



The decline of the Melkite Church in Islamic Egypt and its revival by Patriarch Cosmas I (ca 727-768)

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Abstract

This study focuses on the relations of the Melkites and Copts, two rival religious communities in early Muslim Egypt, at a critical turning point, i.e. the time of the patriarch of Alexandria Cosmas I (ca 727-768), about which not enough attention has been paid by modern scholars. Cosmas's sincere intention to unite the two rival Christian Churches of Egypt, a fact recognized even by his adversaries, is emphasized. Simultaneously, the author points out the initial impartiality of the Arabs towards the perennial dispute between the Coptic and Melkite Churches, which changed drastically by the time of Cosmas I's election.

Keywords: Monophysites-Copts, Chalcedonians-Melkites, Copt Patriarch of Alexandria Benjamin, Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria Cyrus, Cosmas patriarch of Alexandria

Introduction

Following the Arab conquest of Egypt (ca 645), there were a great number of socio-political transitional changes which lasted for centuries and deeply affected its Christian communities. Several important studies have been written about the religious consequences of the above changes and about the development of the two rival religious communities in Egypt through the centuries, i.e. the Monophysite Copts and the Chalcedonian Melkites (followers of the Council of Chalcedon, 451 CE) (Wilfong, 1998; Gabra, 2014; Timm, 1984-92; Mikhail, 2014; Christides, 2016). The present work will be restricted to a limited topic dealing with the confused religious situation that prevailed in Egypt during the early Muslim rule, ending with the complete separation of the two rival Christian churches at the time of the patriarch of Alexandria, Cosmas I (ca 727-768).

It is the present author's view that the two above-mentioned rival Christian groups were initially neither regionally separated nor solidly unified entities. At the time of the patriarch of Alexandria Ioannes Eleēmōn (610-619), Monophysites and Melkites lived peacefully next to each other and the Monophysites frequently attended the liturgy in Melkite churches (Papadopoulos, 1985:457-458; Christides, 2016:7). In order to secure the unity of the Empire, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (610-641) tried to forcibly impose a theological compromise in Egypt called *monotheitism* (single will), which was doomed to failure (Boumis, 2007). Furthermore, Heraclius' appointment of Cyrus as viceroy and patriarch of Alexandria in order to implement his religious policy had disastrous effects. The Monophysite Church of Egypt, usually called Coptic, slipped into a long period of decline from the time of Cyrus (630) and then revived after the Arab dominance (ca 645) (for the term Copt, Arabic Qubṭ, or Qibṭ, see Ibn Manzūr, n.d., vol. III: 9). No doubt, Cyrus' harsh persecution of the Monophysites (Copts)



shattered their loyalty towards the Byzantine authorities. Nevertheless, as Butler himself stated, “a whole population could not turn martyrs” (Butler, 1902, ed. P. M. Fraser, 1978:189). Although the relations of the two rival Christian groups in Egypt deteriorated, they were not entirely alienated. It should be taken into consideration that they were not simply two religious groups, but they were two communities living together in the same area. Given the exceedingly limited material we possess, we do not know details about the actual transformation caused by Cyrus’ hostile actions.

From the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria (S. Mark to Benjamin I)*, we learn about the persecution of Benjamin, the patriarch of the Copts, who was forced to escape, fleeing from place to place and hiding in the remote fortified Monophysite monasteries in Upper Egypt (Evetts, vol. I, 1907:493, 498). Most of the Monophysite bishops were replaced by Melkite bishops (Evetts, 1907: 492). Cyrus bishop of Nikiou and Victor bishop of Faiyūm, by pretending that they had rejected Monophysitism, were the only two who remained in their sees (Evetts, 1907:491).

While the higher ecclesiastical Monophysite authorities bore the greatest pressure from Cyrus’ persecution, little is known about the fate of the average Monophysites of Egypt who were the majority. In the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, it is reported that their churches were all taken by the Melkites (Evetts, 1907:492). Since churches were not simply places of liturgy and religious practices but also were used for social gatherings, their deprivation must have weakened the solidarity of the Monophysite community.

