

subject of debate among scholars for many years. Nevertheless, the mentioning of “prostitutes”, sometimes also designated as a female worker, as an integral part of the workforce in Dūr-Katlimmu requires explanation.

Chapter IX contains useful indices, especially concerning the proper names of the Dūr-Katlimmu people, and chapter X finally offers a list of cuneiform signs occurring in the texts of the archive and their variants. This is followed by black-and-white photos of most of the tablets. In this way, the reader is given an authentic impression of the shape and layout of the original cuneiform texts.

The present volume provides interesting insights into the daily life of common people in thirteenth-century BC Assyria. This major contribution to social history offers an outstanding basis for future research.

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THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

MAGED S.A. MIKHAIL:

*From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest.*

xi, 429 pp. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014. £68. ISBN 978 1 84885 938 8.

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In his acknowledgements Maged Mikhail makes clear that his work, although having benefitted from grants from the St. Shenouda Archimandrite Coptic Society (Los Angeles), reflects only his own viewpoints and not those of the society. The emphasis is needed because, as Mikhail points out throughout his book, Coptic nationalist debates going back as far as the ninth century CE have had a distorting effect on the historiography of this crucial period. Indeed, one of the great achievements of this book is its engagement with these nationalist debates, quoting and refuting studies and opinions that are generally dismissed precisely because of their partisan and programmatic nature. When examined carefully, however, as Mikhail does here, they throw important light on the history and historiography of this period. It also explains why Mikhail is more sensitive to and aware of the role that religion and religious factionalism has played in history. He ascribes confessional identification an important role in the explanation of Egyptian Christians' behaviour, connecting it to developments in the field of early Islamic history that similarly pay closer attention to the explanatory power of religion (e.g. the recent books by Patricia Crone and Fred Donner).

Starting with an extensive historiographical discussion, inevitable in any study engaging with Islam's early history, Mikhail points out how documentary sources, especially papyri, add essential evidence to the narrative sources. But even in his use of the narrative sources Mikhail casts his net wider than scholars usually do, including, alongside the better known chronicles, also Coptic and Arabic Christian hagiographies and apocalyptic sources. Using this varied range of sources, Mikhail is able to present a more nuanced and layered view of the Egyptian Christian

community in this crucial transition period. His book, which combines linguistic, social, religious, economic and political evidence, is a monumental overview of the many different dynamics that turned Byzantine Egypt into an Islamic province.

Mikhail's starting point is that a separation between the late antique and early Islamic history of Egypt is artificial. Continuity, he writes, was prevalent in all respects, but it was not expressed everywhere in the same way, nor did it prevail everywhere to the same extent and for the same period (p. 14). He then proceeds to show how the relation between different communities in Egypt (the Coptic Church, the Melkite Church, the Arab rulers, Egyptian Christian elite, Arab elite) developed under the first five centuries of Arab rule. His observation that various groups in Egypt reacted differently to the Arab conquerors (p. 24) is closely related to another argument that returns throughout the book, namely that the image of an Egyptian population co-operating as a whole with the Arab conquerors is a much later reconstruction (p. 27). By comparing earlier accounts, among others those preserved in apocalyptic literature, with later reports, Mikhail shows that during and directly after the conquest Egyptian Christians maintained close connections to the Byzantine Empire, hoping for its restoration in Egypt and viewing the Arab conquest as unwelcome and ideally transitory (p. 23). That Egyptian Christians continued to consider the Byzantine Empire as their point of reference is confirmed by Arietta Papaconstantinou's article "'What remains behind': Hellenism and *Romanitas* in Christian Egypt after the Arab conquest", in H. Cotton et al. (eds), *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge, 2009), 444–63, which is, however, lacking from Mikhail's bibliography. Mikhail ascribes the historiographical shift of the ninth–tenth centuries to a changed political reality of increased Byzantine–Muslim hostility, which fitted an image of an Arab–Egyptian front better. This is when the accounts of Byzantine persecutions of Copts in the immediate pre-Islamic period were invented as well as the interactions between the Coptic patriarch Benjamin and the Arabs (p. 33). Only a century later, however, Christian–Muslim relations inside Egypt had changed again, with several measures being taken to demarcate confessional boundaries such as the introduction of an exclusively Christian and Muslim calendar (pp. 127–35).

