Approaches to Coptic History after 641

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The study of Coptic history usually brings to mind gnostic texts, remote monastic enclaves, archeological ruins, conflicts with Byzantium, or a long-forgotten language. Until recently, a disproportionate focus on early Christianity has bound Copts to an ancient and seemingly timeless heritage, which explains the dearth of critical examinations on Coptic life from the Islamic conquests to the early modern period. In general, Coptic experiences after 641 have been overshadowed by other themes in Egyptian history writing, in particular political and military changes. Although the latter are as relevant for a better understanding of the Coptic past, they have been predominately examined from the perspective of the Muslim majority, exclusive of Coptic concerns, perspectives, and beliefs. Only in recent years has scholarship on Copts begun to expand. Scholars have drawn from fields such as papyrology, gender studies, art history, and law in pursuit of a more comprehensive historical narrative. We are increasingly encouraged to evaluate the Coptic experience not only as a missing cog in Egyptian historiography but also as one that complicates canonical studies of postconquest Egypt and enriches our understanding of Middle Eastern history in general.

A salient feature of recent writings is their critical engagement with an array of Coptic and Coptic-Arabic archival sources alongside known chronicles, court records, treatises, and travel accounts. Although a large number of untapped and mostly uncatalogued manuscripts continues to be guarded in Egypt's churches and monasteries, selective access to those collections and to materials located in European and North American libraries has resulted in a greater integration of Coptic voices within the study of early Islamic, Fatimid, Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman history.

As a consequence, how Copts constructed and adapted their identity—social, political, and religious—in the face of historically contingent variables has emerged as a unifying theme. Maged Mikhail's research, for instance, has drawn attention to the linguistic interchange among Coptic, Greek, and Arabic speakers, as well as to conversion and religious assimilation in the early Islamic period, capturing the flux and dynamism that characterized Egypt's cultural transformation in this pivotal era.[1] Tamer el-Leithy's study of the Mamluk period, during which the majority of Egyptians became Muslim, situates the waves of Coptic conversion within questions of resistance, economic motivation, and communal remembrance and shows the complexity of this nonlinear process.[2] Others have challenged simplistic discourses of persecution and tolerance, paying more attention to transformations in Coptic theological orientations, popular religion, and the construction of sanctity and martyrdom, from the early Islamic to the Mamluk centuries.[3] Studies of the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods are still nascent, but they are generally following a similar model.[4]

A relatively recent development is scholarship focused on Ottoman-era Copts, in the period preceding the Napoleonic invasion. Here, Muhammad ʿAfifi's work in Arabic provided an important foundation for understanding political and economic life.[5] Magdi

Guirguis has studied Coptic communal structures, relating them, most recently, to the production of icons in the 18th century.[6] My own work examines how, after the Ottoman conquest, religious rituals and pious expressions became closely tied to processes of identity formation, as Copts sought to distinguish themselves from Muslims and from a new community of Catholic Copts.[7] Alastair Hamilton, meanwhile, has perhaps written the most important monograph to date on Western interaction with the Coptic Church, focusing on the struggles of European missionaries and Orientalists in late Mamluk and Ottoman Egypt and revealing their motivations to study Copts and to convert them to Catholicism or, later, Protestantism.[8] Other scholars are using interdisciplinary approaches more explicitly to bridge the history of early Christianity with later centuries; an edited volume by William Lyster, for instance, situates the 13th- and 18th-century renovations of the St. Paul Monastery, an ancient pilgrimage destination in the Red Sea region, within archeological, literary, ritualistic, artistic, and sociopolitical trajectories.[9]

The focus on conversion, theology, popular religion, iconography, sainthood, pilgrimage, and missionary activities reveals a new scholarly perception of religion as a fundamental and chronically contested marker for Copts living under Muslim rule. In past decades, there had been a tendency to minimize the role of religion in the study of the Middle East's non-Muslims, fearing conflation with modern ethno-nationalist discourses. Recent contributions, particularly ones closely engaged with Coptic-authored sources, suggest that religious discourses and practices were important in how Copts negotiated and preserved their communal boundaries and in how they characterized themselves, Muslims, and other Christians. Although sectarianism, as Bernard Heyberger argues, might be a product of 19th-century developments, characterizations of religious identity and difference were a real and critical part of the Copts' and other communities' self-perception in the premodern period.[10] This research orientation should continue to play a prominent role in any examination of Coptic life and history.

NOTES

[1]Maged S. A. Mikhail, "Egypt from Late Antiquity to Early Islam: Copts, Melkites, and Muslims Shaping a New Society" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2004).

[2]Tamer el-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293–1524 A.D." (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2005).

[3]See Stephen J. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice: Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jason R. Zaborowski, *The Coptic Martyrdom of John of Phanijoit: Assimilation and Conversion to Islam in Thirteenth-Century Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004); and Mark N. Swanson, "'Our Father Abba Mark': Marqus al-Antuni and the Construction of Sainthood in Fourteenth-Century Egypt," in *Eastern Crossroads: Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy*, ed. Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2007).

[4]See Marlis J. Saleh, "Government Relations with the Coptic Community in Egypt during the Fatimid Period (358–567 A.H./969–1171 C.E.)" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1995); Maryann M. Shenoda, "Displacing Dhimmi, Maintaining Hope: Unthinkable Coptic Representations of Fatimid Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39 (2007): 587–606; and Kurt J. Werthmuller, *Coptic Identity and Ayyubid Politics in Egypt, 1218–1250* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, forthcoming).

[5]Muhammad ʿAfifi, *al-Aqbat fi Misr fi al-ʿAsr al-ʿUthmani* (Cairo: al-Haʾya al-Misriyya al-ʿAmma li-l-Kitab, 1992).

[6]Magdi Guirguis, *An Armenian Artist in Ottoman Cairo: Yuhanna al-Armani and His Coptic Icons* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008).

[7]Febe Armanios, *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[8]Alastair Hamilton, *The Copts and the West, 1439–1822: The European Discovery of the Egyptian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[9]William Lyster, ed., *The Cave Church of Paul the Hermit: At the Monastery of St. Paul in Egypt* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).

[10]For more on the infusion of modern sectarian discourses into the study of the Coptic past, see Paul Sedra, "Writing the History of the Modern Copts: From Victims and Symbols to Actors," *History Compass* 7 (2009): 1049–63.