Nevertheless, in spite of the harsh persecution and the loss of their churches, the Copts resisted Cyrus’ effort to uproot Monophysitism and they secretly continued their gatherings and the performance of their sacraments. The *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* reports that the Monophysite priest Agathon would visit the hidden Monophysites at night, disguised as a layman, in order to encourage them and give them the Holy Mysteries (Evetts, 1907:502). It should be mentioned that during the Arab invasion of Egypt, the Monophysites did not alienate themselves from the Melkites since they shared the same attitude towards the Arab invaders. Although the contemporary Egyptian historian John, Bishop of Nikiou, whose chronography is the best account of the Arab conquest of Egypt, vividly describes the catastrophic impact of Cyrus’ policy on the Monophysite community, there is not the slightest hint in his work of any separatist movement among the Monophysites in support of the Arabs (for the reliability of John, Bishop of Nikiou, see Christides, forthcoming a).

Butler’s original view that during the Arab siege of Babylon its inhabitants were solely the Melkites while the Copts “were wholly out of action” (Butler, 1902, Fraser, 1978: 252) cannot be accepted, and Skreslet II’s view that the sole inhabitants of Babylon were the Copts (Skreslet II, 1987:72) is also unacceptable. Actually, as I have pointed out in a previous article, both Copts and Melkites demonstrated an “ambivalent attitude” towards the Arab invaders, waiting for the results of the Arab attack. After the Arab conquest of Babylon (H20/641) (Hill, 1971:45), this ambivalence became defeatism and hostility among the local Egyptians, both Melkites and Copts, towards the defeated Byzantines (Christides, forthcoming a).

In a supplementary article concerning the so-called Arab-Byzantine treaty of Alexandria as reported in Tabari, Butler revised his position and accepted the coexistence of Melkites and Copts as a united community. He correctly remarked that in the peace treaty of Alexandria there was an arrangement between the Arabs and the Romans [=Byzantines] on behalf of the whole local population of Egypt, whether



Coptic or Melkite (Butler, 1913:48). Of course, the authenticity of this peace treaty cannot be fully accepted, but its basic elements can be traced through the Arabic sources, even though they were written a few centuries later. Butler not only accepted the unity of the Copts and Melkites but he even dismissed the theory, repeated until later times, that the Copts – in contrast to the Melkites- welcomed the Arabs. As Moorhead and Skreslet II maintain, there are no grounds for asserting that the Copts welcomed the Arabs (Moorhead, 1981:589-590; Skreslet II, 1987:78-79).

It should be noted that in the same treaty there is a reference to the community of Nubians who inhabited Egypt at this period. (Butler, 1913, Ar. text, 33; English trans., 34). Apparently, the Nubians had the same obligations and privileges as the Egyptians as long as they continued living in Egypt. The explicit reference to the Nubians reveals that they were a large active community accepted as a separate group in contrast to the local inhabitants, the Copts and Melkites, reported above as one entity (Hendrickx, 2012; Christides, forthcoming b).

Egypt during the first years of the Arab dominance. The return of the Copt patriarch Benjamin (ca. 644). The equal treatment of Copts and Melkites as *dhimmi*s (protected, religious, monotheistic minority groups under the early Muslim rule of Egypt)

The Arab conquest of Egypt marks a turning point in the reestablishment of the Coptic Church and its relationship with the Melkites. This dramatic change is often associated in the Christian Monophysite sources with the return of the exiled Copt patriarch Benjamin, who is wrongly mentioned by them as delivering Egypt to the Arabs. Thus, the Christian author writing in Syriac, Dionysius of Tel Mahrē, reports that Patriarch Benjamin sought 'Amr and promised to deliver the whole of Egypt over to the Arabs on condition that all the churches occupied by the Melkites be transferred to the jurisdiction of the Monophysites (Palmer, trans., 1993:159). But this is patently untrue since Benjamin didn't actually return from exile until a few years after the Arab conquest of Egypt (ca.643-644) (Butler, 1902, ed. Fraser 1978: 441, note 1; Müller, 1991:376). In addition, in the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* it is reported that Benjamin was brought to the Arab general 'Amr bn. al-'Āṣ by Sanutius (Shenuti), one of the first Egyptian collaborators with the Arabs, only a few years after the Arab conquest of Egypt (Evetts, 1907:496).

