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Christianity in Egypt

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Christianity in Egypt
The Coptic Church
Youhanna Nessim Youssef

The word “Copt” originated from the Greek word “Aigyptius,” “Egyptian” which is the name of the sanctuary near Memphis “Het-Ka-Ptah,” “The dwelling of the ‘Ghost’(ka) of Ptah” and was disfigured by the Arabs to “Copt.” Nowadays, for a visitor to the Middle East, the word “Coptic” may signify a lot of meanings – like Christian Egyptians, mostly Orthodox – but there is a minority of Catholics and Protestants, or Christian Nubians from the seventh to eleventh centuries or Ethiopians living in Abyssinia.

This word is used

1 To designate a people
   a Exclusively, the population of Egypt (nearly 100% Christian before the Arab conquest –641 AD).
   b The Christian Egyptian today a minority – from the Arab Conquest till today.

2 To designate an activity (professions, language, creed, art, etc.)
   a In a narrow meaning, the activities of this population and then the Christians minority in Egypt.
   b In a wider meaning, the activities of the pagan compatriots which are common such as language, art, craft, etc.
   c In the largest meaning, the religious activities of this population or this minority hence the dogma, ecclesiastic hierarchy and liturgy of Ethiopian Christians.

3 To designate a historical period
   a In a narrow sense, Christian.
   b In a wider sense, pagan and Christian from the third to seventh centuries.
The language is common between pagans and Christians from the third to seventh century and became the usage of the Christian minority after the Arab Conquest. The same could be applied for art and other activities.

The beginnings of Christianity in Egypt

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Christ and the Holy Family came to Egypt fleeing from Herod (Matthew 2:15). It is the only country where Christ lived other than Palestine. The Pentecost account in the Book of Acts mentions among the devout Jews in Jerusalem in attendance at Peter’s sermon persons from “Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene” (Acts 2:10). The disputants in the controversy with the “Hellenist” protomartyr Stephen included Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria (Acts 6:9). A hint of the existence of a Christian community in Egypt in the middle of the first century of our era is provided by the story of Apollos, one of Paul’s co-workers in Ephesus and Corinth (Acts 18:24).

According to tradition, the Egyptian church was founded by Saint Mark the Evangelist. A fragmentary letter of Clement of Alexandria (second century) mentioned that Mark wrote his Gospel during Peter’s sojourn in Rome, and after Peter’s martyrdom he came to Alexandria. Eusebius, in his Church History, stated that it is said that this Mark was first to be sent to preach in Egypt. By the end of the second century, extant documentary papyri testify to the presence of Christians in Egypt – some of these fragments were found in Middle Egypt, which reflects the expansion of Christianity along the river valley.

The Church in Egypt before Constantine

During the second and third centuries the history of the Coptic/Egyptian church is characterised by the School of Alexandria, the martyrs and Gnosticism.

Alexandria by the second century was a vital economic and commercial centre located as it was at the junction of the great maritime and land route connecting Europe to Africa and Asia. It also had a cultural role and was known as a seat of learning, which cannot be exaggerated. It was ranked as the second most important city in the Empire after the capital, Rome. Among the great fathers of this school we can mention Clement of Alexandria who was born of pagan parents around 150 AD at Athenes; he became Christian and settled at Alexandria as a disciple of Pantaenus. In the persecution of 202 AD he was forced to flee to Palestine, and in 211 AD he was still there, assisting in the work of the church of Jerusalem. His three main works were the *Protrepticos*
Origen (185–255 AD) was one of the greatest Christians who ever lived, and certainly among the greatest of Egyptian Christians. He was born of Christian parents at Alexandria and probably died at Tyre. In 202 his father, Leonidas, was martyred in the persecution under Emperor Septimius Severus. In the year 231 AD he found himself in conflict with Demetrius I (189–231), the bishop of Alexandria. In 249 AD he is said to have been imprisoned and tortured as a confessor during the persecution of Emperor Decius. He probably moved to Tyre about two years before his death. Though Origen started writing late in his life, his output was enormous. Much of it survives in the original Greek, and even more in Latin translations made during the two centuries after his death, some by Rufinus and Jerome. Origen is decidedly the most prolific author of all time. He was condemned by Justinian in 543 AD as a heretic, as confirmed by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 AD.

Thirteen ancient papyrus containing Gnosticism codices translated from Greek into Coptic were accidentally discovered in December 1945 by farmers in Upper Egypt near Nag-Hammadi. The Nag Hammadi codices contain fifty-one texts. Some of these are copies or variant versions of other texts in the collection, so that there are actually only forty-five distinct works, thirty-six of which were previously unknown in any form.

