CHAPTER 17

Shaping Coptic Christian Identity: Severus and the Adoption in Egypt of the Cult of the Forty Martyrs

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1 Introduction

In an early article, Jean Simon highlighted the importance of the veneration of the forty martyrs of Sebaste in Christian Egypt, yet he did not mention any relation to Severus of Antioch. On the other hand, in his important study about the contact and exchange between the Copts and Syrians, which was centred from the eighth century onwards in the Wadi-Natrun in the monastery of the Syrians (Dayr as-Suryān), while Jean-Maurice Fiey noted that in both the Syrian and Coptic festal calendars some saints have their commemoration on the same day, he made no mention of these forty martyrs. Their cult, we shall argue, is one more example of how in Egypt hagiography was employed in the service of shaping Egyptian (most notably non-Chalcedonian) Christian identity, in this case through the liturgical attribution of the cult to the Syrian exemplar of non-Chalcedonian orthodoxy, Severus of Antioch. This aligns with the findings of an earlier article in which we demonstrated how the veneration of Saints Sergius and Bacchus was introduced to Egypt by Severus.

The Coptic Church in the Wake of the Arab Conquest

As Arietta Papaconstantinou, in particular, has argued, in the seventh to eighth centuries CE, when Egypt came under Umayyad and then ‘Abāssid rule, the construction of a martyr past for Egypt emerged as a result of “the Egyptian Miaphysite (non-Chalcedonian) church searching for a new identity and a new legitimacy. In this quest it was important to that church to mark its indigenous origin.”

Ties at a regional and local level between the non-Chalcedonians in Egypt and Syria were at that point in time strong, as attested by the exchange of synodical letters between the two prelates of the Antiochene and Alexandrian churches, part of which survives in The Book of the Confessions of the Fathers. Antioch, as the seat of the non-Chalcedonian patriarch Severus (512–518 CE), who had spent the bulk of his exile in Egypt leading up to his summons to Constantinople in 534 to negotiate with Emperor Justinian, took on in this period a particularly symbolic role. This is exemplified in the production in Egypt at this period of entire cycles in Coptic of stories of saints martyred during the persecution of Diocletian in either Antioch or Egypt with ties to both regions, but no actual historical foundation. By locating the saints of this

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8 For the Antioch cycle, which later developed into the Basilides cycle—Basilides, Anatolius the Persian, Eusebius, Macarius, Justus, Theodore the Oriental, Apater and Herai, and Claudius and Victor—see BHO 12 (Anatolius the Persian); BHO 292 (Eusebius); BHO 578 (Macarius); Eric O. Winstedt, Coptic Texts on Saint Theodore the General, Saint Theodore the Eastern, Chamoul and Justus (London and Oxford: Williams and Norgate, 1910), 188–99 and 211–21 (Justus); BHO 1174 (Theodore the Oriental); BHO 73 (Apater and Herai); BHO 195 (Claudius); E.A. Wallis Budge, ed. and trans., Coptic Martyrodoms in the Dialect of Upper Egypt (London: British Museum, 1914), 1–45 and 253–98 (Victor); and also Tito Orlandi, “Cycle,” Coptic Encyclopedia 3.666–68; idem, Hagiography, Coptic,” Coptic Encyclopedia 4.1191–97; and Papaconstantinou, “Coptic ‘Church of the Martyrs’,” 75 and 80.