha. Alfred Cody, “Pascha,” \textit{Coptic Encyclopedia} 6.1903-1905.
By Saturday (referred to as the Saturday of Light or “Sabt al-Nūr”), preparations were being made for the most miraculous occasion associated with the Easter services in Jerusalem: the “Miracle of the Holy Fire.” Before returning to the narrative from 1704, however, let us examine Abudacnus’ description of this custom, a record of pilgrimage made almost one century earlier. It is important to keep in mind when examining Abudacnus’ text that he wrote the description with open skepticism towards what he saw as a common (if not base) ritual:

But on the Sabbath day they assemble all together in the Church of the Sepulcher and hear Mass; which all the Bishops that are present celebrate in so many several Chapels. In the Chapel of the Sepulcher only the Patriarch of the Jacobites [Copts], if he be present, otherwise his Vicar [the Archbishop of Jerusalem], with some of the Abyssine Churches, upon whom, they say, a Light shineth out of the Sepulcher. But the Turks, that are Keepers, extinguish all of the Lamps and Candles set up that day in the Church, which are again lighted by the Divine Light springing out of the Sepulcher. But many esteem this to be a fiction; and in truth it is so: it is possible, and many testify, that this might anciently have been, when those that professed the Christian Religion were very rare, but now the Faith being displayed through the whole World, we have no need of any such Miracles. But that the Turks may have good esteem of the Christian Religion, they are wont to deceive the credulous minds of the simple with such Arts, as may bring no damage to the Christian Faith, feigning the Lamps, to have been kindled by a light shining out of the Sepulcher, when indeed they have a Lamp suspended out of the Sepulcher, with which the Priest lighteth up again all the rest that were extinguished. And this is done by the Ethiopians, or the Jacobites, because they alone, as we said before, celebrate mass in the Chapel of the Sepulcher. Many Europeans believe this, but to impose upon the Greeks and Chaldeans\textsuperscript{90} in this matter is a thing impossible.\textsuperscript{91}

While Abudacnus reports that it was in fact Copts (“Jacobites”), who were in charge of this tradition, they were likely not leaders of the ceremony but only participants, as one

\textsuperscript{90} Chaldeans are Eastern Christians who are mostly native to Iraq; since the seventeenth century, the Chaldeans have acknowledged union with the Catholic pope in Rome.

\textsuperscript{91} Abudacnus, \textit{The True History of the Jacobites}, pp. 27-28.
traveler, the Chevalier d’Arvieux, noted in 1660.\textsuperscript{92} Indeed the ceremony was a contested issue among the different sects. Oded Peri describes the ritual as it stood in the seventeenth century as being led by the Greek patriarch of Jerusalem, who would enter the sepulcher, have the door shut behind him in order to assure no foul play took place, and then emerge with glowing candles in each of his hands. In 1634, the Armenians challenged the Greek right and in 1657, a compromise was reached whereby the Armenian patriarch would enter the sepulcher side by side with the Greek patriarch.\textsuperscript{93}

The splendor of this ritual is described in much detail by Antoine Morison, a French priest visiting Jerusalem in 1699, whose account is highly skeptical of the ceremony of the Holy Fire. First, he relates how all of the communities processed around the sepulchre in a most colorful scene, with twelve or fifteen banners carried around by the various “schismatic” Christian denominations and different clergymen donning their most glorious robes, studded with gold and precious jewels. Next, the Greek and Armenian patriarchs were locked into the tomb by four Janissary guards, where they remained for an undisclosed period as a multitude of believers waited. Upon their grand exit from the tomb they passed around this “miraculous fire,” which was used to light the candles of approximately 2000 people occupying the church. Shortly after, according to Morison, the stories of “false miracles” began to circulate, and this was primarily done, in his opinion, for the sake of impressing the Turkish Janissary guards in the Church. Morison contrasts the “chaos” of this ceremony with the orderly and spiritual Catholic

\textsuperscript{92} Memoires du Chevalier d’Arvieux cited in Meinardus, The Copts in Jerusalem, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{93} Peri, Christianity under Islam in Jerusalem, pp. 118-120.
Easter celebrations, completed weeks before the Orthodox, and he laments the disrespect that these schismatic ceremonies bring to Christ’s holy sepulchre.  

Seen from a less skewed and pragmatic perspective, the organization behind this ritual and its importance were related to the issue of legitimizing Christian “supremacy” in the eyes of the Muslim authorities. In 1704, only a few years after Morison’s account, the Coptic version of the ceremony seems both organized and awe-inspiring for the participants. Our account describes how all of the sects prayed together on Saturday night, until dawn on Sunday, when reportedly the miraculous light came out of the tomb. With great organization, the Christian sects had decided ahead of time in which sequence they would receive the light. The light was passed in order from the candles lit by the Greek patriarch to the Armenian patriarch, who lit the candles of the Coptic patriarch, who passed the light to al-Mu'āllim Ibrāhīm Abū Sa'd, one of the Coptic elders, who finally lit the candles held by pilgrims, which had been pre-purchased for the occasion. By all accounts, the drama of this event was the highlight of a week of Easter celebrations. A long procession was held afterwards, in the customary order of Greeks, Armenians, Copts, and Syrians. Once celebrations were finished, the traditional Easter greetings were exchanged among the celebrants. Certainly, this was the climax of the entire journey and the pilgrims would cherish those candles which were lit by the Holy Fire as keepsakes to give to friends and family upon their return home.

In the week following Easter, the pilgrims began to visit more holy sites, including shrines in Bethlehem. On the first Saturday after Easter, Jirjis Abū Maṣfur made the decision that they would leave for Egypt and thus that evening, the doors to the

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Church of the Holy Sepulchre were opened, and people entered to pray. After the mass and after most of the congregation was dismissed, a private ceremony took place in which the patriarch and some of the notables entered the tomb of Christ to take a final blessing. Thus they departed on May 18, 1704 (12 Bashans) and as they eventually neared home, they received news regarding infighting among the Ottoman soldiers that was taking place in Cairo at the time. Jirjis learned that Isma‘il Kâhya, āmīn al-jawālī (supervisor of jizya) and the multazim95 of the province of Bilbays, was coming to Khanqah, where the caravan was halted, in order to raid it. However, when they arrived in Bilbays on Sunday the 17th of Bashans, they received news that the fighting among the soldiers had ceased and that Cairo’s gates were open. On Monday, 18th Bashans, they headed towards al-Maṭariyya, where the patriarch and Jirjis disembarked. They ordered the camels and luggage sent ahead to Cairo and visited the Holy Family shrines there. Many locals gathered to serve them, and Christians of the area came to hear the story of their pilgrimage. Finally they left for Cairo and completed this long and holy journey.

*Translating the Pilgrimage: Piety, Fellowship and Community*

While I have addressed the rituals of this journey, Victor Turner’s understanding of pilgrimage, as described and critiqued by Thomas Idinopulos, can help us interpret this subject in a broader sense. Within Idinopulos’ outline, there are several working hypotheses for our case, namely that pilgrimages are characterized by a sense of communal fraternity, that they are both voluntary and obligatory acts, that they are life-

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95 A multazim was the holder of a tax farm (iltizām).
changing “rites of passage” characterized by the passing from the familiar to the foreign and back to the familiar again, that they have commercial aspects intertwining individual piety with the marketplace, and that pilgrims are able to surpass both spatial and temporal limitations in the course of their journey. Adding to this list, Idinopulos maintains that pilgrimage to the Holy Land is unique in its “unpredictable, dramatic, dangerous, and often destructive” character. Here he is referring to the kind of fanaticism which the Holy Land has inspired, particularly in the form of the Catholic Crusades or the Muslim jihad, the kind of zealotry that turns Turner’s idea of fraternity into a “force” rather than a “grace.” Idinopulos questions Turner’s more hopeful understanding of fellowship as imbedded in these spiritual journeys.

Undoubtedly, for Egypt’s Christians, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was both a means to rejuvenate faith and an opportunity to experience a broader sense of fraternity. I would like to argue here that for Orthodox pilgrims, particularly for Copts in the Ottoman period, fraternity was perhaps one of the most important characteristic of the Holy Land pilgrimage. In a literature rich on Europeans and Roman Catholics and relatively poor on the Eastern Orthodox world, the material presented in this chapter is noteworthy in its depiction of one Orthodox community’s tradition of performed piety. Although this topic has been little studied, pioneering works are already suggestive of how to consider such a question. Here, Glen Bowman’s differentiation between Catholic and Orthodox pilgrimage, for instance, with the former embodying a more distinct experience of an individual pilgrim to the Holy Land and the latter marked by its communal character,
might be applicable. The entire account of the pilgrimage of 1704, as discussed above, is characterized by collective planning and cooperation, from the start of the journey in Cairo to its finish in Jerusalem during Easter services; the fraternal group experience is most central to the narration. As Andrew Jotischky notes in the case of the Greek Orthodox pilgrims in the medieval period, “The Holy Land functions as an icon with the capacity to make comprehensible the ideal of this community.” This paradigm can be easily applied to the Coptic case.

Christian believers have endeavored, throughout history, to express their piety, whether through habitual reverence and obedience to God or through the performance of religious rituals. In many ways these acts, which could be carried out by anyone at any time, lent an egalitarian quality to the Christian faith. However, the Jerusalem pilgrimage was more restricted, since it was typically limited to the wealthy elite. This certainly makes sense: only those believers who could afford to leave off work and pay the heavy expenses of the journey were fortunate enough to go. This elitism was not unique to Copts but was also common among Western pilgrims. Nevertheless, what allows us to refer to this pilgrimage as an act of “popular religion” is ultimately its shared, collective character. As mentioned earlier, it was indeed important for a small Coptic community to find itself part of the larger-than-life ritual, one which included the most influential of the Christian communities in the Ottoman Empire. This may have been motivation for Copts

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to make the dangerous journey and to take their appropriate place in the ceremonial landscape of Easter celebrations.

However, aside from providing a sense of fraternity with other Christian groups, pilgrimage, as Turner suggests, is a collective act of devotion that extends far beyond the temporal and spatial context in which it is performed. As Jotischky writes about Greek Orthodox pilgrims at the time of the Crusades, the fact that those pilgrims chose to record their journeys was in itself “an act of sharing and of educating.” The importance these pilgrims gave to conveying their experiences indicates that they performed the pilgrimage for reasons that went beyond a mere quest for repentance.98 The limited written evidence in our possession about Copts may contradict this hypothesis; however the oral traditions which likely accompanied the pilgrims’ return to their homeland, as they made known their tales of adventure and spiritual enlightenment to fellow believers, broadens the scope of our study. As indicated from the above narrative, numerous bystanders gathered to see the pilgrimage caravan, to speak to the travelers, and to benefit from the material blessings passed out by communal leaders. The pilgrimage connected the Coptic patriarch (a Cairene churchman) to his community, and the caravan was likely a glorious and unusual scene for those who could not afford to make the journey, men and women, peasants and town dwellers alike. Moreover, a privileged understanding of pilgrimage and the texts it inspired, as Glenn Bowman reminds us, had significant effects on how non-elites conceived of the holy places in Jerusalem and their meaning. They created the context for a kind of “second-hand” pilgrimage, one that was passed down orally, literally and physically. As Bowman maintains, the relics of the pilgrimage are “not

98 Ibid., p. 113.
simply referents pointing unobtrusively toward historical incidents and specific locations but are, instead, parts of an elaborate, intertextual discourse in which the journey to the Holy Land serves as an occasion for theology, economics, folklore, politics, and sheer fantasy to converse with one another."

One of the most important “relics” for the Coptic context was and still is the tattoo. A tattoo was not a relic in the traditional sense: it could not be passed around or divided into pieces amongst fellow believers. However, it was a permanent memento from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, one which could be shared in the form of storytelling and in the reenactment of the journey. In his book Coptic Tattoos, John Carswell notes the tradition of tattooing among Copts who visit the Holy Land by interviewing members of the Razzouk family, whose trade of tattooing various religious symbols and pictorial depictions with the use of woodblocks dates back to the eighteenth century. The most common tattoo, among Copts in Egypt and in Jerusalem, was the figure of the cross (the “Jerusalem cross”), both commemorating the occasion and protecting the tattooed; however, numerous other designs existed, including those


100 Mordechai Lewy argues that Europeans predated Eastern Orthodox Christians in the custom of tattooing in the Holy Land, noting that the earliest known cases of European pilgrims being tattooed took place in 1564 in Jaffa and 1602 in Bethlehem. According to Lewy, the tattooers employed a technique which transferred designs onto the body with pre-carved woodblocks, much like the process described for Copts in other periods, and that by the mid-18th century the practice of tattooing moved from “Latin” Bethlehem to “Eastern Orthodox” Jerusalem. The reason cited for this move is the appearance of similar woodblocks among the Coptic Razzuk family, the earliest dating to 1749. I am hesitant to agree with Lewy’s logic, however. The practice of tattooing has ancient ties in Egypt and while we may not have documentary evidence about Coptic tattoos from earlier periods, it is possible that the commemoration of the pilgrimage, even with the simple tattooing of the “Jerusalem cross,” predates the eighteenth century. See “Toward a History of Jerusalem Tattoo Marks among Western Pilgrims” [Hebrew], Cathedra 95 (2000): 37-66.

101 Carswell’s study is mainly a record of the designs imprinted on these wooden blocks, which the Razzouk family has owned for centuries. John Carswell, Coptic Tattoo Designs, 2nd ed. (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1958).
depicting favorite saints or martyrs. Many pilgrims also chose to tattoo the year of the pilgrimage in order to memorialize it for posterity. This custom was not just common to the Copts, according to Carswell, but was also popular among the Syrians, Abyssinians and Armenians. Ultimately, these tattoos are, along with candles, rosaries, and pictures, part of the keepsakes taken home from Jerusalem to commemorate this event.  

Far from just representing Turner’s idea of marketplace meeting piety, the tattoo, as well as the other relics brought home from the Holy Land (including candles lit during the ceremony of the Holy Fire), portray accurately this idea of a “second-hand” pilgrimage. All of these constitute the materials that would be used by the pilgrim upon his or her return to his native land in order to tell and share the story of his journey. As in Coptic homes, where saintly depictions in the form of amulets or small icons are extensively displayed, the tattoos are images that are considered to be a sort of baraka, or blessing to believers. They are a permanent reminder of God’s grace and of the protection he bestows upon the person who dons them.

Epilogue

On May 3, 1995, a French news bureau ran a story with the following title: “5,000 Copts defied patriarch for Easter visit to Jerusalem,” a story outlining the defiance of Copts making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem despite the Coptic patriarch’s ban. In

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102 Ibid., xxx.