The codices include several works: Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles; Allogenes; Apocalypse of Adam; Apocalypse of James, First; Apocalypse of James, Second; Apocalypse of Paul; Apocryphon of Peter; Apocryphon of James; Apocryphon of John; Asclepius 21–29; Authentikos Logos; Book of Thomas the Contender; Concept of Our Great Power; Dialogue of the Savior; Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth; Eugnostos the Blessed and Sophia of Jesus Christ; Exegesis on the Soul; Gospel of Philip; Gospel of the Egyptians; Gospel of Thomas; Gospel of Truth; Hypostasis of the Archons; Hypsiphrone; Interpretation of Knowledge; Letter of Philip; Melchizedek; On the Origin of the World; Paraphrase of Shem; Plato’s Republic; Prayer of Thanksgiving; Prayer of the Apostle Paul; Second Treatise of the Great Seth; Sentences of Sextus; Teachings of Silvanus; Three Steles of Seth; Thunder; Perfect Mind; Treatise on the Resurrection; Trimorphic Protennoia; Tripartite Tractate; Valentinian Exposition; Zostrianus.

Among the heresies that were spread in Egypt, in the third century, Manichaeism played a prominent role. In the Roman Empire it suffered severe persecution soon after its emergence and, indeed, was regarded as a concentration of all heresies. Reflecting the number of cultures and peoples among whom it was proclaimed, the tradition has come down to us in many languages: Latin, Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, Uigur, Tocharian, and Chinese. Mani (Manichaios, from Mani hajja, the living Mani) came from the Babylonian part of the Iranian empire. He was born on 14 April 216 AD. His father, Pattek,
had become a member of the Jewish-Christian Gnostic sect of the Elkasites. Mani received two revelations, the first at the age of twelve and the second at twenty-four. When the Sassanid Ardashir I overthrew the Arsacids in Iran, Mani went to India. He returned under King Shapur I and won his favor, since the king wished to restore the Achaemenian Empire and saw in Mani’s syncretistic religion a common religion that could bind to his empire the regions of the eastern Mediterranean that he wanted to wrest from Rome. Mani prospered under Shapur’s successor Hormizd I (273–274 AD); but when Bahram I (274–276/277 AD) came to the throne in 274 AD, Mani was thrown into prison at the instigation of the Magi, and died after twenty-six days in custody. The year of his death is disputed (276/277 AD). The period of his imprisonment gave him opportunity to prepare his disciples for their task after his death. The dualism of good and evil, light and darkness, is original to Mani. Many of his writings were found in Egypt, especially in Madinat Madi in Fayyum and Kellis in the Dakhelaha Oasis.

The vitality and the rapid spread of Christianity in the third century can be measured by the violent persecutions. Septimus Severus launched a great persecution where Leonides, Origen’s father, suffered martyrdom. Decius (249–251 AD) and Valerian (253–260 AD) were among the main persecutors of the Christian Egyptians. However, the greatest persecution was the work of Diocletian and his successors Maximus Daia and Galerius. Copts found that the year of his reign could commemorate the beginning of the Church calendar as the Copts venerate the martyrs. Few martyrs before the Diocletian era are included in the Coptic Calendar, most of them are foreigners such as Ignatius of Antioch under Trajan, Saint Mercurius, and the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus under Decius. There is a legend concerning the martyr Eudemon, who was from Erment in Upper-Egypt: an angel informed him of the presence of Lord Jesus, Joseph and the Virgin Mary in Ashmunau, fleeing Herod. He went to their place and worshipped Christ. After his return to his village, he refused to worship the pagan gods and suffered the martyrdom. The tradition of this martyrdom occurs only in the Synaxarium of Upper-Egypt.

The martyrs of the great persecution may be categorized as follows:

1. The martyrs of Egypt
   a. The clergy: This category is very important. Historically, we have the martyrdom of Phileas bishop of Thmui. The Coptic calendar includes also several bishops such as: Sarapamon, Bishop of Nikiou (28 Hatur), Pisouria, Bishop of Masil, Macrobius of Nikiou, Psate, Bishop of Psoi, Gallinicus, Ammonius.
   b. The nobles.
2 The martyrs of Antioch (the Basilides Family). This group of martyrs is considered as members of a legendary family of Basilides, king or noble. There are several genealogies included in their martyrdoms but without any consistency. This cycle includes the martyrdoms of Claudius, Basilides, Apater and Iraaie, Macarius, Eusebius, sometimes Theodore, Victor, Besamon, Apoli, and Justus.