Mikhail does us a great service by exposing the internal group dynamics that shaped Egyptian Christians' behaviour in this period. Rather than depicting these groups as passive and undifferentiated, merely reflecting "caliphal hegemony" (p. 234), Mikhail uses polemics and other texts to show the many complex layers which made up the non-Muslim communities. Chalcedonian–Coptic rivalry was expressed, for example, at the end of the tenth century through the acceptance or not of certain fasts (pp. 235–8). While adding necessary nuances to the Egyptian Christian landscape, this focus on confessional conflicts sometimes seems to be carried too far, for example, when Mikhail claims that all functionaries appointed in the Byzantine administration were Melkites who continued their anti-Coptic policy under the Arabs (p. 27). The documentary sources show no evidence of such confessional identities or concerns and one wonders whether the Arabs at this early period were sufficiently aware of such inter-Christian confessional differences to base a specific policy on it. Similarly, the claim that the use of Greek, which had been completely unproblematic for the Arab administration, became untenable and disappeared in the ninth century because of an invented Arab–Coptic, anti-Byzantine/Melkite front (p. 91), suggests a sophisticated engagement on the side of the Arab administration that seems unlikely.

A very interesting discussion appears in chapter 6, "The long eighth century: a cultural bridge", which discusses cultural Islamicization as separate from

conversion. With actual conversion rates remaining low because “the social, linguistic, religious, cultural, and even spatial chasm that existed between Arab and Egyptian communities throughout Umayyad rule was simply immense and seldom traversed” (p. 60), Mikhail shows how the Arab Muslim presence profoundly affected Egyptian Christian communities, from Christian religious positions and functionaries (chapter 9) to Arabization.

By focusing on the religious dimension(s) of the changes described in this book, Mikhail has not only incorporated a rich source base of narrative and documentary texts in many different languages, but most important of all, offers us a fresh look on the transformative processes of this crucial period of Egypt’s history. His admirably clear writing style and convenient presentation in many short thematic chapters in roughly chronological order make the book into a very useful source for beginners as well as more advanced students of early medieval Egypt.

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DANIELLA TALMON-HELLER and KATIA CYTRYN-SILVERMAN (eds):

*Material Evidence and Narrative Sources: Interdisciplinary Studies of the History of the Muslim Middle East.*

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This volume offers a range of interdisciplinary research. The chapters deal with topics dating from the early Islamic period through to the late twentieth century. Art historians, archaeologists, numismatists, sillographers and historians contribute perspectives, with a recurrent concern being to find ways to correlate visual and material culture with evidence drawn from primary written sources.

This interpretive process is aimed, as the subtitle of the volume indicates, at the reconstruction of the “history of the Muslim Middle East”. This seems an overly specific categorization in that it sidelines the non-Muslim dimensions of society (the book does, however, include a fine study based on a document from the Cairo Geniza) as well as the vital interactions between Muslims, Jews and Christians that are such a feature of the cultures of the Middle East. The presence of “history” in the subtitle brings to mind the fact that the disciplines of archaeology and art history are still sometimes called upon to support a dominant narrative created by texts. There is, of course, the danger that scholars can underestimate the extent to which aesthetic or technological advances in the material record can follow trajectories largely independent of political and economic factors – dynastic change, military conflict, famines, and so on – that loom large in contemporary chronicles.

Interdisciplinarity has become something of a mantra in modern humanistic scholarship. The introduction to the volume (penned by the editors and Yasser Tabbaa) notes that students of Islamic art and archaeology have long embraced the idea that primary textual sources are an essential dimension of the analysis of physical evidence. Oleg Grabar’s 1959 study of the Dome of the Rock is justly cited as a turning point in the study of Islamic material culture. Conversely, historians such as Hugh Kennedy and Michael Morony have widened their scope to incorporate numismatic data and archaeology. One might ask, therefore, what novel approaches are being advanced in the present volume given the claim that