103 For a pictorial account of the souvenirs that Muslim, Christian, and Jewish pilgrims acquire from their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, see Iris Fishof and Noam Bar’am-Ben Yossef, *Souvenirs de Terre Sainte pour les pèlerins du XIXe et XXe siècle* (Jerusalem: Le Musée d’Israel, 1996).

consideration of the current conflict, Coptic Patriarch Shenouda III prohibited Copts from visiting the Holy Land and from performing this historically important ritual; on numerous occasions, he insisted that Copts would resume their pilgrimage only when Jerusalem was restored to Palestinian control. However, the defiance of hundreds of Copts persisted, and in an interview in 1998, the patriarch asserted that “Copts who are obedient to the church do not visit the occupied holy territories because they have orders contrary to that. Those who did visit in the past apologized and published their apologies in the newspapers.”105 Indeed, Copts who failed to atone for their transgressions and to issue costly repentant messages in the Egyptian press were “excommunicated” and forbidden from partaking in the Church’s sacraments. The pilgrimage historically associated with an act of communal spirituality now ironically threatened to hinder a devotee’s participation in the broader community, and this point has indeed rattled the Coptic community. This example, seemingly trivial, forces us to consider the enormous value attributed to the pilgrimage and to marvel at the spectacle of those pilgrims who trod the path to the Holy Land a few centuries ago.

CHAPTER FIVE

“WEAPON OF THE FAITHFUL”: PREACHING TO THE COPTIC COMMUNITY IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EGYPT

To give a sermon in the Coptic Church today is a highly regarded duty. The orator is generally a clergyman -- a priest, a bishop, or the patriarch himself -- or an esteemed layman known for his oratorical skills and for his talent in rousing the spirit and the moral fiber of his audiences. As he steps up to the lectern, the words that he has committed to paper (or to memory) are animated and brought to life. Sermons, which are different from other liturgical literature in that they contain a message of moral and/or spiritual improvement, are usually given during a liturgy, but they might also be delivered at funerals to console mourners or sometimes at weddings to counsel newlyweds. Homiletic orations are also a regular part of commemorating Coptic feasts and have been traditionally recited at saints’ festivals. In a church deeply rooted in cyclical and ritualistic oratory, the sermon is perhaps the only opportunity for the speaker to improvise, to explore the demands of his community, and to give moral and religious guidance suitable for his day and age.

1 The most common liturgical readings of the Coptic Church are the Syanaxarion (the collection of hagiographies), the Homilies (of the Great Church Fathers), the Psalmodia (a book containing hymns and psalms to be sung daily), the Dīfnār (a collection of hymns for saints celebrated on each day of a Coptic month), the Turuhāt (expositions of biblical readings), and biblical lessons given during matrimonial and burial services. See Emil Maher Ishaq, “Lectern,” Coptic Encyclopedia 5.1434-1435.
By and large, the general function of a sermon in the Coptic Church, whether today or in years past, is not fundamentally different from its purpose in other religious and historical contexts. The notion that preaching and sermon-giving can link clergymen to worshippers by speaking to the latter’s spiritual needs or by promoting a clerical agenda is not novel. How these sermons were received, however, by their intended audiences is a question of great significance for an historian of the early modern period, and it ultimately leads to the problem of how historians understand popular religious beliefs or practices with the use of “official” documents. After all, in the early modern era, particularly within the Arab Christian context, there are no documents written by laymen or lower clergymen (i.e., priests) that respond to religious concerns of the day. However, the lack of an existing, written response to official sermons should not devalue our study of these texts. In a momentous article, Natalie Davis suggests that “popular religion” might be a product of the creative encounter or collusion of various social elements. She implies that historians should therefore use texts -- even if they are “official” sources -- to interpret the collective expression of religious practices and worldviews.

This approach can easily be applied to sermons, seeing as these texts (and their recital) represent a performative encounter between a speaker and his audiences within

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2 For example, Jonathan Berkey has closely studied this subject in his work Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001). Berkey makes a convincing argument that the Muslim preachers often used the pulpit to exert “a considerable degree of power over the audiences.” However, he also reminds us that “power in preaching and storytelling circles flowed in both directions. Preaching was not a simple didactic affair in which one individual, whatever his standing and reputation, delivered his message to a passive audience,” p. 54.

the context of liturgical practice. In studying this performative space, historians encounter the problems inherent in textual sources written by the clergy rather than by laymen, problems that, not surprisingly, inform the study of Copts in Ottoman Egypt no less than they do that of Protestants in eighteenth-century Scotland. In summarizing the difficulties behind the reliance on these “official” sources for the Scottish context, Ned Landsman writes the following:

The most persistent difficulty confronting historical interpreters of popular religion in the early modern world is that of establishing the relationship between ideas enunciated by religious leaders and those held by their hearers. The causes of that uncertainty are obvious; where historical materials for the former are plentiful, sources that address the latter are far more difficult to obtain. The great majority of evidence that we have concerning lay religiosity derives from clerical rather than lay sources, and most of it tells us about religious behavior than belief. Even those rare accounts we have that purport to narrate the spiritual experiences of ordinary people tend to be both unrepresentative and stylized, to the point where the ultimate implications of such materials for understanding popular belief often are far from certain.

The argument that sermons tell us much more “about religious behavior than belief” is noteworthy. However, rather than interfering with our evaluation of these sources, as Landsman implies, the glimpse that these sources offer of the behavior of a community in a particular historic context, albeit through the lens of religious functionaries, can be rewarding, the more so if the community in question has been little studied. Sermons

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4 In the case of Ottoman Syria, Catholic missionaries note that believers challenged their preachers and noisily expressed their approval during sermons. See Bernard Heyberger, Les Chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la réforme Catholique (Syrie, Liban, Palestine, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles) (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1994), p. 153. Heberger has closely studied the texts that were produced by Arab Christians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly in light of the availability of printing presses in the late eighteenth century. See his study “Livres et pratique de la lecture chez les chrétiens (Syrie, Liban) XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles,” in Livres et lecture dans le monde Ottoman (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1999), pp. 209-223.

written by clerical elements, which will be the main topic of this chapter, should certainly remind us of the limitations set by a restricted source base but should not discourage us from asking questions about these sources’ utility and their historical value. As Patrick Ferry writes for the case of Lutheran preaching, in words that echo Davis’ sentiment above, “the sermon’s historical importance as a point of contact between preachers and hearers…indicates [the] value of studying preaching.”

To understand how sermons are delivered is significant in this context; after all, technique is a key part of oratory performances since it affects a sermon’s perception among various audiences. Marc Saperstein maintains with regard to his case study of rabbinical sermons among a Jewish community in sixteenth-century Amsterdam that

> Even assuming, for the moment, that the written text through which the sermon becomes accessible to us is a verbatim recording of the words that were spoken, which is usually not the case, it contains only one component of the totality. Missing is everything encompassed in the word ‘delivery’: elements such as variations of tempo, pitch, emphasis and intensity, gestures and facial expressions, level of animation, occasionally even interaction between preacher and audience.

Language usage can be of great help in determining the performed aspects of a sermon. As discussed in Chapter Two, in the case of the hagiography of the martyr Șalîb, colloquialisms and emphatic repetitions are an excellent indication of how a writer intended a text to be recited, whether by his own voice or by those of other rectors. The

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6 Patrick T. Ferry, “Confessionalization and Popular Preaching: Sermons against Synergism in Reformation Saxony,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 28, no. 4 (1997): 1143. Ferry adds that “Moreover, preaching records that have come down to us offer an opportunity for analytical insights that are not always readily apparent in many other sources. In much the same way that preaching was supposed to bridge the distance between preacher and hearer, the exploration of extant sermon materials offers an exceptional point of methodological contact for Reformation studies.”

diction of a sermon might also depend on its content, since the subject may alter the manner in which a sermon is articulated to an audience.

It is perhaps helpful, then, to have a general categorization of liturgical sermons in order to better understand how they were received by audiences. From my research on Coptic Christians in Ottoman Egypt, I can discern three types of homiletic orations. First, there are sermons read on particular days of each year and which are usually marked for that purpose by their authors or posthumously by church leaders; these may contain more mundane advice for a congregation that is commemorating a saint’s feast day or partaking in Easter celebrations. Other sermons, however, are written for one-time usage and serve a specific purpose, such as raising funds or financing a building project. Thirdly, there are sermons that can fall between these two categories: these are sermons addressing communal problems of the “day” and containing pastoral guidance applicable to a definite but not necessarily narrow period of time.

This last type of sermon is the predominant subject of study in this chapter. The burden of ministering to and leading the Coptic community was a duty taken seriously by several enterprising Coptic clergymen in eighteenth-century Ottoman Egypt, and these men recorded their advice in homiletic forms that were both novel and methodical in the context of Arab Christian literature. Among the sermon-givers were clergymen who were adamant about keeping their community “in check” during an era which was marked by the intensifying attempt of the Roman Catholic missionaries to unite with and/or convert

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8 Ibid., p. 251.

9 An example of this would be the sermons written to raise funds among the Coptic community for the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, as discussed in Chapter Four, or the sermon Saperstein notes for the case of the rabbi who wished to raise money to ransom a Jewish leader in Jerusalem in 1625 CE
Coptic Orthodox Christians, as exemplified in the form of a text which will be discussed later in this chapter; and by increasing tensions between laymen and the clergy over control of the community. It must be emphasized that this study explores first and foremost the perceptions among Coptic clerical leaders to these threats and tensions. The facts of Coptic-Catholic interaction may be in dispute, and the history of lay-clerical relations within the Coptic community has yet to be fully studied due to the paucity of sources. What is highlighted in this chapter is the awareness of and reaction to the “other” -- to the “Franks,” as will be discussed below -- among Coptic clerical leaders and the way in which this reaction informed these leaders’ ministering to the Coptic community.

Because the intent of this chapter is to specifically examine the sermons written by Coptic clergymen during the late eighteenth century, certain historical events will be assumed as a given. First of all, the elaborate political history of Coptic-Catholic relations has already been studied by a number of historians. The discussion here assumes that European (mostly French) Catholic missionaries were already present in Egypt by the late eighteenth century, at the time during which these sermons were written, and that these Copto-Arabic homilies were written as a response to their presence and to the perceived pressures that they exerted on the Coptic clerical leadership. Secondly, it is known that

Egyptian Copts did not exist in a vacuum, a fact attested to by earlier discussions of the annual festival of Saint Dimyana, on the one hand, and of the Coptic pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In both of these instances, the fact that Copts shared their rituals and traditions with Muslims and with other Christian communities was quite noticeable. In this chapter, it will also become evident that interaction with Catholics in Egypt was “close” enough to evoke a severe response by Coptic clerical leaders in the 1790s. These sermons do not tell us much, however, about the explicit interaction between Copts and other communities; notably absent from these homilies are the Syrian Christians (Orthodox and Catholic), who in eighteenth-century Egypt became increasingly visible in the commercial sector, and the Muslims. The socio-political and economic interaction between these communities in a dynamic period such as the late eighteenth century is a topic worthy of detailed study; however it falls outside the scope of this chapter.11

The job of reacting to the perceived threats towards Coptic communal order was taken up by Coptic patriarchs and bishops alike. For his part, Patriarch Buṭrus VI (1718-1726 CE) rebuked those Copts who adopted the Catholic faith, explaining to them in his letters why their act was considered heretical.12 Patriarch Yu’annis XVIII (1769-1796

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11 In two of the most prominent studies on Arab Christians, Bernard Heyberger’s work, Les Chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la réforme Catholique: Syrie, Liban, Palestine, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles, as well as Bruce Masters’ recent monograph, Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism, the topics of Catholic missionaries and of communal interaction in the Arab world are thoroughly discussed. Nevertheless, these two authors omit an examination of the Coptic Church in Egypt and its response, specifically on an internal level, to Catholic missionary movements. This is a significant omission, in my opinion, particularly in Masters’ study which all but implies that Copts were not part of the Christian and Jewish communities in the “Ottoman Arab world.” In that regard, it is difficult to gauge the situation of the Copts, I believe, without access to internal Coptic Church sources, and the unassuming task of this chapter is to elucidate some of those relevant documents.

12 See Coptic Patriarchate MS Lahūt 235, serial no. 441, cited in Simayka, Catalogues, vol. II, p. 196: “Collection of Various Works: (1) The Orthodox Faith by the Bishop ʿAbdallah Buṭrus; (2) A question by a Copt who rejected the Jacobite sect and the answer to it; (3) Correspondence by Anbā Buṭrus (Peter
CE) and his successor Murqus VIII (1796-1809 CE) originated a genre of writing for this period, that of the *Adrāj* ("Decrees"). The *Adrāj* were intended to guide the Orthodox community in proper moral conduct, but also to clarify a type of practical theology for laymen, a theology made accessible on a level that was unprecedented by earlier church leaders. Perhaps the most famous clergyman who took interest in looking after the community’s needs was Anba (Bishop) Yusāb (1735-1826 CE), known as “al-Abbaḥ,” a devout holy man who served from 1791 till his death as the Bishop of the double diocese of Jirja and Akhmīm. Yusāb’s sermons were known as “*Silāḥ al-Mu’mīnīn*” or the “Weapon of the Faithful,” and his “weapons” were mainly intended to battle the effects of the Catholic missionary movement in Egypt and to “straighten” what he perceived to be the loose morals of the Coptic lay community, whose leaders had become immensely powerful, rich, and influential.

This chapter will rely primarily on the sermons of Patriarch Yu’annis (*Adrāj*) and those written by Bishop Yusāb (*Silāḥ*); simply phrased, the choice of these sermons is primarily due to their availability as the sole (known) manuscripts from this period. However, this point should not undermine the distinctiveness of these texts. At no earlier

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13 "Adrāj" is defined by Simayka as “Degrees.”

14 Jirja is a town in Upper Egypt, approximately 20 miles southeast of Suhāj. With regard to its significance in Coptic history, Randall Stewart writes that “[In the early eighteenth century, the French missionary] Sicard reported that Jirja formed a bishopric together with Naqadah, Abu Tij, and Asyut.” See Randall Stewart, “Jirja,” *Coptic Encyclopedia*, pp. 1330-1331. The ancient town of Akhmīm is today the main town in the province of Suhāj and is within close proximity to Jirja; thus it is quite logical that Yusāb would have been named bishop of these two dioceses. Akhmīm was one of the major centers of Coptic culture from the fourth to the eighth centuries, and in fact, the “Akhmīmic dialect,” along with “Sahidic dialect,” constitutes the Upper Egyptian dialect of the Coptic language. See Peter Nagel, “Akhmīmic,” *Coptic Encyclopedia* (Appendix), A19-A27.
time during the Ottoman period was there such a concerted effort on the part of higher Coptic clergy not only to address the ordinary issues that concerned the community but also to effect uniform change in the practices of Coptic laymen. It is possible that preaching was used by Yu’annis and Yusāb to combat the Catholic missionary movement and the problems that ensued as a result of this missionary activity since, in effect, preaching had been the favorite tool of the missionaries themselves. From the start of missionary activities in Ottoman Syria at the beginning of the seventeenth century, “the mission was essentially preaching” but as Bernard Heyberger writes, Catholic preachers “could never compete with the eloquence of the Eastern [preachers].” Gradually, however, as missionaries learned local dialects and recruited “native preachers,” their sermons may have grown more effective. It is unknown whether in other parts of the Ottoman Arab world, a type of “counter-preaching” rose as a response to this activity. In that sense, the sermons written by Coptic clergymen in late eighteenth-century Egypt are fairly distinctive. Seeing as this type of literature has yet to be examined, the primary goal of this chapter is to review these sources and to highlight their implications for the field of Arab Christian history, in general, and for studying Coptic Church history during the Ottoman era in particular.