3 The cycle of Julius of Akfahs. This cycle is attributed to a legendary person called Julius of Akfahs. In fact, the study of this corpus shows that these martyrdoms were written from the sixth to seventh century to the eleventh century. The study of the events, administrative titles, geography, and persons demonstrates that we can subdivide this corpus into homogenous groups. The first group is the martyrs related to Middle Egypt, such as Epima, Shenoufe, Heraclides, Didymus, Pansnew, Chamoul. It shows that the compiler knew the geography of this district very well; they have a common beginning and end, but there is an evolution towards the presentation of Julius of Akfahs. The second group is Ari and Anoub, written in Lower Egypt. Julius is presented in a few lines and the author did not give any useful data for the geography of administrative titles. The third group is Paese and Thecla. It has a different style. It is the story of a brother and a sister, and it seems that the text we have is a compilation of at least two narrations. Macarius of Antioch and Nahrawa are the fourth group. It is characterized by exaggeration, hence the judge is the emperor himself, and the events are in Antioch (the capital). The martyrdom of John and Simon is from the eleventh century and ascribed to Julius of Akfahs. There are also several texts in Arabic attributed to Julius of Akfahs but it is hard to determine their authorship. We can mention Apa Mirhch, Apa Ischyriion and Kastor.

4 The foreign martyrs
   a The Post Diocletian martyrs, Alladius (3 Baunah).
   b The non-Roman martyrs, St George, James Intercicus, Helias.
   c The martyrs of the heresies (against Arianism, Chalcedonianism).
   d The new martyrs (or martyrs during the post-Arab conquest). These include John of Phanidjoit, Salib (3 Kihak), George al-Mozahim (19 Baunah). The text of their martyrdom is more or less realistic – we do not find outstanding miracles, atrocious tortures or heroic answers. The general schema of these martyrdoms is either the saint was accused to renounce to the Islamic faith (some of them adopted the Islamic religion for a while or were from Islamic origins – George al-Mozahim – or through proselytism). An outbreak of the mob or fanatical caprice of some rulers, searching for a scapegoat, caused the martyrdom of these saints. Geographical and historical data are, generally speaking, accurate.
   e The Confessors such as Agapetus (24 Amshir).
The Coptic Church in the fourth and fifth centuries

After the Edict of Milan issued by the Emperor Constantine in 313 AD and the end of paganism, the life of the Coptic Church in the fourth and fifth centuries may be characterized by two phenomena. The first is the theological debates after the arising of the Arian and Nestorian heresies and monasticism. We will mention briefly two of the great figures of the theological debates – Athanasius and Cyril. For monasticism, we will mention the founders of the three types of monasticism – the hermitic, Antony the Great; the semi hermitic, Macarius the Great; and the Conobist Pachomius.

The Arian heresy was derived from a priest in the church of Alexandria, Arius (270–336 AD). According to this heresy, Christ is the Son of God by adoption. The problems caused by Arius and other teachers led to a series of Councils. The first Ecumenical Council met at Nicaea. Among the heroes of this council was the future patriarch of Alexandria who played a great role in the debates. Athanasius was the twentieth patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (326–373 AD). Athanasius was born in Alexandria at the end of the third century. Athanasius became the secretary and closest companion of his predecessor, the patriarch Alexander I. He accompanied him to the Council of Nicaea. Athanasius had been exiled five times by the Arian emperors. He wrote several works – we can mention among them the Apology to Constantius, Apology for His Flight, Apology against the Arians, History of the Arians, Against the Gentiles, On the Incarnation, Orations and Discourses against the Arians, Exposition of the Psalms, and Life of Saint Antony.