Butler, who dismissed the theory that the Copts welcomed the Arabs as deliverers (Butler, 1902, ed. Fraser, 1978:298), nevertheless expressed the view that the Arabs' attitude towards the Copts changed after the Byzantine expedition to reconquer Egypt in ca 645. This view was based on a fictitious legend passed on by Balādhuri (Butler, 1902, 1978:478). Balādhuri, who was usually a reliable author, occasionally sacrifices historical reality for a fascinating legend. Here he reports that 'Amr was approached by Patriarch Benjamin who requested and managed to obtain special treatment of the Copts by the Arabs because, in contrast to the Melkites, they did not participate in the Byzantines' attempt to reconquer Egypt in ca 645. Actually, there is no evidence that 'Amr received such a request or that he granted a measure in favor of the Copts. During 'Amr's rule and the early Arab conquest of Egypt, a policy of equal treatment of both communities, Melkite and Coptic, was applied. Both were transformed into minority groups under Islamic rule (Griffith, 2008). Indeed, the patriarchs of the Coptic and Melkite Churches remained the spiritual leaders of their communities which continued to apply their traditional judicial system with few exceptions (Fattal, 1958:78).



Both Copts and Melkites belonged, as Christians, to the *dhimmis*, a term applied to the protected, religious, monotheistic groups who resided in *dār al-Islām* (area of Islam) and accepted Muslim rule (for the legal status of the *dhimmis*, see Emon, 2012). Numerous studies have been dedicated to the theoretical duties and rights of the *dhimmis* and their controversial practical application. Any discussion on this topic lies beyond the scope of the present study. It is sufficient to mention here the pioneering work by Fattal (1958). It is noteworthy that Fattal (1958:78) reporting on the autonomy in the Coptic and Melkite jurisprudence, points out the rare use of the Islamic law by the *dhimmis*: “*Si l’un de vous ou tout autre Infidèle s’adresse à nous pour demander justice, nous vous jugeons d’après la loi musulmane. Mais si nous ne sommes pas saisis, nous n’intervenons pas entre vous.*”

Gottheil’s article (1908) is one of the most analytical studies on *dhimmis*, based on the exhaustive use of a large number of Arabic sources, but their proper interpretation is sorely missing and we cannot accept his view that a great number of persecutions which the *dhimmis* suffered through the centuries were caused by their arrogant bearing and “the fanatical outburst of the populace” (Gottheil, 1908:367-368). An extensive investigation and an attempt to interpret the destructive Islamic attacks against the *dhimmis*, especially by Caliph Ḥākim (386/996 – 411/1021), was undertaken by S. A. Assaad (1974:40-44). Recently well balanced discussions on the concept of *dhimmis* from its origin to modern times have been successfully undertaken by H. Teule (2015).

It is unnecessary to discuss here the *dhimmis*’ rights and obligations as they had been practiced through centuries, imposing dress codes and building restrictions. Khadduri (1955:197-198) reports that the *dhimmis*’ obligations were divided into twelve duties and disabilities according to the most reliable jurist – theologians; six absolutely necessary, starting with the payment of *jizya* (tax obligation), and six desirable, of which the most impressive was the requirement of clothing called *ghiyār*, a special garment which was imposed by the time of Umar II (717-720) (Yarbrough, 2014). In any case, in the beginning of the Islamic civil administration of Egypt there were no such restrictive measures forced on the *dhimmis*. The newly established Islamic government desperately needed the experienced Egyptian bureaucrats, a number of whom had already been recruited from the time of ‘Amr bn. al-Āṣ, as John, Bishop of Nikiou reports (trans. Charles, 1916:200). There is no evidence that the Arabs preferred to appoint Melkite administrators, contrary to what was incorrectly asserted by Skreslet II (1987:81-82).