Ultimately, I will argue that Patriarch Yu’annis and Bishop Yusāb attempted through their sermons to “create uniformity of faith” and to define what it meant to be a Copt. Just as Lutheran preachers were forced to contend with issues of synergy in sixteenth-century Saxony, so were senior Coptic clergymen in eighteenth-century Egypt unwilling to accept heterodox and “conflicting religious opinions” prompted by the

infiltration of an unfamiliar church. Often, as Ferry writes, controlling synergistic behavior called for the use of more persuasive than coercive tactics by clergymen:

Together lay and clerical leaders concluded that very much was at stake, in this world, and especially in the life of the world to come. This prompted rulers and leading clergy to cooperate in a common effort to ensure desired results. Reform-minded men used the various means that were at their disposal to indoctrinate, and coercive tactics were not entirely out of bounds. Pastoral reform measures, however, were geared toward persuasion rather than coercion. Preaching was unquestionably one of the church leaders’ favored and most trusted tactics to accomplish this goal.16

Preaching was influential for creating and defining a community’s identity, and was part of a wide-ranging revival movement within the Coptic Church during the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries, one that spanned the arts and literature.

Setting the Community Straight: Two Men and their Ambitions

Two ambitious Coptic clergymen living in the late eighteenth century -- one a patriarch and the other a bishop -- were not only contemporaries but friends and possibly even, at some point, rivals. Both shared the same birth name: Yūsuf (Joseph). Patriarch Yu’annis XVIII (reign 1769-1796) was originally from the city of Fayyūm, where he resided until he joined the monastic order at the Red Sea Monastery of Saint Anthony at an unknown date. Bishop Yusāb (1735-1826) was born in Nukhayla (a province of the Upper Egyptian town of Asyūt) to wealthy parents. He joined the Monastery of Saint Anthony around 1760. While it is not clear when Yu’annis became a monk, it is more

than likely that the two men’s tenure as monks overlapped. During their stay at the monastery, there were approximately twenty-five monks in residence.\footnote{This is a rough approximation. In 1730, one traveler reported this number (cited in Meinardus, “Dayr Anba Anṭunīyūs”), and a colophon from a manuscript at the monastery’s library reports the exact statistic in 1805: “In the same year [that is, A.M. 1521, or A.D. 1805] there were twenty-five monks at the monastery, for it was an end of time. They were in great hardship because of the Bedouins. The caravans to the monastery were interrupted and even the news. And all the inhabitants suffered severe trouble. The entire land of Egypt was devastated and it was without control. This happened during the pontificate of Anba Mark, the hundred and eighth patriarch of the fathers, the patriarchs. One [of the bedouins] tried to make a hole in the enclosure wall at night but did not succeed. They [the bedouins] reopened the eastern spring. It was in every respect a bad year for the monks, who were dwelling at the monastery, especially because of the interruption of the caravans.” Monastery of St. Anthony, Library, Ms. biblical no. 164, fol. 132v, cited by Gawdat Gabra, “Perspectives on the Monastery of St. Antony: Medieval and Later Inhabitants and Visitors,” in Monastic Visions: Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea, ed. Elizabeth S. Bolman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 174.}

The few available sources on Coptic monastic life in the eighteenth century give us some indication of the milieu in which these two clergymen lived. Monks at the Monastery of Saint Anthony, it appears, were more exposed to other religious communities than monks at other Coptic monasteries. Traditionally, the cultural and intellectual environment at the Monastery of Saint Anthony attracted members of numerous religious sects: “Copts, Syrians, Ethiopians, Franciscans, and perhaps also Armenians visited and lived there at one time or another in the medieval and later periods….Such was its fame and significance within and outside of Egypt that it was a regular destination for study and pilgrimage.”\footnote{Gabra, “Perspectives,” p. 175.} One of the Monastery’s main draws was likely its impressive library, which had been rebuilt, along with the monastery itself, during the early Ottoman period and eventually restocked with significant numbers of manuscripts. As a center of learning, the Monastery of Saint Anthony gradually stole attention from the notable and ancient monasteries in Wādī al-Naṭrūn, and according to Coptologist Gawdat Gabra, this reclusive destination in the Red Sea was tremendously...
influential in shaping Coptic Church history: eight “Antonian” monks served as successive patriarchs, from John XVI (1676-1718) to Cyril IV (1854-1861).  

Perhaps it was these diverse offerings which attracted the two ambitious young men to the monastery’s doors. In the case of Bishop Yusāb, one Coptic historian writes that upon his arrival, the young monk began to research in the monastery’s books and to study, in detail, all matters related to theology. His devotion apparently won him the confidence of his compatriots, who ultimately named him librarian and charged him with the care of the library’s valuable manuscripts. On the eve of his consecration as patriarch in 1766, Yusāb’s compatriot and soon-to-be patriarch, the monk Yu’annis, witnessed the benefaction of one Coptic archon, Ḥassaballa al-Bayādī, who rebuilt the Church of St. Mark inside the monastery. This experience may later have motivated the patriarch to cajole the renowned Coptic archon Ibrāhīm al-Jawharī into renovating the monastery’s walls in 1783. It is not farfetched to wonder whether at some point during their tenure as monks, Yu’annis and Yusāb competed for the Coptic patriarchal seat. It is known that Yusāb was an ambitious and politically engaged bishop, who in later years

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19 Ibid., p. 174.


22 One viewpoint that may support this hypothesis is the fact that Yu’annis did not consecrate Yusāb as bishop until fairly late in his reign, possibly in an attempt to keep his authority at bay. However, as Nakhla argues, the Patriarch may have offered the bishopric of Akhmīm and Jirja to Yusāb, who declined it out of humility and attachment to his hermitic lifestyle — that is, the Patriarch insisted he take up the post in 1791. Nakhla, vol. 5, p. 90.
became involved in the selection of subsequent patriarchs.\textsuperscript{23} In all cases, whether they had been competitors or not, it is clear that eventually there was a close friendship and a mutual reliance between these two men.\textsuperscript{24}

Yu’annis would leave the Monastery of Saint Anthony in 1767 and proceed to lead the Coptic community as patriarch during a lengthy and relatively tumultuous period of Egyptian history. Aside from the homilies (\textit{Adrāj}) that he recorded, which will be examined shortly, not too many details are known about his patriarchate or his personal life. He was definitely, however, a committed leader of the Coptic community. His \textit{Adrāj}, although likely intended to be read in Cairene churches, were addressed from a “father” to his “children,” to the entire Coptic community throughout Egypt. The content of these sermons covers a wide range of topics, from the basic principles of proper Orthodox belief outlined in the first three homilies to raising funds for the Coptic community in Jerusalem (the sixth homily), and rebuking those who participate in acts of greed and in drunken behavior (the nineteenth homily).\textsuperscript{25} The sermons are often redundant, and the

\textsuperscript{23} Nakhla, \textit{Silislat tārīkh al-babawāt}, vol. 5, p. 90.

\textsuperscript{24} At the time Yu’annis died in 1796, Yusāb wrote a commemorative homily memorializing the benevolence that this patriarch had shown to his congregation throughout his reign. This is the seventeenth sermon in the collection, as described below in fn. 32.

\textsuperscript{25} I have compiled a list of the topics discussed in the \textit{Adrāj} based upon a complete manuscript at the Patriarchal Library in Cairo (Lahūt 134). 1) For the sake of the upright Orthodox faith; 2) For the sake of the upright faith; 3) For the upright faith; 4) A letter to the Abyssinian sultan; 5) For the sake of the priests and the servants of the altar; 6) In regard to what has befallen the Church in terms of the fine for [the] Jerusalem parish; 7) For the first Sunday of the Great Fast (Lent); 8) For the second Sunday of the Great Fast; 9) For the third Sunday of the Great Fast; 10) For the fourth Sunday of the Great Fast; 11) Regarding the holy sacraments (to be read on the fifth Sunday of the Great Fast); 12) For the sixth Sunday of the Great Fast; 13) For the Sunday called “al-Zaytūna,” (the olive branch) which is the seventh Sunday of the Great Fast; 14) For the Ninth Hour on Good Friday; 15) For the eighth Sunday of Easter; 16) For the Thursday of the Holy Ascension; 17) For the Feast of the Pentecost; 18) For the Advent Fast, to be read on the fifteenth day of the month Ḥātūr [the third month in the Coptic calendar]; 19) For the sake of drunkenness and avarice; 20) For the sake of enmity and envy; 21) For the sake of those who deny the goodness of God; 22) For the sake of the temptations of the world and its enticements; 23) For the sake of greed and many of the
patriarch seems to have utilized a “cut-and-paste” approach, recycling some of his most effective speeches into new texts. It is possible that the sermons were written throughout the patriarch’s reign, a period that spanned over twenty-seven years: any subject of significance during his office must have received mention in the *Adrāj*.

**Coptic-Catholic Relations: A Background**

The reign of one of the most theologically informed and spiritually attuned patriarchs in the early modern history of the Coptic Church has been characterized by Aziz Atiya as “one of the most miserable periods in Coptic history.” Atiya writes that “On several occasions [Patriarch Yu’annis XVIII] had to flee from the injustice and extortions imposed on the Christians.”

Certainly there was much civil unrest in Egypt...
during this time, but within the Coptic community any “misery” seems to have been counteracted by an ongoing cultural and literary renewal. This period was witness to one of the most vibrant iconographic revivals within Coptic Church history, led by the two painters Yuḥanna the Armenian and Ibrāhīm the Scribe, whose icons covered most Cairene churches. Moreover, the literary resurgence which was taking place among Copts throughout Egypt has been acknowledged to be much more considerable than earlier historians had estimated. Books were being written and copied to the extent that possibly up to fifty percent of existing Copto-Arabic manuscripts can be attributed to the eighteenth century. These works were produced in order to be circulated within churches and monasteries but also for personal use among the notables and the literate of the community.

However, despite this cultural and artistic renewal, there was one thorn in the side of this patriarch’s reign, and it stemmed from the Catholic missionary movement in Egypt. The patriarch was living the consequences of a movement, which, since the sixteenth century, had become quite proactive. The Capuchin order established a

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28 For more on the icons of these two painters, see Cawthra Mulock and Martin Telles Langdon, The Icons of Yuhanna and Ibrahim the Scribe (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1946), p. 12.

29 Magdi Girgis, “Athār al-arākhina ‘ala awdā ‘al-Qibṭ fil-qārn al-thāmin ‘ashr” [“The Effect of the Archons on the Position of Copts in the Eighteenth Century”], Annales Islamologiques 34, no. 2 (2000): 14. Simply put, many Coptic notables -- archons -- accumulated a great amount of wealth throughout the seventeenth and particularly the eighteenth centuries. Their generosity funded many building projects, and supported the aforementioned iconographic and literary revivals. This subject has been well-covered by Magdi Girgis in his article.

30 The Capuchins are an independent offshoot of the Catholic Franciscan Order.
mission in Egypt in 1623 and the Franciscans followed in 1687, with their center in Cairo. On some level, the missionaries were at first welcomed. Capuchins were allowed to use the Monastery of Saint Anthony as a language school for preparing their missionaries. In a move which may have come back to haunt Bishop Yusâb and Patriarch Yu’annis in the late eighteenth century, Patriarch Matthew III (1634-1649 CE) even allowed Catholic priests to preach in Coptic churches. The obstacles to uniting the Copts with the Catholic Church, however, were many, and the “immoral conduct of the Catholics [French merchants] residing in Egypt” was cited as a main reason for the failure of that effort; reportedly, Matthew III complained that “the Roman Catholic Church in this country is a brothel.” Nevertheless, in 1697, the Franciscans branched out and founded the new mission of Akhmīm-Fung-Ethiopia (or the mission of Upper Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia). Undoubtedly, the Catholics believed that relocating within

31 Meinardus, “Dayr Anba Anṭuniyūs.”

32 Frazee, p. 148; Father Cuthbert, “Capuchins Friars Minor,” The Catholic Encyclopedia. Cuthbert provides important information regarding this interaction between Catholic and Coptic clergy. He writes, “From Aleppo friars were sent, in 1630, to Cairo, under the leadership of the Blessed Agathange de Vendôme, one of the most remarkable missionaries of the seventeenth century. He was an Arabic scholar, and had published books in Arabic setting forth the Catholic Faith. On the coming of the friars to Cairo Urban VIII addressed a letter to the Catholics in Egypt, bidding them welcome the friars and accord them every assistance. But unhappily the friars found that their work amongst the Copts, for whose reunion with the Roman See they more particularly laboured, was hindered chiefly by the scandalous lives of the European Catholic merchants. Yet the friars obtained leave from the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria to preach in the churches of the Copts, and the pope even granted them permission to celebrate Mass in the same churches. Father Agathange’s influence with the Copts was such that he persuaded the Coptic patriarch to appoint for the Copts in Abyssinia a bishop who would live in peace with the Catholics. In 1637 Father Agathange, together with Father Cassian de Nantes, entered Abyssinia, but owing to the treachery of a German Lutheran they were at once seized and imprisoned, and the following year suffered martyrdom.”

33 Petro B. T. Bilaniuk, “Coptic Relations with Rome” 2.609-611.

34 Dêté Jean-Marie, “Contribution à l’étude,” p. 125; Bilaniuk, “Coptic Relations with Rome,” notes that these were the “Friars Minor of the Observance.”
the heart of the Coptic Christian population in Upper Egypt and away from the watch of the Cairene patriarch would have beneficial effects on the propagation of Catholicism in Egypt and in East Africa.

Initially, the mission in Upper Egypt was slow to gain converts. In 1703, Father Jacques d’Albano wrote to Rome that after five years of the mission, he had obtained very few conversions. Some years later, during his travels in Egypt, Father Claude Sicard reported the same news but wrote back with suggestions on how to change the situation:

The sole conversion of one Coptic priest, which the Lord allows, is the key to a great number of conversions; because to convert one Coptic Priest, that is to convert with him several others of his nation. The gross ignorance of Copts is such that they blindly follow all that their priests do.