Cyril was the twenty-fourth patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (412–444 AD). In his early life, it is reported that he spent several years in the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Scetis. He later became the secretary of his uncle the reigning patriarch Theophilus and was ordained a presbyter. He was an eloquent preacher and a great theologian. After his ordination as patriarch he proved himself as a good administrator and reformer and against the prefect Orestes. After the Nestorian crisis, Cyril played a great role. Nestorius was a patriarch in Constantinople who rejected the title of Theotokos. After Nestorius and Cyril exchanged letters, both parties came to the conclusion that an Ecumenical council was needed. Cyril played a great role allying with him Rome, the bishops of Ephesus and the key persons in the imperial court (such as Pulcheria). Like Athanasius, Cyril left behind him a tremendous number of theological studies and works of exegesis, homiletics, and apologetics. Among his writing we can mention his apology against Julian the Apostate as a document of historical interest. His numerous epistles are documents of the highest importance for the ecclesiastical historian. His twenty-nine paschal homilies defined the date of Easter. His extended liturgy, practiced in full mainly in monasteries, presumably reflects older texts ascribed to Saint Mark’s Anaphora. On the whole, Cyril’s theology was regarded by subsequent generations as the key to orthodoxy.
though some theologians tend to differ on its interpretation. He wrote also Commentaries on the Old Testament, Commentary on Isaiah, Commentary on the Minor Prophets, and Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew. Following the Nestorian crisis, Cyril composed many works such as the Twelve Anathemas against Nestorius, The History of the Blasphemy of Nestorius, and Apology to the Emperor. He wrote Paschal Letters in addition to many sermons.

The monastic movement was distinguished by its group of dedicated Christians who devoted their lives to prayer. Antony is considered the founder of Christian monasticism. He was born in Coma, a village some 75 km south of Cairo. His Life, written by the patriarch Athanasius, mentioned that Antony was an Egyptian by birth whose parents possessed much property and were Christians. When Antony was about eighteen to twenty years old his parents died, leaving him to look after a younger sister. One day after the death of his parents, Antony left the house in order to go to church. On his way there, he reflected on the manner in which the Apostles had renounced everything and followed the Saviour. In church, Antony listened as the Gospel was read; it was “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and come follow me” (Matthew 19:21). Antony took this as a sign and immediately gave away the land that he had inherited from his parents and kept a little for his sister. On his next visit to church, Antony heard the Gospel “Do not be anxious about tomorrow” (Matthew 6:34); without hesitation he gave the rest of what he owned to the poor. As for his sister, he entrusted her to some faithful women. Antony then left his house and dedicated himself to an ascetic life, first just outside his village, and then he received instruction from an old man who had practiced asceticism since his youth. For nearly 20 years Antony lived as a solitary ascetic at Pispir. He settled later at the foot of Mount Clysma. Antony is reputed to have died in 356 AD, aged 105.

Macarius the Great (300–390 AD) was the son of a village priest. He learned the Holy Scriptures. As a camel driver, he withdrew to the desert, having seen an angelic vision. He settled first in the vicinity of present-day al-Baramus. Then he moved to the place of the actual monastery which was named after him. Many were attracted by his conduct and became his disciples.

Pachomius was born around 292 AD near Esna in Upper-Egypt. His parents were pagans and Pachomius had no contact with Christians. When he was 20 years old he enlisted in the army and served there for several years during the reigns of Constantine and Licinius. During a short stay by his unit at Thebes, Pachomius was entertained hospitably by local Christians, and was so influenced by them that he sought an early discharge from the army. On his release from the army, Pachomius was baptized at the village of Chenoboskion, near Nag-Hammadi, and began the ascetic life under the guidance of Palaemon, a local hermit. Seven years later, Pachomius had a vision and left Palaemon, who is said to have died some years after. Pachomius founded a community at Tabennesi around 323 AD. In the Pachomian system, the monastery consisted of a group of buildings

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surrounded by an enclosure wall. Within this wall there was a kitchen, a
library and workshops. There was also a guesthouse; and house for the porters
who guarded the entrance to the monastery. Within a few years of the found-
ing of the original monastery at Tabennesi, it had become too small, and so a
second foundation was opened at Pboou. Pachomius died in 346 AD in the
plague.

Towards the schism

The second part of the fifth century, and up to the middle of the seventh
century, is marked by the schism which followed the Council of Chalcedon.
Among the great figures of this period we can mention Dioscorus of Alexandria
who was the patriarch, Shenuda of Atripe, and Severus of Antioch. Although
Severus was not a Copt, he played a great role in the life of the Eastern churches.
He was born in Sozopolis in Pisidia. He studied rhetoric and philosophy in
Alexandria and Beirut. At the age of thirty he received baptism in the church of
Saint Leontius in Tripoli. Soon after his baptism he became a monk in a monastery
near Gaza. There he met Peter the Iberian. Later he built his own monastery, but
the Chalcedonians took it from him. Severus was obliged to go to Constantinople
to defend his case. There he gained the friendship of the emperor Anastasius.
He wrote several important dogmatic works, among them the Philalethes (the
lover of truth). He paticipated in the council which condemned Macedonius,
Bishop of Constantinople, for his pro-Chalcedonian opinions. Later Severus was
ordained Bishop of Antioch in 512 AD where he delivered 125 homilies (which
survived only in Syriac translation and several Coptic fragments).