In their early administration of Egypt, the Arabs faithfully observed the conditions which were stipulated in the final peace treaty between conquerors and conquered (Hill, 1971:179). Two articles of this treaty preserved by Ṭabari and John of Nikiou are of particular interest. Ṭabari mentions that the Arabs granted “the security of [the conquered] people, their religion ... and their churches and their crosses... and [promised to avoid] any encroachment of their [religious] rights.” (Ṭabari’s text in Butler, 1913, Arabic text, 32, trans.:33). Similarly, John of Nikiou reports that “[the conquerors] were to desist from seizing Christian churches... and to intermeddle with any concerns of the Christians” (trans. Charles, 1916:194). In contrast, the Byzantines, whose authorities signed the peace treaty in the name of the Egyptian people, violated one of the most important terms, i.e. not to invade Egypt. They undertook an unsuccessful expedition to reconquer Egypt in ca 645 with the assistance of part of the Egyptians who belonged to both parties, the Copts and Melkites (Christides, 2012: 387-390).



The impartiality of the Arabs at this early period towards the religious dispute between the Copts and the Melkites is clearly demonstrated in their attitude towards their patriarchs. 'Amr bn. al-Aṣ cordially received the Copt patriarch Benjamin a few years after the completion of the conquest of Egypt, as explicitly mentioned in the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, and he recognized him as the sole leader of the Monophysite Church and community (Evetts, 1907:496), but not as "the sole representative of the Egyptian people", as wrongly suggested by Müller (1991:376). Simultaneously, the Arabs did not ignore the leadership of Patriarch Peter III (ca. 642-651) as the leader of the Melkite Church although he had left Alexandria and spent the rest of his tenure in Constantinople (Papadopoulos, 1985:503). Thus, the Arabs accepted the reestablishment and the restoration of the Coptic Church without any interference in the perennial dispute between Copts and Melkites.

The theory, often repeated by a number of modern authors (Papadopoulos, 1985: 471; Müller, 1991:376; Iakovides, 2008:152) that the Muslim Arabs were in favor of the Copts who were treated better than the Melkites, cannot be sustained. The overarching Arab preoccupation at this period was to secure peace and stability by faithfully observing the stipulated conditions of the peace treaty. During their early dominance of Egypt, they treated the Coptic Church under Benjamin and the Melkite ecclesiastical leadership equally. For the Arab conquerors both parties belonged to the *dhimmi*s. When later the formulation of the dress code and a number of restricted measures were imposed on the *dhimmi*s (Griffith, 2008:14-20), there was no differentiation between Copts and Melkites (Assaad, 1974:106).

It is true that, following the Arab conquest, there was a rapid reorganization of the Coptic Church while the Melkite Church was continuously crumbling, but this was caused by other circumstances rather than any Arab preferential treatment. Benjamin I's energetic leadership was instrumental in strengthening the Coptic Church at this period. Benjamin I came from a family of very wealthy landlords but early on he left his parents and spent many years in monastic life (Evetts, 1907:487). He was thoroughly familiar with biblical studies and had acquired great experience "assisting the Copt patriarch Andronicus, whom he succeeded, in ecclesiastic works and general administration" (Evetts, 1907:489). After his reinstatement, he spent many years reviving the Coptic Church which was reorganized, ignoring the Melkite Church (Müller, 1959).

Coptic and Melkite Churches in Egypt: the Copt patriarch Khā'īl I (or Michael) (747-767) vs. the Melkite patriarch Cosmas I (ca. 727-768) and the end of the futile attempts for reconciliation

Under Islamic rule, the two Christian Churches of Egypt continued their perennial rivalries. The most conspicuous action by the Copts was the acquisition of a large number of Melkite churches (Papadopoulos, 1985:486-491). This was often considered the result of the Arab conquerors' interference in favor of the Copts. Pargoire even considers the acquisition of the church called Caesarion as a gift from the Arabs to the Copts because of their gratitude for their cooperation in the conquest of Alexandria (Pargoire, 1905:152-153; quoted by Skreslet II, 1987:78). Skreslet's view that the attainment of the Melkite churches by the Copts was more a result of circumstances than of malice is more persuasive (Skreslet II, 1987:122).