Although Sicard refers to the “ignorance of Copts,” in reality he was one of the most outspoken advocates for preserving Coptic traditions: as Maurice Martin writes, Sicard “refused to separate the practice of the sacraments by Catholics from that of their original Coptic community and fought long with the Roman authorities in defense of his view.” Other missionaries, however, were quite harsh in their approach towards the indigenous population. There are reports that throughout the eighteenth century, Franciscan missionaries demanded that newly converted Catholic Copts destroy their old books, and


that many “actually ridiculed and misrepresented the Eastern rites, tradition, and customs.”

Throughout the eighteenth century, the Catholic missionary movement was waging its battles on two fronts: in Cairo, through its attempts to win the allegiance of the Coptic patriarch, and in Upper Egypt, through its active mission in Akhmīm. As will be discussed shortly, it was on both of these fronts -- in Upper and in Lower Egypt -- that Coptic clerical authorities later formulated a response to the missionaries. In Akhmīm, tensions erupted over the recruitment of Coptic boys to be educated in Rome. These recruiting attempts were met with much resistance, as Coptic families accused missionaries of kidnapping their children and took their cases to the shari‘a courts.

Throughout this period, several Coptic priests (possibly up to thirty-eight) had secretly professed their allegiance to the Catholic faith but continued to serve their Coptic Orthodox congregations. It seems that “being proclaimed like a Frank,” as one Catholic priest wrote, was the biggest discouragement for the adoption of Catholicism among the Copts and their clergy. Patriarch Yu‘annis XVII also “threatened to excommunicate all

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38 Issues regarding the marriage of clergy, which is permissible in the Coptic Church but not in Roman Catholicism, also created some real tensions between the two communities. See Bilaniuk, “Coptic Relations with Rome.”

39 Among those recruited were the abovementioned Yusūtus al-Marāghi and another, Rufa‘īl al-Ṭūkhī (1701-1787), a native of Jirja. Although Rufā‘īl was named a bishop of Anṣana (Fayyūm), he would live most of his life at the Vatican editing Coptic liturgical materials. Ya‘qūb Nakhlah Rufayla, Tarīkh al-umma al-Qibtiyya [The History of the Coptic Nation] (Cairo: Metropol, 2000 [1898]), p. 269.

40 Frazee, Catholics and Sultans, p. 219.

41 See Frazee, Catholics and Sultans, p. 219; and Bilaniuk, “Coptic Relations with Rome.”

42 Father Dêtré Jean-Marie, an historian of the Catholic Church, cites a letter by a missionary, sent from Cairo to Rome during the eighteenth century, which describes the attitude towards the missionaries. “With regard to his successor, Patriarch Peter VI (1718-1726), here is what was written by P. Elie de Georgis, S.J., in a letter addressed from Cairo to Rome: ‘We have had a very cruel persecution on the part of the
those which would have become ‘Franks,’ [and] prohibited all ‘Franks’ from entering the house of a Copt and vice versa, under penalty of losing all their goods.” Moreover, the Patriarch ordered his priests to serve wine made from “dried grapes” and to read in each church the excommunication edict against Coptic priests who have become “Franks.”

From this attitude, it is clear that the Coptic Church frowned upon any association with the “Franks.” It is less clear, however, what the term “Frank” actually denotes from the perspective of Coptic Church writers. For obvious reasons, it may have been a reference to the French merchants in Egypt but also to the large number of French missionaries who were pervasive in Cairo and in Akhmîm. However, it also seems to take a more general meaning in the writings of Coptic clergymen -- a meaning denoting “foreignness,” “strangeness,” and “unfamiliarity.” These attributes were most worrisome to the Coptic Church leadership, as we shall see from the sermons discussed below. The “Franks,” specifically the Catholic missionaries, were rejected because their ideas and teachings not only contradicted the Coptic Church but also aimed to devalue its significance as leader of the Coptic community. In this chapter, I will be using the term “Franks” as it was used by the Coptic church writers themselves, as a term denoting the “other,” the “foreign,” and the “heretical.”

Coptic nation and the Patriarch (Peter VI) of this same nation; but then I say that the Patriarch is not so much guilty, since I know him well, and between us there is a great friendship, and he himself has sworn to me his not wanting to consent to the words of his Copts; but by force and because of fear of not being recognized and of being proclaimed like a Frank, he agreed with them and they wrote Letters of excommunications and maledictions for all the Coptic Catholics and they wanted to have them read publicly in their churches and to deliver all these Catholics into the hand of the tyrants.” See Dêtré Jean-Marie, “Contribution à l’étude,” p. 134.

43 Ibid., p. 145.

44 Traditionally in the Coptic and Abyssinian Churches, communion wine was made from the fermented juice of raisins and not from unfermented, freshly pressed grapes.
From the perspective of Coptic clerical authorities, Franks were seen as politically divisive and as responsible for heterodox religious behavior in the Coptic community. The fact that Coptic laymen, powerful or not, had more choices regarding what religious faith to follow than their predecessors was worrisome for a Church leadership that had come to rely upon the benevolence of these laymen in running its affairs. The persistence of missionary movements and their modest but visible success in recruiting converts, particularly from notable Coptic families, was a significant scare to the Church. Existing sources do not tell us much about the reasons that Coptic Orthodox converts left their faith, however one cannot rule out the attractiveness of an alternative but somewhat familiar religion and the prospects of upward social mobility which may have resulted from intermarriage with the Franks. For the majority of influential laymen, who remained Orthodox, the threat of leaving the faith was likely used as a lever against Coptic churchmen who wished to impose strict orders upon the community.

The modest scale of success by Catholic missionaries in Egypt is noteworthy as compared to their more widespread appeal in other regions of the Ottoman Arab world. The pervasiveness of Coptic Orthodoxy throughout Egypt was in contrast to the theological and ethnic divisions that existed among different religious communities in

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45 As sources indicate, since the seventeenth century, most of the significant functions of the clerical leaders, including the election of a Coptic patriarch as well as the payment of the jizya tax, had been taken over by influential laymen. Magdi Girgis, for instance, successfully argues that these laymen controlled nearly every facet affecting community life, be it social, cultural, or religious. Even the priests bowed down to the demands of the powerful archons, a reality that one patriarch could not change: Murqus VIII, out of anger against the ongoing practice among Coptic archons of allowing their daughters to marry notable Muslims or non-Coptic Christians, directed the blame upon those priests who conducted the wedding ceremonies rather than at the culprits who initiated the habits. Girgis, “Athār al-arākhina,” p. 44, argues that this was also the case when Coptic patriarchs attempted to battle the prevalent custom of polygamy.

46 Here, in the case of intermarriage, Coptic Orthodox were marrying not only European “Franks,” but more likely other Copts who had converted to Roman Catholicism and who had come to be dubbed “Franks.”
Ottoman Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. As Bernard Heyberger writes for the case of the
Levant, “the choice of Tridentine Catholicism and the attachment to Rome by the Eastern
[churches] is, in large part, the result of local strategic concerns within a ta’ifa
[community] or in competition with one other. The divisions and rivalries within the
confessions favored the action of the missionaries and the recourse to the arbitration of
Rome or Constantinople, which became the practice during the eighteenth century.”47
The Coptic Church, on the other hand, had been for centuries the most significant
Christian institution in Egypt, and it would not be easy to sway its hold.

Despite its pervasive authority in Egypt, the threat that Catholicism posed to the
Coptic hierarchy was taken seriously. In 1791, when Yu’annis recalled Yusāb to his
Patriarchal headquarters in Ḩārit al-Rūm in Cairo, he urgently needed the help of (most
likely) one of only a few learned and theologically informed clergymen in the Coptic
Church. He was asking Yusāb to fill a post that had been abandoned by Bishop
Antūniyūs Fulayfil.48 Yu’annis sent Yusāb to the hotbed of Catholic missionary activity
in Egypt -- Akhmīm -- at a time when tensions had reached their height, when meetings
between all sides were being held on a regular basis in order to codify the appropriate
interaction between Copts and Catholics,49 and when Coptic families in the region were

48 At the end of the eighteenth century, the Catholics won the conversion of the Coptic bishop of Jirja,
An ūniyūs Fulayfil. As a result of his conversion, however, he was allegedly attacked by his own people
and by local Muslims. One historian reports that he was taken to the local ruler, who asked why he
“denounced his national church.” An unconvincing answer earned this bishop jail time, until the French
consul paid his bail. Before long, he escaped to Rome where he remained until his death in 1807. Al-Maṣrī,
Qissat al-kanīsa al-Qibṭīyya, vol. 4, p. 162. The details of this story are not footnoted; thus I am uncertain
what al-Maṣrī’s sources are regarding this matter. See also Rufayla, Tarīkh al-umma al-Qibṭīyya, p. 269.
49 In 1790, a Catholic decree reiterated prohibitions against Coptic Catholic priests having intercommunion
with the Orthodox. The Coptic Catholic Church would ultimately form its own hierarchy in the nineteenth
accusing Catholic priests of kidnapping their children. Likely even worse for the bishop, the Coptic community in this region, because of their prolonged contact with the missionaries and with Catholic converts, was perceived to be engaged in some of the most synergistic practices, in heterodox behavior that was unacceptable to a theologically-informed Coptic monk.

When Yusāb arrived to his post, after decades of living a hermitic lifestyle in the Monastery of Saint Anthony, he was stunned, for, as one historian explains, “he found the people involved with the heresies of the Roman Catholic Church.” Seeing his role as a “shepherd,” Bishop Yusāb was intensely committed to bringing the believers (the “flock”) back to the Orthodox faith. One of his first tasks was the building of a large church that would serve as the center for his bishopric. From his own writings, it is easy to detect the bishop’s struggle to teach his congregants the true beliefs of the church. He,

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For its part, over time and particularly on an official level, the Orthodox Church wanted at any price to safeguard the internal cohesion of the Coptic community and continued to fight against Coptic Catholics. According to Coptic historian Mansī Yuḥanna, in 1794 the Catholics of Upper Egypt -- who had apparently been the most numerous and influential among the Catholics in Egypt -- met with the Coptic Patriarch Yu’annis, the Austrian ambassador (“Al-Khawāja Karkūr”), as well as the Coptic archons al-Mu’allim (“master”) Ibrāhīm al-Jawharī and his brother Jirjis, and they came to a tentative agreement. 1) Those Catholics and Copts already married to each other had the freedom to choose where to pray; 2) From hereon, Copts could not marry Catholics or vice versa; 3) It was not acceptable for a Catholic priest to enter and pray in a Coptic home or vice versa; 4) No one should be forced to pray in either church and everyone had the right to choose; 5) It was not appropriate, from now on, to take any disputes before the two churches to the government but they must be taken to the heads of both churches who have the final say. This agreement is dated 3 January 1794. Mansī Yuḥanna, Tārīkh al-kanīṣa al-Qibṭīyya, pp. 477-478. Yuḥanna refers to this document that was later circulated by the Coptic Church and cites its contents with confidence, but he does not mention what type of document this was or if it was a hujja shar‘iyya (a legal decree).

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51 Ibid.
like Yu’annis, wrote many sermons on matters related to the Orthodox faith and also on the proper moral behavior of his flock. It was his bookish training in the Monastery of Saint Anthony which made him such a viable candidate for this position. Yusāb recognized, moreover, that the situation called for a peculiar type of pastoral guidance. This matter was to be handled sensitively, since Coptic notables held effective power within the community on the one hand, and on the other, their allegiance to the rigorous practices of the Coptic faith appeared, at least from the clerical perspective, to dwindle.

For Bishop Yusāb -- directing his writings to Upper Egyptian Copts -- and for his compatriot Patriarch Yu’annis -- focusing on the Cairene community -- the prospect of losing the Coptic faithful, whether through intermarriage, synergistic practices or conversion to Catholicism,52 prompted the need to tackle these growing problems through far-reaching measures. Because it was unlikely that they would openly confront the politically powerful archons, whose behavior was so disagreeable, these clergymen turned to a more “sensitive” method for couching their criticisms, that of preaching. This

52 On the issues of inter-conversion, intermarriage, and cross-cultural exchange among minorities living in the Ottoman Empire, Lucette Valensi maintains that to the missionaries, it became painfully clear that intermarriage and conversion was a practical issue and not necessarily a matter of faith. In the case of Ottoman Jerusalem, Valensi writes that, “Marriage, in effect, clearly appears as the motive for attending two churches or switching to another. These practices sometimes expressed the ratios of comparative strength, the faithful of one minority church being forced to find a spouse among those of the relatively more numerous church….The passage from one church to another could also result from the micro-strategies of social advancement: The Greeks and Syrians marrying Latins serving the function of intermediaries were not choosing entry into a larger community but, rather, a change in status which allowed them to escape from the Ottoman system.” Intermarriage for convenience often led to halfhearted religious practice and to, as Valensi puts it, “proximity brought promiscuity.” For instance, syncretic religious behavior greatly disturbed the Franciscan friars who were charged with ministering to new Catholic converts in Ottoman Palestine. In Jaffa, complaints arose over the fact that “the Catholics who followed the Eastern rite did not wish to obey their parish priest in the Latin rite for the practices of Lent, and they continued to eat fish and drink wine.” Valensi maintains that the missionary sources are plentiful regarding these incidents of misconduct. While there are fewer Arabic-Christian documents detailing the “transgressions” of the Orthodox parishioners, it is clear from the Coptic side that church authorities were equally displeased at the behavior of their community. Lucette Valensi, “Inter-Communal Relations and Changes in Religious Affiliation in the Middle East (Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries),” Comparative Studies in Society and History 30, no. 2 (1997): 257.
form of censure, beyond having the immediate intent of curbing the immoral habits of the community, was also designed to shape and define what it meant to be a Coptic Orthodox Christian. At no other point during the Ottoman period was it so important for Coptic Church authorities to take this line of action -- to systematically characterize the qualities that defined the community vis-à-vis “others.” The task of defining appropriate behavior for the community was accomplished not with the use of outmoded sermons written by “church forefathers” but with contemporary and accessible discourse. Forming a “confessionalization” or homogenization of the faith, as Patrick Ferry writes for the Lutheran case, was likely inspired by the fact that sermons “were indispensable devices for those who wished to have the ear of what was still predominantly an oral culture.”