After the Chalcedonians, when Justin and his nephew Justinian took power
and became emperor, Severus fled from his see and went to Egypt where he
wrote several dogmatic books against the heresy of Julian of Halicarnasus. He
spent around twenty years in Egypt. He is commemorated in the Coptic church
three times and his name always follows Saint Mark, the founder of the church,
as he is considered as a second founder of the church.

Benjamin I became the thirty-eighth patriarch of the See of Saint Mark
(622–661 AD). He was born about 590 AD at Barshut, a village in the province
of Beheirah in the western Delta. Benjamin was undoubtedly one of the greatest
patriarchs of the Coptic Church. He lived through the tremendous upheavals of
the Persian invasion (619–629 AD) and the Arab Conquest in 641 AD. He was
able to steer the church through these turbulent and confused times to a fresh
beginning, side by side with the emerging power of Islam. Benjamin became a
monk in the Pachomian monastery of Canopus. His predecessor, Andronicus,
ordained him priest and retained him as a disciple in Alexandria. After Andronicus’
death, he succeeded him as patriarch of Alexandria. He managed to steer the
church out of the difficult period of the Persian invasion. After the withdrawal of
the Persians in 631 AD, Cyrus, or Kyros, the Chalcedonian Bishop of Phasis in the Caucasus, was appointed by Emperor Heraclius both as Melchite patriarch of Egypt and as prefect in command of the military forces of the Byzantine province. He persecuted Benjamin who fled into the desert until the Arab conquest in 641. ‘Amr issued a safe-conduct to Benjamin, who seems to have returned to the valley at a slow pace either at the end of 643 or the beginning of 644. Benjamin dedicated his time to the restoration of the Coptic Church. He consecrated a new church in the monastery of Saint Macarius and delivered several homilies but only one survived on the miracle of Cana.

The Copts under the Arabs, Egypt under the Ommayed and Abassid dynasties

The conquest, under ‘Amr ibn al-‘As, was the last of the rapid series of victories in the years AH 13–19/635–640 AD that had led the Arabs to overthrow the weakened Byzantine provinces of the Near East. During the period of the Orthodox caliphs and Umayyads, until the Fatimid conquest, Egypt remained on the margin of the Islamic world, and the story of its conquest is of relevance to the affairs of the rest of the Arab world. At the same time, the Chronicle of John, the Monophysite bishop of Nikiou (the important city of the western Delta), is of primary importance as a contemporary document independent of Arab traditions; it survives, however, only in an Ethiopic translation.

It is noteworthy that the Ommayad dynasty started in January 661 AD and ruled for ninety years (until July 750 AD) during which time the Coptic church had eight patriarchs.

In the eighth century, the church became the target of the Arab governors. A tax had been imposed on the monks and many churches and monasteries had been destroyed – among them we can mention the important site of Bawit (near Assiut), the monastery of Apa Jeremiah in Saqqarah, and the first monastic site of Kellia. By the order of the governor Abdallah ibn Abd Al-Malek, in 706 AD the Coptic language was prohibited in the administration. Our reference for this period is the History of the Patriarchs which focuses on the lives of the Patriarchs. Among them we can mention Chael the forty-sixth patriarch (743–767 AD) – during his time the Nile did not rise enough so the patriarch and the clergy went to the shore and prayed and the Nile rose through their prayers.

In the ninth century, during the patriarchate of Shenudah I (859–881 AD), the persecution was more severe – the governor increased the tax levied on the monks, churches, and monasteries. The patriarch sent two delegates to Baghdad who met the Caliph and submitted the case to him. The Caliph ordered the cancellation of these taxes but the situation returned during the Caliphate of al-Mu’taz.
The Copts under the Fatimids and Ayyubids