Most probably some of the Melkite churches were abandoned because of the flight of part of the population of Alexandria. While a number of modern historians have dealt



with the Arab invasion of Egypt, not enough attention has been paid to the departure of the defeated Byzantine army from Egypt and the flight of part of the population of Alexandria (Butler, 1902, ed. Fraser, 1978:366-367). According the Arab-Byzantine peace treaty of surrender, anybody who desired to leave the city of Alexandria could do so, while those who wished to remain had the right to stay provided they paid their taxes (Balādhuri, 1987:310). John Bishop of Nikiou also reports that the soldiers of the Byzantine army could take with them their precious belongings (Hill, 1971:40), which could obviously be applied to all the inhabitants of Alexandria, too. How many of the inhabitants of Alexandria took advantage of this favorable condition is not known. Maqrīzi reports that thirty thousand Byzantine soldiers left in one hundred ships and six hundred thousand inhabitants remained, but none of these exaggerated numbers can be verified (Maqrīzi, H 1270/1853, vol. I:309).

The extreme paucity of the sources does not allow us to understand the sequence of the interchanges of the churches from Coptic to Melkite and vice versa. According to the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, all the churches of Egypt forcibly changed from Coptic to Melkite, save for two, at the time of the patriarch Cyrus (631-641) (Evetts, 1907:491-492), while Eutychius of Alexandria reports that by the time of Caliph Hisham's early ruling (ca 724 AD), "the Monophysite Copts had seized all the churches in Alexandria save that of Mār Sabā" (Eutychius, 2001, 1122; Cheikho, 1909:45). Most probably, the flight of a large number of Melkites from Alexandria to the Byzantine Empire, following the Byzantines' treaty of surrender in H 20/641 CE (Hill, 1971, 46), must have caused a great reduction in the Melkite community leaving a number of churches deserted which were then easily acquired by the Copts. On the other hand, the Melkites managed to regain a number of their churches by requesting them from the Arab authorities, which usually required concrete proof of their ownership.

Of particular importance is the case of "the great church of Caesarion", as it is called by John Bishop of Nikiou (trans. Charles, 1916:192). It was originally an ancient pagan temple, constructed by Queen Cleopatra in honor of Augustus, which was changed by the emperor Constantine into a Christian church in honor of St. Michael but it kept its name "Caesarion". Two Egyptian obelisks, made of monolithic granite, which were placed in front of this church, marked the exact location of the church near the main harbor (Empereur, 2016). While little is known about the delivery of the famous church of Caesarion to the Copts, we do know that it was retaken by the Melkites after a determined intervention by the Melkite patriarch Cosmas. It was during Cosmas's time at the patriarchate of Alexandria that the constant struggle of Copts and Melkites reached its peak, each side demanding retention of the churches that originally belonged to them.

Unfortunately, the detailed sequence of the struggle for the properties of the churches that ended after many centuries has not yet been studied adequately. Frenkel reports that in the 12th century there were only two Melkite churches in Alexandria, the church of St. Nicholas and the church of St. Mary, while five Coptic churches were still functioning (Frenkel, 2014:30). Maqrīzi, writing in the 15th century, mentions a large number of churches spread all over Egypt, some of them in ruins, of which only one belonged to the Melkites (Leroy, 1907:279).