The Sermon as a Weapon: Fighting (for) the Faithful

Yu’annis had chosen Yusāb as a “warrior” against the Catholic missionary movement, a job, which with increasing age, he was too exhausted to handle. The bishop took the patriarch’s trust seriously, and his role as a warrior for the faith has perhaps contributed to the naming of his collection of sermons *Silāḥ al-Mu’minīn* (“Weapon of the Faithful”). This collection circulated throughout Egypt, and today copies of this manuscript are located everywhere from the Patriarchal Library in Cairo and the Monastery of Saint Makarius in Wādī al-Naṭrūn to the Bibliothèque Nationale in

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54 For instance, Yu’annis asked Yusāb in the early 1790s to respond on his behalf to a letter from Father Bartholomew, a Catholic priest who had urged Yu’annis to correspond with the Pope in Rome. In a complete manuscript of *Silāḥ al-Mu’minīn*, such as Patriarchal Library MS Lahiūt 138, Khalil Samir mentions that this letter is the thirty-third entry in the collection. Khalil Samir, S.J., “Yusab, bishop of Jirja and Akhmim” *Coptic Encyclopedia* 7.2360-2362.
Paris. Khalil Samir, a scholar of Arab Christian literary history, has studied this collection for his brief entry on Bishop Yusāb in the *Coptic Encyclopedia*. Samir has pieced together from several existing, incomplete manuscripts of *Silāh* a total of thirty-four sermons, the order of which seems to be chronological. Like Yu’annis’ *Adrāj*, the topics of these sermons range from purely theological matters such as the incarnation of Christ to issues of popular behavior and misbehavior such as the practices of dancing at banquets held in honor of a martyr’s feast and of playing games in Church.55

55 Khalil Samir lists the topics of these treatises, and I believe that it is helpful to reproduce this list for reference purposes. However, I must note here, as Samir does, that complete collections of these sermons are scarce. For this chapter, I was able to use parts of various collections but not the complete anthology. Also, the numbering of these sermons is slightly different within the various existing manuscripts; thus the following should be considered a content list and not a precise succession of the sermons. ‘1) The existence of the Creator, and the Trinity, and His attributes; 2) The incarnation of Christ; 3) On Matthew 18:7: ‘Woe to the world on account of scandals!’; 4) On Matthew 18:9: ‘If your eye scandalizes you, tear it out’; 5) On Romans 9:6: ‘This does not of course mean that the word of God has failed. For all the descendants of Israel are not Israel’; 6) On 1 Corinthians 15:23ff: ‘Each according to his rank; at the head, Christ’; 7) On Ecclesiastes 24:1-4: ‘I am the mother of pure love, of fear, of knowledge, and of worthy hope’; 8) Discourse addressed to those Copts who have abandoned their church in order to follow that of the Franks, dealing in particular with the two natures in Christ, the sacraments, and liturgical innovations; 9) On the last judgment; 10) Against the heretics who deny the resurrection of the just and their individual judgment; 11) Against those who habitually commit, without being aware, the sins of pride, slander, and attachment to wealth; 12) Against [those] Abyssinians who claim that the Holy Spirit anointed Christ…13) Account of a controversy between a Muslim sage and a bishop [namely, Yusāb], on the occasion of a visit to a prominent Copt, on the Trinity and the Incarnation; 14) Against the custom of celebrating martyrs by large banquets, for which musicians, singers, and poets are hired, out of vainglory, and to which the poor are not invited, thus leading to jealousy and base rivalries; 15) Against abuses current in churches: games, chitchat, disputes, and tumults; 16) Reproaches to the priests concerning the Wednesday and Friday fast and disputes that arise among them on account of confession; 17) Panegyric of John XVIII (1769–1796) for the day of his death, which occurred on 7 June 1796; and panegyric of Ibrāhīm al-Jawharī; 18) On the sins that derive from pride and on the benefits of humility; 19) On confession, and the dispositions of the confessor and the penitent…; 20) On medals (‘icons’) struck in the image of the saints and the martyrs, and the respect they should be accorded for fear of scandal; 21) Concerning the scapegoat mentioned in Leviticus 16:5–10; 22) On Matthew 15:13: ‘Every plant not planted by my Father will be uprooted,’ and on John 17:12b: ‘I have watched over them, and none of them has been lost, save the son of perdition,’ and on John 14:6: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’; 23) Against the faithful who fast on their own authority, without the counsel of their ecclesiastical pastors; 24) On the prince of darkness; 25) On the prayer of Christ in his agony: ‘Father, if it be possible, may this cup be taken away from me’; 26) How was it possible that the soul of the prophet Samuel appeared at the command of the prophetess before Saul?; 27) On penance and the absolution of sins…; 28) On haughtiness, the love of dominion, and pride; 29) On patience and perseverance in time of trials and tribulations; 30) On the resurrection, and against those Copts who have followed the Chalcedonians, who claim that the saints and the martyrs will be crowned already before the resurrection; 31) On the fall of Satan and the disobedience of Adam and Eve; 32) On the unjust judge and the second coming of Christ, according to Luke 18:18; 33) Letter of Father Bartholomew to the 107th patriarch, John
The Adrāj of Yu’annis and Yusāb’s Silāḥ have much in common. In their spirit, they provoke congregants but are also tender; they can be characterized as sermons of “tough love.”\textsuperscript{56} Distinguished by a number of colloquialisms and an obscure style of writing, the Adrāj are comparable to the sermons in Silāḥ which, according to Khalil Samir, are “very casual, both on account of the language, which is full of grammatical errors and vulgarisms, and on account of the redaction, which contains numerous repetitions and sentences that are often incomprehensible.”\textsuperscript{57} Both sets of sermons were written with the intention of transforming the Coptic community at large and to guide believers toward understanding what behavior characterized a true Coptic Orthodox Christian. But one cannot overlook the prime audience for these works: the notable laymen of the Coptic community -- the archons -- and the clerics (namely priests) who were “blindly” following the archons.\textsuperscript{58} The sermons are overwhelmingly directed at rich and powerful laymen and at those priests who had been “co-opted” into immoral and positively “un-Orthodox” acts, which were being promoted by skillful missionaries.

Patriarch Yu’annis and Bishop Yusāb stumbled upon several persistent sticking points in their battle against what they deemed to be improper behavior, not only among

\textsuperscript{56} “Tough love,” as defined by \textit{The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language}, fourth edition (2000) is “the use of strict disciplinary measures and limitations on freedoms or privileges, as by a parent or guardian, as a means of fostering responsibility and expressing care or concern.” This seems to characterize Yu’annis’ approach towards Coptic laymen and lower clergy.

\textsuperscript{57} Samir, “Yusab.”

\textsuperscript{58} Yu’annis always begins his sermons with the following phrase: “To the blessed sons, to the beloved and chosen ones who are obedient to the Orthodox religion, the fervent archpriests, the faithful priests, the glorified deacons, the elders and the venerable archons, and the estimable scribes [kuttāb]...”
Coptic laymen but also among priests whose habits indicated a general disregard for higher clerical authorities. In trying to write effective sermons, neither Yu’annis nor Yusāb shied away from using real-life examples as a pedagogical strategy, and these examples tell a great deal about the unruliness of the community. Repeatedly the patriarch and bishop challenged perceived vices including, but not limited to, marriage practices (underage marriage and polygamy); drunkenness and its adverse effects; consulting magicians and relying on astrology; financial greed; the sin of pride; disrespect for church rituals (such as confession and fasting); dancing, feasting, and lewd behavior associated with those two vices. These problems seem to have pervaded equally the Coptic communities in Cairo and in Upper Egypt.

If any of these allegations is accurate, and if sermons, as discussed earlier, tell us much more about religious practice than about religious belief, then one may conclude that Coptic notables living in the eighteenth century were practicing their faith and living their day-to-day lives with unbridled liberty. In the next section, I will explore the opinions of Yu’annis and Yusāb regarding some of the above topics. Because these sermons are unpublished, it is important to hear the words of the two clergymen in order to glimpse their strategy towards changing unacceptable community practices. As these points are elaborated, it is also important to keep in mind the way in which their words speak directly to several of the allegations made by Catholic missionaries which will be addressed later on.
On the Franks

The perception that Catholic missionary activity opened the doors of religious practice among Christians living in Egypt and created an environment in which “heterodox” behavior proliferated was confronted directly by Yusāb’s and Yu’annis’ sermons. Seeing the movement less as an open door and more as a great obstacle, Yusāb tackles converts to Catholicism with a most aggressive approach. In his eighth sermon, titled “From the Sayings of Bishop Yusāb on those Followers of the Franks who left the Coptic Community,” he writes:

Tell me, you follower, you Coptic believer of the Chalcedonian Council…if you were asked about your faith, you would have no answer other than ‘I follow the Pope and the Western church.’ I want you to tell me: what good have you seen in their church? What wisdom have you witnessed from their missionaries, or what kind of truth have you seen? How have we misled you? What have you seen within us, in terms of heresy?…Could you possibly answer that you have seen the truth and the correct belief among them?59

I also ask you: are you Copts by race or Franks? You must answer that we are Copts and our forefathers are Copts.60

As evident from the Bishop’s words, the question of conversion went beyond adopting another faith; it crossed the boundaries of “community.” Conversion to Catholicism threatened the unity of the Coptic identity. The policy of turning “Franks” into a vulgar word within the Coptic community was viewed as a successful tactic in deterring a large number of conversions and in maintaining a cohesive community.

A few years later, Yusāb still struggled with the questions of the Coptic identity and the threat that Franks posed to the coherence of the community. In another sermon,

59 Abu Maqār, MS Theology 6, 75’-76v, my emphasis.

60 Ibid., 83v.
he expresses his state of mind upon arriving in Akhmīm in 1791 and how it had changed over time:

When we arrived to the seat [of the bishopric] we found you committing customs which are not according to the laws [canons] of our church, such as your intermixing with the Franks [afranj] and your marrying your sons to their daughters and your daughters to their sons. You were committing these acts without insight and we know that previously our church has forbidden these acts. We were informed that most of you returned to the laws of our church, and this pleased us.61

However, those who did not “please” the bishop were greatly criticized. Yusāb goes on to convey his disgust at the fact that “mixed couples,” of Catholic and Orthodox backgrounds, are praying in separate churches. He condemns this behavior not just as a minor error but as a sin worthy of eternal damnation and threatens that “if the husband and wife do not return to pray in one church [i.e., the Coptic Church] and take communion from one cup, I absolve myself of their behavior.”62

In his concern for the welfare of the community, Yusāb wrote to Yu’annis, asking him for guidance. Their correspondence is included in the Adrāj. Yu’annis’ reply to Yusāb’s complaints is predictable: he condemns the intermarriage of Copts and Franks (referred to here as “non-believers”) and the separation of husbands and wives (who pray in different churches). But his pedagogical approach and his “tongue-twisting” style of words are worth noting here:

If a person was married to a woman who is a non-believer and she wished to live with him, he should not leave her. If a non-believing man wished to live with a believing woman then she should not leave him, or else their children would be

61 Ibid., 168v-168r.

62 Ibid, 169v. Yusāb complains to Yu’annis about the fact that this situation has created divisions among husbands and wives, where the wife, if she is Catholic, takes her daughter to be baptized in the Catholic Church, while her Orthodox husband takes his son to be baptized in the Coptic Church. See Adrāj, Patriarchal Library, MS Lahūt 134, 209v.
defiled \textit{[arjās]}. These words were true in the days of the missionaries, when the mission was new and the wonders were plentiful. The Apostle Paul said this: that a male believer should attract the non-believing woman to the faith and the believing woman attract the non-believing man to the faith. But today, it is not the case. The non-believing man attracts the believing woman to his sin and to his non-belief. And the non-believing woman attracts the believing man to her ill belief. The man perhaps listened to the woman until she fed him the fruit of disobedience. This situation exists today in the case of every man who obeys his wife, particularly if the person [the man] loves temptation, and his hands are loose, and his organs are controlled by the runny moisture [semen]….If [the man and woman] are divided in their belief, there is nothing worse, for the kingdom that is divided will be destroyed.63

This quotation is rich, not just because of the Patriarch’s graphic viewpoint on the outcome of interfaith marriages but also because of the evidence it provides on the role of women in these marriages.

It is because of her “impurity,” the Patriarch believes, that a Frankish “non-believing” woman constitutes the ultimate demise of a believing and faithful Coptic Christian man. Here, the Frankish woman is possibly being likened to “Eve,” as the temptress who feeds “Adam” (the Orthodox man) the “fruit of disobedience” (i.e., the metaphorical “apple”), a taste of which could lead to damnation. Here, the Catholic faith, which may have seemed an enticing escape from tradition to many Copts, was being posited as the downfall of the individual (particularly male) believer. From the perspective of leading Coptic clerics, the Catholic mission was jeopardizing the control of the Orthodox Church over its community and, in the bigger picture, endangering the

\footnote{Patriarchal Library, MS Lahūt 134, 212v-213v. The biblical reference made by Patriarch Yu’annis is to the Pauline epistle, I Corinthians 7:12-16, “But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”}
propagation of future Coptic offspring; the leadership, therefore, was attempting to battle
the mission at the heart of its domination -- inside the Coptic home.

On Drinking and its Vices

If Catholicism was the “fruit of disobedience” among Coptic Orthodox believers,
then the anise-flavored liquor *arak* was their drink of choice. The fact that drinking is
recurrently mentioned in Yu’annis’ *Adraj* and in Yusāb’s *Silāh* indicates how it was
perceived to be among their greatest challenges. Drinking and intoxication, a problem
common both to laymen and priests, crop up in many sermons, even in those that are not
intended to specifically address this problem. In one of his sermons (number sixteen), a
homily which is intended to reproach priests for disregarding the prescribed
Wednesday/Friday fast, Bishop Yusāb not only relates a story that in his view illustrates
the community’s problem with alcoholism and its lack of respect for *bayt al-rabb* ("the
house of God") but also indicates the line of punitive action that Yusāb is willing to take
against drunkards:

Believe me my brothers, I saw a group of people who went to church while they
were carrying alcohol in their containers. I do not want you to reproach me so I
will not tell you this individual’s name and that individual’s name. After the
liturgy ended, they held a feast and then drank alcohol. They thought by doing
this that they would be happy and joyful. But I saw them…and the devils were
playing with them. The [state of] drunkenness and those madmen[^64] led them to
being angry towards each other. The anger led them to beating each other until
finally I took them to the *ḥākim* [ruler].[^65] Some of them were beaten and
humiliated, others were fined. Look, my brothers and my beloved ones, to the

[^64]: Drunkards are most commonly referred to by both Yu’annis and Yusāb as *majānīn* (“madmen”).

[^65]: It is unclear from the text, but this *ḥākim* is likely the bey who governed Jirja (as a sub-provincial
governor), seeing as the term *ḥākim* was typically his title.
outcome of drunkenness! From now on, do not carry alcohol to the house of God, ye who seek prayers and repentance for your sins. Do not make up empty excuses and say that ‘I have habits that I cannot stop and so I will take a little bit and drink it outside of the church.’ Tell me…what is the benefit of your going to church? If you say that it is for prayer and repentance, I would reply to you, which sin is greater than drunkenness? For the Apostle Paul said that the drunkard and the adulterer do not inherit the kingdom of God. Ye who seek repentance, prayer, and supplication in the house of God [also] bring alcohol to the house of God….Do not allow this anecdote to be your story [reality], nor these deeds to become your deeds. Let your life be moral and good in a way that is fitting to the sons of Christians.66

Whether the story is exaggerated or not, drunkenness was not taken lightly, as seen by Yusāb’s threat to involve the local authorities in an attempt to curb the behavior of laymen. The gesture takes on greater significance within the context of a clerical hierarchy that was usually reluctant to involve Muslim authorities in its internal affairs.