In the tenth century, the Fatimids came from the west (North Africa) and created a chi’ite caliphate in Egypt. Egypt became independent. The Fatimid rulers founded Cairo in 969 AD. Under their rule the Copts enjoyed a fair amount of religious freedom. At this time, the Copts restored their ruined churches, among them the church of al Moallaqh and the church of Saint Mercurius. For the first time, the Copts used the Arabic language to write their own books. Among the pioneers in this field we should mention Severus of Ashmunain who wrote several treatises in Arabic. The Copts also got highly ranked positions in the administration, among them the name of Cosma Ibn Mena should be mentioned. It is also important to mention the patriarch Abram Ibn Zara'ah who was first a Syrian trader (not a monk) and was elected as patriarch of the Coptic Church. During his patriarchate a great miracle took place. Al-Hakim (996–1021 AD) destroyed many churches and monasteries and persecuted the Christians, including women. The patriarch Zachariah suffered a lot of humiliation and torture at his hands and in the end was exiled to a monastery in Scetis. After nine years, al-Hakim restored all the properties he had confiscated previously to Christians and allowed the patriarch to return to his see. The role played by a monk called Poemen should be mentioned as it was he who gained the favor of the governor and interceded on behalf of his patriarch. This monk built a monastery outside Cairo, known as the monastery of Barsum al-Aryan.

Among the great personalities of the time we should also mention Pope Christodulos, who issued a series of Canons for his congregation and established the custom for several medieval patriarchs such as Gabriel II and Cyril III. He was the first pope of Alexandria to visit Ethiopia as a delegate from the Caliph al-Mustansir; he was also the first patriarch to have a residence in Cairo.

Among the laymen of the eleventh century, Mansur al-Tilbani has a very great contribution in the history of the Copts. He was a highly ranked officer and arrived to build a Coptic church in the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

The patriarch Gabriel II (1131–1146 AD) was a deacon before his consecration. According to the custom he went to celebrate his first liturgy in the monastery of Saint Macarius. But after adding to the last confession, the monks refused to accept it and a theological discussion between the two parties reached a compromise.

Among the most controversial persons of Coptic history, the name of Mark Ibn Qunbar should be mentioned. Although all our information comes from his opponents, we can mention that he became a monk (after being married) and he insisted on the necessity of the confession to a God father – this practice was not common at that time. He wrote several exegetical books where he used the allegorical interpretation, but the patriarchs excommunicated him. The Bishop of Damietta, Michael, known for his opposition to Ibn Qunbar, wrote also an important compendium of the Canons.
The Copts under the Mamluks

During the thirteenth century, the Coptic Church reached the summit of its activity. This is called the Golden Age of Coptic Arabic literature. However, by the second half of the thirteenth and the fourteenth century the Mamluks started a persecution. The patriarch Cyril III (1242–1235 AD), known as Ibn Laqlaq, was a great scholar but his accession to the throne of Saint Mark came to pass in peculiar circumstances after an interregnum of nineteen years, during which the patriarchal seat remained vacant. The intrigues of this man before acceding to the throne cost the Church a lot. He was obliged to sell the vacant episcopal seats in order to pay the highly ranked persons who helped him. The leaders of the Coptic community were opposed to this practice.

The al-‘Assal Family was a very distinguished family of scholars. Al-Safi Ibn al-‘Assal compiled the famous *Nomocanon* which served as the juridical code (both religious and civil) of the Coptic community until recent times. The Christian kingdom of Ethiopia adopted this book. Al-As’ad, his brother, was a great linguist. He compiled a Coptic grammar and a Coptic dictionary. He revised the Arabic translation of the Gospels according to the Greek, Coptic, and Syriac versions. The third brother, al-Mu’taman, composed a theological book in addition to several homilies.

Also in the thirteenth century, Barsum the naked, who was the son of the secretary of the Queen Shagahat al-Durr, withdrew from the world, and retired to a small cell in the church of Saint Mercurius. Even after the closure of the churches he persisted in prayer. He was arrested by the government but later released and he withdrew to the monastery of Shahran which became known after him.

Among other great personalities the name of Shams al-Riasah abu al-Barakat Ibn Kabar should be mentioned, a scholar born to a wealthy Coptic family toward the end of the thirteenth century. He became the secretary of a Mamluk called Rukn al-din Baybars and he aided his patron in writing a historical work. He wrote a Coptic dictionary which is considered one of the most comprehensive lexical records. The Sultan al-Ashraf Khalil (1290–1292 AD) issued a decree ordering the dismissal of all Coptic functionaries from public service unless they apostatized to Islam. Ibn Kabar retired from his high-ranking office and dedicated himself to the scholarly work. He wrote the most comprehensive Encyclopedia called “The Lamp of Darkness for the explanation of the Service.” Later he was ordained as priest to the church of al-Mu’allaqqh in Old Cairo and he died in 1324 AD. He wrote several homilies. Ibn Katib Qaysar was one of the greatest exegetes of the Coptic nation. Peter of Sadamant wrote a theological book on the passions of Christ.