The Enthronement of Cosmas I as patriarch of Alexandria

Patriarch Cosmas I's leadership of the patriarchate of Alexandria ended a long period of decadence in the Melkite Church and contributed to its rapid recovery from the



ashes it had been dragged into by the Melkite patriarch Cyrus. The patriarchate of Peter III (642-651) marks the end of the general predominance of the Melkites, who from a prominent, privileged monopoly, were reduced to the status of minority (*dhimmis*). The Melkites' recovery from decadence was achieved by Patriarch Cosmas, whose activities are mainly recorded in the following Christian sources written in Arabic: *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*; the work *Annales* of the chronographer Sa'īd bn. al-Baṭrīq, also known as Eutychius of Alexandria; and supplementary information in the work *Kitāb al-mawā'iz w- al- i'tibār fi dhikr al- khīṭaṭ w- al-āthār* by the 15th century Arab author Maqrīzi.

The *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* was wrongly attributed to Severus (Sawīrus) bn.al-Muqaffa'. Trombley considers him as one of the several compilers (Trombley, 2004, 199), while Den Heijer (1989:1991) has shown that the final version of the *History of the Patriarchs*, which is based on Coptic sources written between the 5th and 11th centuries, was composed by Mawhūb bn. Mansūr bn. Mufarrij. Mawhūb put in order the scattered notes of Severus (Sawīrus) bn. al- Muqaffa', and translated the Coptic sources into Arabic. In general, although we discern in the *History of the Patriarchs* an obvious bias against the Melkites, it is undoubtedly our most valuable source (Blankinship, 1994:267).

Eutychius of Alexandria (ca 877-940) was a Melkite physician and historian. Born in the capital of Egypt, Fustaṭ, he practiced medicine before he was elected Melkite patriarch of Alexandria in 933. There he became acquainted with a large number of interwoven Christian and Muslim historical sources, reflecting diverse historical traditions (Vasiliev, 1950:24; Atiyah, 1991:1266; Griffith, 1998, rev. 2012:78). Eutychius wrote many medical treatises, but his best work is his *Annales*, a universal chronicle written in Arabic, which starts from the creation of the world and continues until the time when he became patriarch of Alexandria (933-940) (Papadopoulos, 1985:909). In this work, he heavily relied on a great number of sources which he used mainly verbatim with only short additional comments, sacrificing interpretation for simple reproduction (Michaelidis, 1934; Simonsohn, 2011:39), although his attitude towards the Monophysites and Melkites was ambivalent (Cameron, 1988: 234). The *Annales* was first edited with a Latin translation by E. Pococke (1658-59); the Latin translation was reproduced by J. P. Migne (1857-66) and the Arabic text by Cheikho (1909).

Simonsohn (2011) expressed the view that the *Annales* has been preserved in two versions, the Alexandrian Recension, which was based on *Sinaiticus Arabicus* 582 and is actually the earliest and most reliable one, and the Antiochian Recension which is an artificially augmented version with later additions (Simonsohn, 2011:38; for an edition of the *Annales* with a German translation see Breydy, 1985). While Simonsohn's theory is rather persuasive, we should not dismiss the possibility that certain of the additional elements of the Antiochian composition were inserted from some other now lost, reliable sources.

The appearance of Cosmas, the patriarch of Alexandria, as "*deus ex machina*" revived the Melkite Church and placed it on equal footing with the Coptic Church under the Islamic rule of Egypt. His undisputable effort to reunite the two churches is clearly demonstrated in the sources, as will be seen further in this article, and marks the last effort of their reconciliation (Labib, 1991:1411). Unfortunately, we know little about Cosmas' personality and his activities, part of which are interwoven with those of Khā'īl I, the patriarch of the Coptic Church of Egypt. The author of the *History of the Patriarchs* describes Khā'īl as a presbyter in the Monastery of St. Macarius and a "pure



virgin, brought up in the desert” (Evetts, 1910, vol. V, 111). He vividly illustrates the great respect he enjoyed among the Copts who “conducted him to the governor’s palace with the clergy... acclaiming him and chanting before him, till they reached the palace” (Evetts, 1910:113).