In a similar denunciation of drinking, Patriarch Yu’annis uses one of his favorite literary tropes (women) in illustrating the “ugliness” of this habit:

[When the drunkard appears in public] he is laughed at. His rotten drool is dribbling from his mouth and he stinks of that hateful smell of alcohol….This drunkard is like a free woman in the arms of a Berber who is of a strange race, who is ugly in appearance, and who attacks her dignity.67

The task of reminding Coptic laymen of this message and of managing their spiritual well-being was supposed to fall upon church pastors. In one of his sermons, Patriarch Yu’annis prompts priests to coax their congregants (both men and women) into confessing their sins (e.g., drunkard behavior) prior to attending church services and to “teach and discipline” the believers so that they learn to attend church with the “fear of

66 Abu Maqār, MS Theology 6, 202’-203’.

67 Patriarchal Library, MS Lahūt 134, 153’.
God in them."\(^{68}\) The Patriarch also emphasizes that priests should themselves be without any obvious faults and should set an example for the community. He specifically mentions that a priest should be “the husband of [only] one woman,” noting the prevalence of polygamy among Copts in general and among priests in particular.\(^{69}\) The Patriarch warned that if any priest failed to follow these rules and to do his job, he would be removed from office.\(^{70}\)

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 74v.

\(^{69}\) Patriarchal Library, MS Lahūt 113, 263v. Among Christians living in the Ottoman Empire, the subject of polygamy has not received much attention. The practice seems to have continued among Copts well into the nineteenth century. There is some cursory information regarding the way in which this practice constituted yet another site of contention between Coptic laymen and some of the Coptic leadership. According to Mansī Yuhanna, during the reign of Murqus V (1602-1613 CE), Copts in the Delta region began to stir up trouble by proclaiming their right to freely practice polygamy. During this dispute, the Metropolitan/Bishop of Damietta sided with those rebellious Copts and declared that polygamy was not against biblical teachings. As a result, Patriarch Murqus wrote a declaration forbidding polygamy and excommunicating the Bishop. A group of influential Copts, supporters of the Bishop of Damietta, who disagreed with the Patriarch’s decision, allegedly planned a conspiracy which sent him to prison. They complained to Ja’far Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Egypt, who ordered the patriarch to be beaten until he was near death, and then had him imprisoned in the Tower of Alexandria. The Bishop of Damietta and his supporters then convinced a monk to become the standing patriarch, and he announced that Copts can practice both divorce and polygamy. After a short time, the Copts of Cairo and Upper Egypt rebelled and convinced the Ottoman governor to return Murqus to his place. The pro-polygamy faction fought hard; however the new monk-turned-patriarch finally abandoned his post. Patriarch Murqus died in 1613. See Yuhanna, p. 467. In another incident, Coptic Historian Kāmil Sāliḥ Nakhla, Silsilat tārīkh al-babawāt, vol. 5, p. 13 reports that Patriarch Buṭrus VI (1718-1726 CE) was so influential that he was actually able to obtain a ferman from the governor enforcing the Christian laws regarding marriage and divorce.

\(^{70}\) This punishment is referred to as the “defrocking of priests,” a process which is similar to the punishment of excommunication in the Coptic Church. According to Martin Krause, “The following grounds are named for exclusion: disobedience toward the bishop, holding a communion service at the wrong time, incorrect ordering of divine service, offenses against the professional duties of the clergy, failure to keep night watches or to hold divine service, refusal to accept a church canon, and failure to appear before a court.” See Martin Krause, “Defrocking of Priests,” Coptic Encyclopedia 3.891. These punishments, however, date from a period around 600 CE. It is likely that they underwent some changes over the course of the Arabization and Islamization of Coptic Egypt. For instance, it is doubtful that the “defrocking of priests” was a regular habit in a church that was struggling to stay alive, particularly during those Ottoman centuries in which the opportunity to convert to another Christian faith was strong or, even more prevalent, the opportunity to convert to Islam.
The problem among priests, however, went beyond their failure to act as “spiritual police” within the community. In reality, the laity’s raucous and drunkard behavior paled in comparison with the intoxication of their spiritual leaders. The fact that priests were unable to exercise self-control, particularly when it came to alcohol consumption during liturgical prayers, infuriated the Patriarch, who felt that such vices threatened his authority over the community. Perhaps out of a realization that banning Coptic priests from drinking alcohol altogether was doomed to failure, Yu’annis warns them not to drink on the day before or on the eve of holding mass:

If a priest came forth to offer liturgical prayers, then he must not drink arak or liquor, or any alcoholic drinks in the evening of the day in which he will make the offerings nor in the day prior to that....The smell of arak in that evening will not disappear from the breath of the person who drank it and also [will not disappear if he drank it] the day before. How could it be that you, while your mouth is filled from the devil’s cup, can spoil your mouth [before drinking] the true cup [of communion], that [cup] with which your sins are forgiven? How is your state of being while you are embracing that magnificent cup [of Christ’s blood], which was sacrificed on behalf of the world for their sins, while your mouth smells of the horrific smell of arak?...How could you teach others so that they learn to fear approaching [the communion cup] when they are unworthy?71

One can only imagine the embarrassment that the drunken priests caused to church authorities. While Bishop Yusāb involved local authorities in castigating delinquent laymen, it is difficult to imagine that the Patriarch would have acted the same way when it came to the clergy. Again, using a “tough love” approach, the Patriarch firmly rebukes but certainly does not threaten members of the clergy. In the end, the attitude of both Yu’annis and Yusāb towards drunkenness was summarized best by Yusāb: “He among

71 Patriarchal Library MS Lahūt 113, 266r-266v.
you who wishes to drink should drink in the hidden corners of his home [and not at taverns].”

On Feasting, Merrymaking, and the Practice of Magic

In his fourteenth sermon, Bishop Yusāb addresses the topic of excessive revelry among Copts, particularly on the occasion of martyrs’ feasts. This was a sort of behavior that went beyond the public festivals that were usually held in honor of Coptic saints, such as the one discussed for the case of Saint Dimyana in Chapter Three. These feasts were private affairs initiated by wealthy Coptic notables and usually held in their homes. Such lavish and decadent celebrations displeased Bishop Yusāb, whose concern was twofold: first, he worried about the immoral behavior which inevitably cropped up during these feasts, and secondly he cautioned against the arrogance of those revelers who spent extravagantly on food, drinks, and entertainment, while their impoverished brothers and sisters languished:

If one of you makes a vow or throws a dinner party in the name of a martyr, then he should ask about the widowed, the orphaned, the impoverished, the blind, and disabled. He should send the mercy [feast] that he made and distribute it among them in their homes. This should be done in secret…. [But] I have seen one of you make a feast in the name of one of the martyrs. He invited all the priests and all of the clerical orders, all of his beloved ones, men and women, [who were] his rich neighbors. I was at a nearby house. I heard many different sounds. The priests were singing church hymns, and others -- deacons -- were praising with chants in honor of the martyr. And then they drank alcohol and began to perform the poetry of the Arab Abu Azyad and the women were bellowing with their well-known

72 Abu Maqār MS Theology 5, 177.

sounds [that they make] at weddings. Others became very drunk so they began to quarrel and to beat one another.\textsuperscript{74}

In this bishop’s view, lewd behavior went hand in hand with the lack of generosity towards the poor; this type of charity was not only expected of Copts but was a custom of provincial grandees and Ottoman officials in Egyptian society. Even worse, revelers were all too willing to pay money for entertainment rather than to help out a needy person:

I have heard that on the days of your weddings you participate in the games which are inappropriate to the believers. You invite to your weddings the adulterous women. You defile your eyes with adulterous sights. You defile your ears with words inappropriate among believers. You savor their [the women’s] depraved songs, and then you adorn them with gifts and money. And if a Christian person came upon you [at that moment] and asked you for something in the name of Christ, not only do you throw him out but you also hurl curses at him!...Tell me, my beloved children, is this a habit that you found in the laws of our Church?...I have also heard that [among you] at weddings and occasions, you play strange games. I believe that you have learned them from those who are outside of our faith because such things should not be mentioned among the faithful in Christ.\textsuperscript{75}

Certainly playing games and excessive celebrations, particularly involving “adulterous” women, were the fault of the “other,” of the corrupt Catholics (or possibly Muslims) whose vices had infiltrated the Coptic community. Common games such as al-\textsuperscript{d}ā‘\textsuperscript{7} (dice) and al-fanājīn (foretelling the future by reading coffee grounds), Bishop Yusāb reports, caused people to be on their worst behavior, to use foul language, and curse one another. This behavior did not befit true Coptic Orthodox believers.

Some of the “games” in which people participated were a more serious threat, as they went beyond frivolous amusement and bordered on experimentation with the paranormal. In his forty-sixth sermon, Patriarch Yu’annis addressed the issue of magic

\textsuperscript{74} Abu Maqār MS Theology 6, 170\textsuperscript{f}-171\textsuperscript{f}.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 178\textsuperscript{v}-179\textsuperscript{v}.
and astrology, a common and ancient practice among Copts, but also among the Muslims and Jews of Egypt. This was not a practice that was relegated to the “popular masses” but was also practiced among the most notable Coptic archons. Perhaps the growing use of magic among the Coptic lay leaders threatened to further undermine the authority of Coptic clergymen, an issue with which clerical leaders had been grappling for a number of years.

Typical of Patriarch Yu’annis’ style, most of the forty-sixth sermon has little to do with the intended topic of “magic and astrology.” However, in the last few sections, the Patriarch firmly explains why these practices are akin to worshipping idols and threatens his congregants with the ultimate punishment available to him:

There are those [individuals] who attract people to their evil habits which anger God: [these habits are] magic and astrology. Those who behave like such people, who say their [magical] words, or act in a way that leads to evil intentions [should know that] the magician is a slave of something other than God, which is Satan. For the Bible says, let there be none among you who is either a fortuneteller or a follower of fortunetellers. Do not ask them [the fortunetellers] for anything lest you get defiled by them. He who follows fortunetellers and allows them into his

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76 The ancient practice of magic was widely popular among Copts, and after the Islamic conquest of Egypt in 641 CE and the eventual Arabization of Egypt in the following centuries, it took on a different flavor. As Werner Vycichl writes, “After the Arabic [sic] conquest (641) Coptic magic gradually lost a bit of its originality. The most striking feature was the adoption of the Arabic language and script. Original creations were replaced by copies of Psalms with magical squares in which letters and figures were inserted, each letter representing a figure according to the Arabic system....Seals and squares were taken over from Arabic models. They had to be written with a special ink, such as rose water, musk, or saffron essence. Special incense was to be burnt: qaquli, a kind of cardamom; Turkish mastic; gawi tanasiri (benzoin); and red sandalwood. When writing, the scribe had to sit on the earth to keep in constant touch with the underworld forces. Several prayers were often copied for amulets....Modern Coptic magic frequently uses Psalms. Every Psalm is used for a special purpose. The objectives of spells may be the same as in old times, perhaps with the addition of a spell to find hidden treasures or attract a customer into a shop, or an amulet against flies. Four of the latter amulets must be hung upside down on the four walls of a room, and this must be done on Easter, because the flies disappear at that time of the year, the so-called khamsin, or the fifty days between Easter and Whitsun.” See Werner Vycichl, “Magic,” *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 5.1499-1509.

77 The Copt Mu’allim Rizq (d. 1770) was Mubāshir al-Ruzname, kātib (scribe), and direct advisor to ‘Ali Bey al-Kabīr (1755-1772), the former mamluk who effectively ruled Egypt during this period. Aside from his administrative duties, in his capacity as “advisor,” Rizq apparently served as ‘Ali Bey’s “astrologer” and as his personal confidant. On Mu'allim Rizq’s interest in astrology, see al-Maṣrī, pp. 158-159.
house or goes into their houses will bring upon himself my severe anger and he will be banished from my people....He who plays al-fāl [optimism], al-mandal, al-harūz or ta’yīs [pessimism] al-athār, or who speaks with the Book of Births [mawālīd] or the Book of Astrology, or who predetermines the outlook of a coming day, saying ‘this day is blessed or this day is impure,’ and also the hours [will be condemned]. None of you should visit the ponds and the wells in which the devils live because they mislead people. All of these things we have mentioned are the remnants of idol worshipping....Any man, woman or child from the Coptic Church who practices any of [these habits] will be excommunicated. He will be forbidden from entering the Church and no offerings will be accepted from him. He cannot take communion nor can he interact with the other faithful. If he died in this state of being, without remorse for what he has committed, he will not be prayed over, nor will he be memorialized, nor would offerings be made on his behalf.78

The fact that the Yu’annis made threats of excommunication shows the seriousness of this vice. Excommunication, or the exclusion from communion (and the community), was in theory mandatory for a number of other offenses; as Martin Krause writes, traditionally, excommunication could be used in cases such as “a hostile disposition toward one's neighbor,” “making young men drunk,” “a breach of the precept of sobriety at the Lord's table,” “ill treatment of the poor, and offenses against the marriage law.”79

As seen from above examples, however, the Patriarch handled the punishment of other sins such as the drunkenness of priests with a more moderate approach. Magic and fortunetelling threatened church authorities because they dabbled in techniques that rivaled the Church’s own teachings of the miraculous and the divine. Most believers, of

78 Patriarchal Library, MS Lahūt 134, 265r-265v. In an almost identical critique, Bishop Yusāb wrote article fifteen, which addresses the vices committed not at house parties but inside churches. He writes: “We have spoken to you many times before about the habits that you committed such as playing al-dā’ and al-fanājīn, as well as your bringing poets and adulterers to your weddings, among other habits which are too elaborate to address here. When you brought to the church such immoral habits, anger and fury has occurred to the extent that among you there are those who dares raise their hands [beat another] in the house of God, [the place] which is the foundation of truth and the place of repentance and regret from sin.” See Abu Maqār, MS Theology 6, 181v.

course, managed to mix religious practices with magical interventions without seeing any contradiction in their traditions. However, as defined by these sermons, “good” Coptic Christians were to attend church and then allow the Church to attend to their needs, whatever they might be.80

*On the Rules of the Church*

A number of other vices discussed by Yu’annis and Yusāb cover a wide range of topics but can be roughly characterized under the heading of “church rules or doctrines.” One of the rules concerns the underage marriage of Coptic girls and boys. This topic received special attention in the *Adrāj* and was addressed by Yu’annis in his thirty-first sermon. This was another persistent vice among Coptic believers, as the Patriarch’s tone seems to indicate:

> In years past, we have written to you sermons, out of our love, on the marriage of immature [*ghayr mudrikīn*] girls so that no one should marry immature girls nor immature boys. Because of the long time that passed, you have forgotten what we have written to you, and how we explained to you how this act creates an excessive harm. He who marries immature girls trades in joy with sadness and happiness with hatred, and [creates] a bond with evil, as well as other things which are too elaborate to address here. All of you know, one by one, that marriage is one of the sacraments of the God….and God’s laws do not permit the marriage of those who are immature.81

80 The delineation of religious practice from magical practice by Coptic Church authorities can almost be classified as “Protestant” in character, in the sense defined by Keith Thomas in his seminal work *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971). Thomas argues that Catholicism, in the years prior to the rise of the Protestant faith, fostered a sort of “magical worldview” among believers, and that it was in fact the Reformation which drew such sharp distinctions between “magic” and “religion.” In his own understanding of those two categories, Thomas maintains that “magic” was distinguished by methods that were intended to manipulate supernatural powers for solving tangible, day-to-day problems. On the other hand, “religion” functioned by explaining the unknown, by comforting believers, by defining a moral agenda for its adherents, and most importantly, perhaps, by criticizing those believers when they fell out of line.