The fourteenth century

This was a very sad century for the Copts. Many churches had been destroyed and their properties confiscated. The governors charged the Coptic community
with heavy taxes. The number of Christians decreased considerably. In addition to these bad circumstances, the Black Death caused the death of many people. The number of bishops, especially in Lower Egypt, decreased. The History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church is very brief starting from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth century. However the Biography of Matthew I is the exception (1378–1409 AD); his nickname was Matthew the poor. At the age of fourteen, Matthew left home to enter a monastery in Upper Egypt. Later he moved to Saint Antony monastery in the eastern desert, and he spent some time in that monastery before he moved to Jerusalem. Returning to Egypt, he headed for the monastery of al-Muharraq. His fame began to spread, and after the death of Gabriel IV, he was elected patriarch. As patriarch he served the community in every way imaginable, and he retained his humility. All his income was spent in helping the needy, the poor, the monks, and the nuns. After the defeat of Egypt, Matthew participated with all the means at his disposal in buying the freedom of the prisoners and captives, which must have courted the sympathy of the Islamic administration of the country. Sultan Barquq (1383–1389 AD) asked Matthew to write to the Ethiopian sovereign on his behalf in order to establish peaceful and friendly relations between their two countries. Matthew died at the age of seventy-two on 22 Tubah. Of these years, he spent forty as a bachelor and a monk, and thirty-two as patriarch. Apparently his funeral was a turbulent occasion at which innumerable people congregated from all walks of life. He was buried in the tomb he had prepared for himself at Dayr al-Khandak in Cairo.

Anba Ruweiss, an outstanding person, was not a monk or a priest. He was a poor man who practiced the ascetical life and is buried in his church next to the patriarchal residence.

The History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church is silent concerning the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but the Muslim historian Maqrizi is an invaluable source for that time. Many events took place at that time – such as what happened in the latter part of the fifteenth century when the monasteries of Saint Antony and Saint Paul with their libraries were destroyed by the Bedouins who lived in the monasteries as servants of the monks. The Monastery of Saint Samuel of Qalamun also was deserted and later destroyed. Gabriel V, the eighty-eighth patriarch, instituted his liturgical ordo, where he codified most of the ceremonies of the Coptic Church, the Upper-Egyptian traditions are not in use any more. After the death of Gabriel in the beginning of 1427 AD, a monk of the monastery of Shahran called Michael was elected but after a few weeks he was replaced by the priest Abu al-Farag who served as a priest of the church of Saint Mercurius in Old Cairo. He became Patriarch John XI.

There was an excellent relationship between the Coptic Church and the Syriac Church. Basil Behnam al-Hadhli, who was elected patriarch in the monastery of al-Za’faran, found that it was not enough to send the synodical letter to the patriarch of Alexandria, so he decided to come in person to be ordained by his Alexandrian homologue. However, the relations with the Ethiopian kings were
not as good. The Mamluk sultans prohibited any direct correspondence between
the Egyptian prelate and the Ethiopian kings. John also consecrated the Chrysm
(Myron) for the Church. In 1434 AD, King Zara Ya’iqob came to power – this
king was known as Constantine of Ethiopia. He deployed his efforts to protect
the Christians of Egypt.

The Venetians stole the head of Saint Mark, which affected the consecration
of the new patriarch. For the first time since the schism, the Roman Catholics
decided to enter into contact with the Coptic Church. The Roman Pope Eugene IV
sent his delegate to Cairo, the Franciscan, Albert de Sarteano. The Pope
informed his Alexandrian homologue about the union between the Latin and the
Greek churches. A Coptic delegate was sent to attend the Council of Florence but
he never arrived.

The Coptic language

The language spoken by the inhabitants of Ancient Egypt was written in several
scripts. Hieroglyphs were normally used for monumental inscriptions. Hieratic,
a cursive formed from the hieroglyphs, was used for religious documents written
on papyrus. Demotic was the derivative of the hieratic which came into use
about 700 BC. By the Graeco-Roman period, demotic had become the ordinary
writing for everyday use. Coptic had its beginnings in the first centuries before
Christ. Coptic is the Egyptian spoken language written with Greek letters in
addition to a few characters from the demotic (their number varies from one
dialect to another).

Coptic, as the unique script used in Egypt, has two characteristics

1. It reflects the dialect of each document: hence we can know the origin of the
scribe, from Upper or Lower Egypt etc.
2. Coptic is the only language used in Egypt to have vowels – hieroglyphics,
hieratics, and the demotic, as well as Arabic, do not use vowels. It was used
by Champollion to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics in the nineteenth
century.