In contrast, only meager information is provided in the sources about the elusive personality of Cosmas I. According to Eutychius, Cosmas became the patriarch of Alexandria in ca 731, the seventh year of the rule of Caliph Hisham (724-743) (Eutychius, 2001:1122; Cheikho, 1909:45). Nevertheless, Maqrīzi reports the third year of Hisham’s rule, i.e. 727 (Maqrīzi, H 1270/1853, vol. III:537), which seems to be the most probable according to Papadopoulos (1985:506, n. 4). Eutychius adds that Cosmas was completely illiterate and that before his election he was a needle-maker (*‘aml al-‘ibr*) (Cheikho, 1909:45). The illiteracy of Cosmas should not surprise us as it was not a unique case. There was a fifth-century bishop from Palestine called Theodore, who was illiterate (ἀγράμματος), and Aitherius, the archdeacon, was authorized to sign in the synods instead of him (Papadopoulos, 1985:343, n. 1). The author of the *History of the Patriarchs* also reports that Cosmas was a “needle maker in the market place” (Evetts, 1910:105), but simultaneously, in another passage, he mentions that Cosmas, who was also called Theophylactus, was a “goldsmith who wrought in gold for the prince’s household” (Evetts, 1910:118), and thus he managed to acquire the support of the governor of Egypt who assisted him to ascend to the throne of the patriarch of the Chalcedonians (Evetts, 1910:118). It seems that this information is rather plausible in spite of the arbitrary use of the second name Theophylactus attached to that of Cosmas.

In any case, it is evident that one of the most important articles of the Arab-Byzantine peace treaty, i.e. the prohibition of the Arabs from interfering in the Christians’ affairs (Hill, 1971:41), was no longer valid. Both the enthronement of the patriarch of the Copts, Khā’īl, as well as of Cosmas, had to be ratified by the Arab authorities, in particular by the governor of Egypt. Details are now known, but certain vague information is revealed in the *History of the Patriarchs*, which reports that the governor of Egypt Qāsīm rejected a candidate chosen by the Monophysites to become patriarch of the Coptic Church of Alexandria, and requested a new election in which Khā’īl was finally elected (Evetts, 1910:104).

Additional information about the energetic patriarch Cosmas is reported by the 15th century Arab author Maqrīzi who, based on an unknown earlier source now lost, reports that Leo III (717-741) sent Cosmas to Damascus to meet Caliph Hishām in order to acknowledge his election as the Melkite patriarch of Alexandria on the one hand, and on the other to request the return of the churches occupied by the Copts (Maqrīzi, H1270/1853, vol. III:537). Eutychius also mentions that Cosmas went to Damascus where, after meeting with Caliph Hishām, he managed, through the mediation of the Caliph with the governor of Egypt, to secure the return of the famous church Caesarion to the Melkites (Eutychius, 2001:1122; Cheikho, 1909:45).

It should be repeated that the Arab authorities, in the period of their early dominance, applied an even-handed policy in both communities without any favoritism towards the Copts. There was not any preferential treatment of the Copts based on ideological or religious affinity. Of course, personal relations between the Arab rulers and some of the local leaders, whether Copts or Melkites, enabled them to secure occasional special treatment. Such a typical case appears in the above-mentioned activities of Cosmas who, based on his personal direct contacts, managed to acquire the church of Caesarion. Nevertheless, the Arab authorities usually required unambiguous proof



concerning the origin of a church before accepting its transfer. A typical example appears in the disputed ownership of the rich church of St. Menas in Mareotis, a church famous for its miracles (Papadopoulos, 1985:490-491; Kiss, 1975). Both Churches avidly desired to acquire ownership and did not hesitate to ask for the mediation of a Muslim judge (*qādi*) to investigate their dispute. According to the Islamic rules, the *dhimmis* had the right to solve their internal conflicts within the framework of their own jurisprudence and only voluntarily could they submit to the mediation of a Muslim judge (Fattal, 1958:78). It is indeed strange that at this early period, during which Muslim judges were still rarely used, that the two Christian denominations resorted to them (Tillier, 2013:29-31). As vividly described by the author of the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church*, the Muslim judge decided in favor of the Copts after an intensive inquiry into the claims of the representatives of both parties (Evetts, 1910:126).