81 Patriarchal Library, MS Lahūt 134, 203r-204v.
He continues to discuss how this type of marriage “ruins” young girls, not just in a sexual sense but in an overall manner. This was the sin of the biblical Sodomites, Yu’annis proclaims, and will draw a similar punishment from God if it is not controlled. The Patriarch, however, does not command the community to abolish this practice, but rather pleads passionately for the end of this practice (“We beg of you with our love that you stay away from all of these habits”).  

Finally, the Patriarch blames the mothers of these girls: “If a woman is asked about her daughter, ‘Is your daughter mature?’ and she confirms her maturity although [the girl] is not mature, this woman will be held responsible under the laws of the Church.”

Yu’aannis does not elaborate on what the church dictates as a penalty but implies that God may use punishments outlined in the Old Testament. Thus while the Patriarch employs tender language as he solicits an end to this custom, he is willing to resort to threats of divine punishment to stir fear among those who may continue to practice it.

That the community had gone astray from a number of the Church’s teachings was an issue that Yusāb also dealt with in his sermons. The bishop seems intent on reminding his congregants of their role as Coptic believers and of their duty to observe their obligations, such as confession and fasting. Catholic missionaries had long ago noted that few Copts practiced the sacrament of confession, a vice which within Catholicism was viewed to be highly heretical. Coptic leaders had apparently noticed the same problem, and not surprisingly, in their opinions, the trouble stemmed from poor pastoral leadership within the community. Yusāb asks, “How can you, the priest who

82 Ibid., 204”, my emphasis.

83 Ibid., 205”. 

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does not confess his sins, teach the people to confess their sins?” He goes on to refer to priests as “spiritual doctors,” and condemns their lack of wisdom in dealing with congregants’ sins (ills) and in prescribing remedies. Ultimately, he advises priests to “search for each person, among men and women, and to attract them to repentance through preaching, teaching, confession, and communion.” Yusāb characterizes this action not merely as a duty but as a priestly obligation whose neglect, if broken, is worthy of eternal condemnation. In his view, priests are responsible for the souls of their congregants; if they fail to carry out their mission, their congregants’ souls will be doomed to hell.

Fasting, which is not a sacrament but a duty, seems to have been inconsistently practiced among Coptic laymen. Traditionally, Coptic fasting has assumed two forms: one is the total abstinence from food and another is the abstinence from animal-derived products (i.e., eggs, milk, meat, etc.). In essence, it is expected that a total abstinence from food would be incorporated until a certain hour of the day during predetermined Church fasts such as Lent. However, in Yusāb’s viewpoint, Coptic laymen appear to have redefined this duty in their own terms:

I have seen among our Christian children disgusting [damīma] habits which they have grown accustomed to. Through these customs, they have come to decide whether to carry out or go against the fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, and [also] the forty days fast [Lent]. They arise early in order to smoke and drink coffee. Then they come up with empty excuses, [saying] ‘My head hurts,’ or another says, ‘If I do not drink coffee I cannot open my eyes,’ and another says ‘The smoke helps expunge the phlegm which is upon my chest’….Oh, how these are meaningless bonds, bonds which have tied the Christian children and [even]...

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84 Abu Maqār, MS Theology 6, 197-198v.
the most renowned among you, those who are employed in the diwāns, the archons and the muʿallimīn [masters].

The Bishop goes on to explain that abstinence from food, drinking, and smoking during predetermined church fasts must be followed at least until the ninth hour of the morning. It is likely that this criticism was falling, for the most part, on deaf ears. If a Coptic notable claimed that without coffee, he was unable “to open his eyes” and was subsequently incapable to perform his duties at the administrative council, then it is doubtful that a bishop’s words would have effected much change.

In a telling remark on fasting, Patriarch Yu’annis criticizes the habits among Coptic laymen who are making their own decisions regarding when to follow the Church’s fasts and when not to. He is less worried, however, about the spiritual welfare of the community than about giving a negative impression to the Catholics (“the enemy”) which they can use as fodder to criticize the Coptic Church:

You should all fast according to the guidelines and the laws of the church for fasting. Do not give to the enemy a way through which he may enter among you. The breaking of church laws might allow us to be pillaged by those outside nations, who would say, ‘What is the state of those people? Some of them fast and some do not. Perhaps they do not have any beliefs in their church, particularly those who are clerics, or those who are educated or those who are notables’….When the lower peoples regard them [those who break the fast] while

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85 A diwan is “the administrative council held by the Ottoman governor of Egypt three times a week in Cairo’s citadel and attended by the highest regimental officers, the highest beylical officials, and the highest-ranking ulema.” See Hathaway, The Politics of Households in Ottoman Egypt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 175.

86 Abu Maqār, MS Theology 6, 198v-199v. Similarly, Yu’annis complains how people are attached to gluttonous lusts throughout the day. “From the time of waking until sleeping, the drinking continues and the stomach is occupied until three, four, or five in the morning. And [people] are working in gluttonous work all day, at one point they eat, and at another they drink coffee, and at another they snuff [tobacco], and at another they drink arak. This goes on all day…particularly among the wealthy.” See Patriarchal Library, MS Lahūṭ 134, 146v.
they are being careless in their gluttony, conquered by [their] love of lustfulness, they will [also] quickly fall.”

Clearly, the lack of uniformity in belief and practice among Copts was the biggest threat for both Patriarch Yu’annis and Bishop Yusāb. As discussed above, public acts of disobedience against church teachings (e.g., public drinking, public inconsistency in fasting, public fighting) were not tolerated because they constituted a blow to the image of the Coptic community. The fact that this theme is recurrent throughout the sermons reveals a feeling of imminent danger to the integrity of the Coptic community, particularly as it is viewed by outsiders. It also emphasizes that the “battle” is to be waged against the enemy within -- immorality -- and the outside enemy -- Catholicism.

_A Catholic Treatise: “The Book of Asking Questions after Being in Doubt”_

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact dates that _Adrāj_ and _Silāh_ were written (possibly between 1791 and 1796), there is a good indication that they were both part of a concerted reply to the writings and sermons of Catholic missionaries which had been circulating in Egypt throughout the late eighteenth century. I have discovered one such Catholic text which, after close study, seems to fit perfectly into the argument that was taking place between Coptic Orthodox and Catholics. In fact, it is quite possible that Yu’annis and Yusāb were both familiar with this treatise, or at least with the information

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87 Patriarchal Library, MS Lahūt 134, 145v. The Patriarch goes on to marvel at the fact that divisions in the rules of fasting occur even within one household, therefore creating a “broken home.” See also 145v.

88 Using almost identical logic to that used by Yu’annis, Bishop Yusāb responds to the criticism of _Kitāb al-istīfḥām_ and writes that “I saw other people breaking from what the teachers of the church have arranged in terms of fasting. They see the church fasting, so they [decide] not to fast. They have divided the church into two…there is now separation in the house of God. I saw people fasting the Advent fast, from sixteenth day of Hatūr and others eating meat until the first day of Kiyahk. I saw one table split into two, some people eating meat and others fasting.” See _Silāh al-Mu’minīn_, Paris Arabe 4711, 102v.
included in it, and were directly responding to some of its arguments against the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The Catholic treatise is called “Kitāb al-istifām ba’d al-istibhām” or “The Book of Asking Questions after Being in Doubt.” The manuscript of this work is, today, held as part of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts (Mingana Chr. Arab. 32) at the University of Birmingham. According to Anthony Mingana’s catalogue of this collection, this treatise is a theological work, written in 1772 CE by an anonymous Coptic Uniate (Coptic Catholic). The manuscript is divided into twenty bābs (chapters) and a khatimah (conclusion). From its tone and language, the intended audience for this work may have been educated Coptic notables who were considering conversion to Catholicism, but who had a number of questions regarding the differences between the practices of Coptic Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Although filled with a number of colloquialisms, the language of this treatise is more lucid, straightforward, and grammatically correct than that of A ḍrāj or Silāḥ.

Kitāb al-istifām is a lengthy work, and without delving into great detail about its contents, I would like to provide an exposé of its main themes, particularly in light of how it correlates with Coptic Orthodox sermons discussed in the previous section. From the outset, it is immediately clear that the author of Kitāb al-istifām aims to entice, through the use of logical arguments, those Copts who are considering conversion to Catholicism. One of the most significant arguments he makes, in that regard, is the supreme role of the Catholic Pope and the lack of disunity within Catholicism as

compared to the divisions among Orthodox churches. He refers to Copts as followers of
the “Jacobite”\textsuperscript{90} sect and argues that the disunity among the Orthodox sects is indicative
of the falseness of their beliefs:

\begin{quote}
We see that all the sects which are opposing to your [Coptic] faith refute your
opinions, do not follow your orders, and do not obey your patriarch. So you
cannot prove that your church is the one holy catholic apostolic church because it
is alone, isolated, and its teachings are opposing to the truth, opposing to each
other [other churches], and opposing to what is written in your theological and
scientific books. You dismiss the Greek Orthodox [Rūm] and call them heretics
because they believe in two natures and criminalize Dioscorus, and they call you
heretics [as well]. Yet you say about them that upon their hands appears the light
of Christ at the Sepulcher on the Great Saturday [during Easter]...so the
conclusion of your talking is that their faith is more correct because of the miracle
which occurs upon the hands of their patriarch since the miracle is a sign from
God....If the Greek Orthodox hold the truth because of the light, then \textit{you}
are wrong because of the difference of belief from them!\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

The logic of this argument is relatively sound, and it likely attracted some Copts to
question the practices and teachings of their own church, particularly those which were of
a more superstitious nature.

Still, the stigma of being labeled as a “Frank,” as a foreigner, and as a non-Copt
was a strong deterrent to conversion for many potential converts, and the author of \textit{Kitāb
al-istifhām} was quite attuned to this point. He attempts to explain to his audiences what
the term “Frank” actually signifies:

\begin{quote}
You must learn that in truth, those [Catholic] monks and missionaries are not of
the Frankish race because the true Frank, to whom this name applies, is the
Frenchman such as the foreign \textit{khawājāt} French merchants who live in Cairo;
they are truly Franks. But others are from different races; among them are those
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{90} The name “Jacobite” has historically referred to the monophysite Syrian church based in Antioch, which
shares a common theological belief with the Coptic Church. “Jacob” was the name of the Syrian Church’s
founder in the sixth century. Over the years, however, all monophysite communities came to be lumped
together under the name “Jacobite,” and this term was often used in derogatory ways by Catholics in the
West.

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Kitāb al-istifhām}, 77r, my emphasis.
from Rome, Austrians, those from Naples, Portuguese, Venetians, French, and others. These are all worldly races, just as in the East there are Greeks, Armenians, Syrians, Copts, Abyssinians, Nubians, Sudanese and others. These races do not signify faith but the origin of nationality. So if all of these sects believe in the Orthodox faith, then we are all one in Christ through faith, not through race. Not each person who is a Catholic is a Frank; we [for example] are Catholics by faith and Copts by race. We are like you in all things spiritual and physical, except in the heresy and teachings [of the Coptic Church]…[we are like you] in the material things such as food and clothes. We are enslaved like you are, and we pay the sultan’s jizya just like you do.92

To the best of his ability, this author differentiates between the Catholic religion -- the system of belief adopted by converts -- and the Copts as an identity group. According to Kitāb al-istifḥām, the negative viewpoint of Frankish missionaries has been misrepresented by the malicious labels used among Copts: missionaries were called “new Jews” and “non-Christians.”93 By using such labels and by associating Franks with immorality, Coptic Church leaders, as discussed above, came to argue that these two identities -- faith and race -- were completely inseparable. On the other hand, the author of Kitāb al-istifḥām was trying his best to disconnect those two identities.

Beyond the heretical theological beliefs of the Orthodox Copts, however, this author attacked some of the most inconsistent and “backward” practices which he viewed as prevalent among Coptic believers and which occurred, in his opinion, because of the ignorance and lack of guidance of church authorities. On the subject of fasting, the author reveals that Copts in Cairo were diverging from Copts in Upper Egypt in their interpretation of when to follow the core fasts of the Church. Whether this division

92 Ibid., 16r-117v, my emphasis.

93 Ibid., 114r.
reflected the historic geographical division of Egypt or not, it was a vital point for the author of *Kitāb al-istiťhām* in illustrating disarray within the Coptic community:

I speak to you about the differences in the ritual [of fasting] between the Roman Catholic Church and the Copts....In the Coptic Church itself, it differs between the city of Cairo and Upper Egypt, even though this is one sect, following one ritual, and under the leadership of one patriarch. In Cairo, the Christmas fast is twenty-eight days beginning from the first of the month of Kiyahk. But in Upper Egypt, it is forty-three days, which is the last half of the month of Hatūr, fifteen days before Kiyahk....This [situation] is the same for the Apostolic fast. In Cairo, they fast fourteen days before the feast of Saints Peter and Paul....In Upper Egypt, they fast from the Pentecostal Feast, which is the fifty days known as the *Sajda*, and this makes the fast, following Easter, up to forty-nine days long.94

As evident from Yu’annis’ *Adrāj*, Coptic Church authorities could not challenge this criticism. It was indeed a grave problem for them that Copts throughout Egypt held different traditions regarding this particular and fundamental church ritual; worst of all, it evoked an image of disunity which Catholics could cleverly use to persuade Coptic notables to change their faith.