Coptic art and architecture

Coptic art is the art produced by Copts whether before or after the Arabic
conquest. It is the product of a dialogue between several civilizations, such as
Ancient Egyptian art and Hellenistic art. Christianity influenced this art although
several masterpieces reflect the local environment, such as scenes of hunting.
Coptic art frequently uses symbols such as the Ankh symbol for life and the
cross. Most of the materials used in this art are cheap, such as wood or copper, and rarely can we find something in gold.

The liturgy of the Coptic Church

The beginning of the Coptic liturgy is obscure. It is difficult to give an overview of the sources of the liturgy before the peace of the Church (312 AD).

We will give a list of the most important liturgical direct sources first and then the indirect sources.

The New Testament

The New Testament remains our first liturgical source giving information about the first Christians, their life and their faith. Here and there, hymn fragments are to be found. The use of the psalm is inherited from the Jewish background. It is important to mention that the liturgy in the East is primarily related to the liturgy of Jerusalem, which was of widespread influence. Jerusalem and Palestine had generally been the pilgrimage places par excellence since Constantine. Even the beginning of the Church of Alexandria is always related to Jerusalem.

The Apostolic Tradition

The Apostolic Tradition, attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (usually dated c. 215 AD) is regarded as providing reliable information about the liturgical activity of the Church of Rome. The original Greek text has not survived except in the form of a few isolated fragments, but Coptic, Arabic and Ethiopian texts survive which show that the liturgical data of this document could be applied to the Alexandrian Church.

The Canons of Hippolitus

The Canons of Hippolitus derives from The Apostolic Tradition. It was composed in Egypt between 336–340 AD. Only an Arabic version survives, providing important liturgical data.

The Euchologion of Sarapion of Thmuis

This collection of prayers has traditionally been regarded as the work of Sarapion, Bishop of Thmuis, in Lower Egypt, and a friend of Athanasius of Alexandria.
The Travel Journal of Egeria

In the journal of her travel, Egeria gives a detailed account of the services during the week and on Sunday. She also describes, in detail, the rite of Holy Week. In Jerusalem, according to Egeria, the monks took part in communal worship together with the clergy and the people.

Indirect sources

The Paschal letters

The patriarchs of Alexandria, from the middle of the third century, used to write letters announcing the date of Easter and giving some moral recommendations to the congregations. These writings, especially those of Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, contain much liturgical material.

The monastic literature

The monastic literature, and especially the rules of Pachomius for the monks, contain liturgical material.

Hagiographical texts

The lives of saints, and especially those of monks and bishops, contain several quotations of liturgical texts. However, a detailed study of the Coptic liturgy through the Coptic hagiographical texts remains to be done.

The church in Egypt was divided by the Christological controversy (451 AD). The Coptic Church maintained their liturgical particularity, but fell under a degree of influence from the Syrian Church, sharing the same faith, hence it is important to mention some of the sources of the Syrian tradition:

1 Cyril of Jerusalem delivered twenty-four catechical lectures in which he explained Christian initiation and some liturgical details.
2 John Chrysostom, whose works, especially his initiation catecheses, are rich in information as are his festal homilies.
3 Ephrem the Syrian, an inexhaustible hymn writer.
4 Severus of Antioch, who was known especially for his dogmatic controversies but he was a great liturgist. He wrote several hymns and liturgical texts and his cathedral homilies are a mine of liturgical information and explanation, such as his explanation of the Trisagion.
Coptic liturgy comes to our knowledge through four groups:

1. Greek texts – this group includes the Anaphoras, such as the Anaphoras of Saint Basil, etc., and hymns for different occasions.

2. The Sahidic texts – this group includes the Anaphoras and the liturgy before the mass (Psalmodia) in addition to several excerpts. We have several papyri from the seventh/eighth centuries while most of the texts of this group are dated from the ninth and tenth centuries. Some hymns survived in the rite of consecration of the Myron from the year 1374 AD.

3. The Bohairic corpus – this group includes nearly all the liturgical texts. In the Middle Ages the popes moved to Cairo and the Bohairic dialect became the official dialect of the Coptic Church. Most of the manuscripts of this group are late, the most ancient are dated from the twelfth century (a copy of the rite of the consecration of the Church on parchment, dated from the tenth century, existed in Dayr al-Surian, but I did not find it).

4. The Arabic corpus – this consists of some late hymns for the month of Kihak and other occasions.