Cosmas' continuous efforts to regain as many of the lost churches as possible did not hinder his great desire to restore the relations between the two rival churches of Egypt. The *History of the Patriarchs*, although usually hostile towards the Melkites, acknowledged his efforts by quoting him as saying, "I [Cosmas] desire, if unity be established, that my church and your church should be one at Alexandria. And when your father, the patriarch, is present on the days of liturgies, I should be with him; and when he had finished the prayers, each of us should go forth to his own place; and none should hinder me from visiting any of the churches; and so likewise with regard to him" (Evetts, 1910:128).

Cosmas' efforts were doomed to failure because of the negative reaction of the Coptic Church which had been sorely humiliated by the harsh treatment it suffered at the hands of the Byzantine supporters of the Melkite Church during the days of the patriarch Cyrus. A temporary alliance between Khā'il and Cosmas lasted for a short while when both were imprisoned in 749 by Caliph Marwān II (744-750), the last of the Umayyads (Kennedy, 1998:75-76), accused of being part of a conspiracy against him. The *History of the Patriarchs* describes them both being punished and chained together (Evetts, 1910:161). Cosmas' reign (ca 727-768) marks the revival of the Melkite Church in Egypt, seals the end of the interferences of the Byzantine emperors in the enthronement of the patriarchs of Alexandria and witnesses the final breach between the Copts and the Melkites. These two rival churches of Egypt continued living apart albeit next to each other, rigidly separated under the Islamic dominion.

Conclusion

The key information we can glean from the sources is that the two Christian groups in Egypt, the Monophysite Copts and the Chalcedonian Melkites, continued their intensive rivalry for a long period after the Arab conquest in ca 645 until the time of the rule of the Melkite patriarch of Alexandria, Cosmas. His enthronement marks the end of Monothelism, the compromised religion form applied forcibly on Egypt by the patriarch of Alexandria Cyrus, which, instead of reconciling the antagonism of the two rival churches, aggravated and escalated their animosity. Cosmas' rejection of Monothelism is reported by Theophanes (1883, repr. 1980:416, line 13-15): ὠρθοδόξησε ὁ πατριάρχης Ἀλεξανδρείας, Κοσμάς, σὺν τῇ πόλει αὐτοῦ, ἐκ τῆς τῶν Μονοθελητῶν κακοδοξίας. Cosmas' enthronement also witnesses the final attempt of reconciliation of the two Churches, which were transformed into *dhimmis*, protected religious monotheistic communities residing in Islamic land. The interference of Constantinople in the election of the patriarchs of Alexandria ceased, although the relations between the Church of Alexandria and the Church of Constantinople were not interrupted (Wilfong, 1998:194, 198).



It should be noted that for Cosmas dogmatic differences were the sole cause for the disunion of the two Churches. His obsessive insistence on the reunion of the Coptic and Melkite Church, based solely on religious grounds, drew the scorn of the Copts (Evetts, 1910:129-130). No doubt, while neither the motive of race nor any socio-political cause is obvious in the sources, the gradually emerging special identity of the Copts had already drawn a line of inevitable separation between Copts and Melkites. Actually, Cosmas' reign marked the turning point in the turbulent relations between Copts and Melkites. Granted, an ethnic Coptic identity already rooted in ca. the fifth century CE had developed; nevertheless, the research of this topic lies beyond the scope of the present study (Papaconstantinou, 2009; Parker, 2013; and especially the detailed pioneering study by Wipszycka, 1992). Further research is needed to trace the roots of a Coptic identity and the actual causes of the intense animosity between the two rival religious communities in Egypt (Christides, Searching for a Coptic Identity during the late Byzantine rule in Egypt, the time of the Arab conquest of Egypt and the early Arab dominion, lecture to be presented at the 3rd International Conference "Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in Egypt: 1st -- 12th Centuries", Cairo 2nd-4th May 2017).

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