Because, in the author’s view, Coptic Church leaders were unable to curb “inappropriate” popular practices, these leaders were worthy of major criticism. The clergy’s lack of control over the marriage of boys and girls who had not yet reached maturity was considered to be one of their greatest vices; underage matrimony, as such, turned marriage into an act of sexual lust rather one intended for procreation. The author notes that the rule of waiting until boys had passed the age of fourteen and girls passed the age of twelve was commonly neglected. This was contrary to the Catholic canon that defined the purpose of marriage as first for procreation and secondly for sexual satisfaction. At Coptic weddings, the author writes, “[there is] gossip, mockery, 94 Ibid., 86'-87'.
inappropriate finger pointing, and sinful language against purity since the people believe that marriage is only for sex and do not consider it as a church sacrament. So they wink and laugh when the priest orders the groom and bride to love one another!95 Similarly, the widespread practice of divorce among Copts was shunned as an act of adultery and heresy.96

Most importantly, the author balks at the pervasive ineptitude of Coptic priests in ministering to their congregants. The priests, he writes, “praise” those believers who use magical practices and astrology to resolve their problems.97 They assume their offices through the practice of nepotism; priesthood is passed down from generation to generation solely because of hereditary rights and not aptitude.98 The author of Kitāb al-īstifhām cannot comprehend how during liturgical prayers, the priests fail to control unruly congregants, among whom the men “speak with one another about worldly news and such, and the women about the news of their men, their children and their clothes.”99 None of the believers can understand the Coptic hymns which are being sung, including the priests who are themselves singing. Moreover, like “animals,” the writer continues, priests and their congregants spend Sunday -- the day of the Lord -- feasting, eating, and drinking the anise-flavored liquor arak.

95 Ibid., 104′.
96 Ibid., 99′.
97 Ibid., 104′-105′.
98 Ibid., 108′.
99 Ibid., 109′.
In attacking the most “ignorant” of the practices among Coptic priests, the author comments about their inability to preach to their congregants due to their “stupidity.” “They have been raised in ignorance, like you, and the Bible says that ‘if a blind man leads another, both of them will fall into the pit.’”\textsuperscript{100} The writer of Kitāb al-istifhām directs his words to laymen who believe that they are part of a “flock” which must follow its “shepherd,” i.e., priests. He writes that “a layman says ‘I am a sheep and not a shepherd; thus I believe that the sheep which does not follow the good shepherd will be lost, found by the wolf, and will suffer.'”\textsuperscript{101} By arguing that these shepherds are anything but good and that they are too ineffective to lead believers to salvation, this writer appeals to Coptic notables so that they will rebel against their religious leaders and join a community where salvation is a closer reality. He reminds his audience to look at the Catholic missionaries in Egypt, at their learned traditions, at their efforts to study the Coptic language in order to “correct” all of the wrongdoings of past generations. Finally, he asks potential converts to forego their “stupidity” and to adopt Catholicism as many Greeks, Melkites, Armenians and Syrians have already done.\textsuperscript{102} It is understandable from the tone of this text how Coptic clerical leaders found Catholic missionaries to be threatening and hostile.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 110'.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 111', my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 113'.
Conclusions

In these late eighteenth-century Coptic sermons, one uncanny resemblance repeatedly surfaces: a similarity between Yu’annis’ and Yusāb’s writings and sermons of moral improvement written by Russian Orthodox clerics in the seventeenth century. This topic has been closely studied by Paul Bushkovitch, whose conclusions are telling for this chapter. Bushkovitch speaks of the reform program advocated by a group called the “Zealots of Piety” whose sermons were specifically intended to target the upper classes. He argues that these sermons were, in a way, revolutionary, for they “implied a move away from liturgy alone as the central religious experience, for now the liturgy was accompanied by a nontraditional homily that called the congregation to a better life. The sermons also signified a shift in emphasis toward the moral improvement of the Orthodox Christian.”

Just like Coptic sermons, these Russian sermons reveal a preoccupation among the clergy with the main vices during that time: pride and avarice. The eradication of “extreme” behaviors within the community and the emphasis on “correct” and “proper” conduct was their most important preoccupation:

[T]he sermons stress (besides faith, of course) fasting and correct moral behavior, including almsgiving, the whole giving the impression of a morality fairly strict for laymen but far from monastic asceticism. The message was the message of the Zealots of Piety, with their concern for church attendance, avoidance of drunkenness, and the suppression of popular amusements. The Zealots tried to convince their congregations, and Russians as a whole, to adopt a morality of moderation, one that stressed pious observances, such as fasts and church attendance, and the avoidance of sin, but was not ascetic in the monastic sense.

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104 Ibid., p. 152.
Such sermons, as in the Coptic case, were written out of concern over the rise of increasing “temptations,” greater wealth, and the subsequent “perceived” moral and social decline which “naturally” followed.

In late eighteenth-century Egypt, the perception of moral dilapidation within the Coptic community, both in Cairo and in Upper Egypt, was further complicated by the threat of an impending wave of conversion to Catholicism among the principal breadwinners, among those Coptic laymen whose financial generosity had rebuilt churches, helped pay the jizya tax on behalf of impoverished Copts, and patronized a literary revival. Church authorities, who had increasingly conceded much power to these laymen, were attempting to regain some control over the community and its management through these sermons. The issues raised in the context of this period and by these sermons -- whether to solicit Western/Catholic protection, whether to invoke the interference of the state in communal matters, and whether laymen or clergy should ultimately decide the future of the Coptic community -- carries over into the modern period and continues to be a major site of contention within the Coptic community today.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding a relationship which oftentimes bordered on hostility and in the face of basic religious differences, Christians and Muslims in Egypt have historically shared numerous rituals and practices. Today, the attendance by Muslims at Coptic saints’ festivals, and vice versa, illustrates this firm overlap between these two communities’ practices on a popular level. One can argue that it is within the space of such religious practices that that the differences between what constitutes official and unofficial Christianity, or what defines Muslim or Christian practice, has been blurred. The participation of Muslims and Copts, side by side, has been and continues to be a hallmark of Egyptian society on the whole.

It is also within this greater context, of festivals, saint veneration, and shared traditions between Egypt’s Muslims and Christians, that we can understand this dissertation. This project has focused primarily on how Coptic Christians expressed their religious beliefs in Egypt during the Ottoman period (1517-1798 CE) but more significantly, on the ways in which Coptic beliefs were shaped by their encounters with other religious communities with whom they shared many public and private realms. As I explained in the Introduction, questions regarding tolerance and/or persecution among different religious communities are relevant to my approach, but in the course of this
dissertation I have also attempted to incorporate other variables in shaping my understanding of Coptic communal and religious life. Central in this discussion was the Coptic Church’s response to challenges, whether from Islam or from Catholicism, the dialogue between authors of official religious culture and its recipients, and the interrelationship between Copts and Muslims, between the Coptic community and Muslim rulers, and between the Coptic community and other non-Muslim communities.

Underlying the study of Copts in this period are the continued efforts made by Coptic Church and communal leaders to preserve and carry on traditional religious institutions and practices. This was not only in the face of the perceived and real threats posed by the dominant Islamic religious culture but also in reaction to the fact that Ottoman power generally gave administrative and political preference to the Greek and Armenian Orthodox Churches. Still, the fact that Copts occupied a small but visible part of this scheme was seen in the annual Easter rituals held in Jerusalem. If competition with other Christian communities was insufficiently taxing, however, then one should consider that the Ottomans generally favored the Jewish community in the lucrative commercial sector. Copts rarely held any posts in this sector not only because of Jewish dominance but also because the “capitulation” system, prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, granted the French, English, and other Europeans trading rights and privileges, favoring those groups and their Arab Catholic protégés. Moreover, to various parts of the Ottoman Empire, Europeans brought an aggressive Catholic missionary movement targeting mostly indigenous Christian communities. Egypt’s Coptic Church, as we have learned from Chapter Five, was relatively preoccupied with defending against this threat.
With persistence, however, Copts evaded total extinction from the Ottoman socio-political map and continued to fill indispensable positions in the administrative and financial apparatus of Egypt’s government. As discussed throughout this dissertation, Coptic elite channeled their wealth into community-building strategies. Despite an intermittently hostile environment and legal prohibitions against these actions, there was immense interest in building churches, repairing monasteries, and patronizing literary and artistic projects. This was ultimately intended to unify the community and to create conditions for thriving Coptic religious practice. However, this attempt at uniformity was cannot be projected into an idyllic picture; one notes that in the eighteenth century, basic religious practices among Copts living in Cairo were sometimes radically different from those who lived in the more conservative area of Upper Egypt. The variety of religious interpretations and practices shows that the Church faced as many challenges from within as it did from outsiders.

The picture which emerges of the Coptic Church in the Ottoman period illustrates creative tactics in dealing particularly with threats from an Islamic government but also with pressure exerted by non-Muslims, such as the Catholic missionary enterprise in Egypt. In order to preserve their authority and influence over rituals practiced among Coptic believers, both Church and communal leaders supported a prolific manuscript production of hagiographies, miracle narratives, and sermons; whether inadvertently or willingly, this attempt to codify the history and beliefs of the community exemplifies both resilience and flexibility in dealing with contemporaneous challenges. In response, for instance, to financial hardships in its Jerusalem diocese, the Church wrote sermons and asked believers to contribute funds and supplies, while simultaneously encouraging
the practice of pilgrimage among its more affluent members. Similarly the bold response to official societal constraints was evident in that even with existing legal prohibitions against the public display of non-Muslim religious practices, the Coptic community continued to stage festivals, processions, and pilgrimages which not only embraced the participation of fellow Muslim believers but also, as in the case of Saint Dimyana, relied upon the protection of Ottoman soldiery.

The reliance on Muslim official involvement in numerous facets of Coptic religious life challenges prevailing notions that non-Muslim communities living under Islamic governance were mostly self-reliant, insular, and reluctant to engage Muslim rulers in their internal communal affairs. This dissertation provides numerous examples to the contrary. Aside from seeking the protection of soldiery at festivals and of soliciting legal privileges to make their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Coptic communal leaders and clergymen were not reluctant in asking Muslim rulers to make judgments on internal community practices such as polygamy, or in seeking those rulers’ involvement in limiting Catholic missionary encroachment on the faithful. Indeed, in their own writings, as exemplified by the martyrdom of Saint Šalīb, Coptic authors made a clear distinction between Muslims that lived “among” them as neighbors and those who were perceived as malefactors. In a text which was intended to provoke a remembrance of suffering and of Coptic misery during the Mamluk period, there was an attempt on the part of Coptic Church writers to judiciously represent day-to-day Muslim-Christians relations in their full complexity.

It is in these authorial nuances that one detects the approach by Coptic Church writers to engage both the official religious dialogue sponsored by the clergy but also its
recipients on the popular level. For example, Saint Dimyana, despite being a fourth-century martyr, became highly popular during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as did her legend, which was copied time and again by Coptic scribes to be distributed among churches all over Egypt. Although her hagiography contained material that was mostly promoted by Coptic clergy, the focus on the familiar Egyptian local character in Dimyana’s life narrative reflects the fact that it was read at her festival each year and that the festival was attended by both Christians and Muslims. Moreover, the sense of the miraculous embedded in an Islamic-era codex within this hagiography may have appealed to the popular masses. Finally, the ascetic values in her legend -- such as virtue, purity, dutifulness, and obedience to religious functionaries -- may have been upheld for women in broader Egyptian society.

Likewise, sensitivity to issues of practice and belief within the Coptic community are reflected in the clerical sermons of the late eighteenth century. For the first time in the early modern period, top Coptic clergymen contended with pending religious practices and wrote sermons addressed directly to contemporaneous audiences. Rather than relying on pre-written homiletic texts, religious leaders dealt with imminent threats, addressing practices that included pride, avarice, polygamy, drunkenness, lewd behavior and blatant disobedience of church rituals. Furthermore, we witness how Coptic clergymen used this forum in order to characterize a specific “Coptic” identity and to distinguish a pure Coptic morality from the perceived moral and spiritual vices of other communities. The use of the sermon text for the “here and now” was a novel if not revolutionary idea within the Coptic community.
The politicization of religious writings and of popular religious expression has been a recurrent theme of this work. The popularity of sermons and of sermon-givers among Copts reflects a broader trend in Ottoman society among all religious communities, one that perhaps indicates a public demand for more coherent religious instruction. The use of sermons in the eighteenth-century Coptic context can be viewed as parallel to their use within the seventeenth-century Muslim reformist Kadızadeli movement centered in Istanbul and also as a way to spread Kabbalism among Jewish communities throughout the late sixteenth-century Ottoman and Mediterranean world. Such cases and others in the context of Christian communities in Europe have one common thread: sermons indicate the search for collectiveness in the face of moral trepidation. The fear that popular practices can affect the cohesion of any religious community was handled differently by that community’s leaders, depending on perceived challenges. Much like the puritanical Sunni Kadızadelis identified popular Sufi practices -- viewed as deviant and heretical -- as posing a threat to the religious cohesion of Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, one century later, Coptic Christian leaders recognized the dangers posed both by unguided Coptic popular practices and by Catholic missionaries whose conversion attempts threatened the coherence and reproductive future of a small group. The Kadızadeli were not reluctant to blame some of these schismatic practices on non-Muslim influences, and neither were the Coptic Church leaders hesitant to point fingers at Catholic missionaries and occasionally at Muslims as well.

What is interesting, however, is that regardless of official statements made by religious leaders blaming the moral debasement of their communities on each other, in reality, there is strong indication of extensive and quiet influences among these groups.
This can only illustrate that despite Islamic societal provisions pre-specifying religious communities into rigid legal categories and despite official religious attempts to codify and unify practice, popular religious practices in the Ottoman Empire, in general, and in Egypt, in particular, were quite diverse. We need only to recall the scene described by European travelers at the annual festival of Saint Dimyana, which depicts a crowd of believers -- Christians and Muslims -- that was eager to identify saintly apparitions, without heeding supervision from external authorities.

To what extent is an investigation of all these particular features of Coptic life indicative of any peculiarities to the Ottoman period? As discussed throughout this study, there has been a somewhat immutable perception in modern history-writing on non-Muslims in the Ottoman era, which has characterized their existence as dark, barren, and even tragic. The sheer abundance of manuscripts produced during this period indicates that there was a vibrant and enduring Coptic life, centered on their religious beliefs and practices. On different levels, I have attempted to paint in this dissertation a colorful and vivid snapshot of Coptic Christian life in the years between 1517 and 1798. More importantly, however, this study stands as the first of its kind to focus on the religious beliefs and traditions of Christian community life under Ottoman rule in Egypt and to attempt to reconstruct the daily practices of this community in relation to its surrounding milieu. In this process, this study has drawn extensively on the works of European and Islamic scholars, from works on the early modern period as well as contemporary theoretical studies. Ultimately, by refusing to accept a narrow definition of “community” in the Ottoman context, and indeed within the context of Islamic societies at large, I have been sensitive to the varieties and purposes of Christian, Muslim and Jewish popular
religious expression and their role in community-building strategies. It is my hope that this study will attract attention to a subject which has long warranted greater consideration.
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