
*The Copts and the West* is another jewel in the crown of Professor Hamilton’s impressive contribution to the history of pre-modern European intellectual and cultural history with a persistent focus on the discovery of various facets of the Middle (or Near) East. While much of Hamilton’s previous work covers the development of European scholarly and cultural interest in Arabic and Islamic culture taken in a broad sense1 (and includes a number of lavishly illustrated exhibition catalogues),2 his particular preoccupation with Oriental Christianity regularly emerges and has already resulted in some shorter publications on specific phenomena or personalities.3 This special interest, nurtured by a large-scale and long-term project of processing and analyzing a vast number of sources and studies carried out over the years, has now found its outlet in this monograph on various aspects of European attitudes towards one particular Christian community of the Arab East: the Copts of Egypt.

Hamilton’s monograph is divided into four parts, each subdivided into a number of chapters. Three of these parts constitute the bulk of the book and are devoted to the main sectors within this history of intellectual activity in Europe. It is mostly in these three parts that the author displays the fruits of his long and profound quest for knowledge and understanding of his topic. With regard to the data presented and analyzed in Parts II-IV, the present reviewer is in no position either to add anything particularly significant or to challenge any of the author’s interpretations and comments. From a functional point of view, some added value can only be obtained here by sharing a few thoughts on a limited number of specific issues, mainly dealt with in Part I (chapters 1 and 2), which actually reads as an extension of the (rather brief) Introduction (pp. 1-5), and by limiting our observations on Parts II-IV to issues directly related to such comments on the first two chapters.

One of the merits of Hamilton’s book is its fine awareness of problems of periodization. Whether in connection with his own original research or in introductory paragraphs based on earlier publications by others, the chronological aspects of relevant developments are regularly highlighted. For example, referring to W.H.C. Frend’s classic *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, Hamilton duly points out that “Despite the apparent autonomy implied by the existence of an anti-Chalcedonian patriarch, almost a century elapsed before the new anti-Chalcedonian Churches acquired an identity of their own, and it was still longer before there was a definitive break between them and

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1 Particularly: *The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras (4 Ezra) from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*; ‘A Lutheran Translator for the Quran: A Late Seventeenth-Century Quest’; *William Bedwell the Arabist, 1563-1632* (for full bibliographical details see his bibliography, p. 296).

2 For example, *Europe and the Arab World: Five Centuries of Books by European Scholars and Travellers from the Libraries of the Arcadian Group* (Oxford, 1994); *Arab Culture and Ottoman Magnificence in Antwerp’s Golden Age* (Antwerp, 2002).

3 ‘Eastern Churches and Western Scholarship’; ‘An Egyptian Traveller in the Republic of Letters: Josephus Barbatus or Abudacnus the Copt’; ‘The English Interest in the Arabic-Speaking Christians’ (see bibliography, p. 296).
the Church of Constantinople” (p. 19). In the same vein, he refers to a more recent study by Ewa Wipscycka in order to point out the Egyptian identity that gradually came to characterize the Copts in the course of this evolution, an identity that “was in contrast to their cosmopolitan origins” (p. 22).

Only in a very small number of insignificant cases is the chronological perspective overlooked, resulting in a minor inaccuracy like “Pisidia in Turkey” (p. 19), which may easily be corrected into “Pisidia in present-day Turkey.” Furthermore, the phenomenon of mass migration of Armenians towards Egypt, mentioned in a footnote and attributed to the twelfth century (p. 25 n. 4), had actually started in 1074 with the arrival from Syria of the predominantly Armenian troops of Badr al-Gamālī, who became the effective ruler of the Fatimid empire after suppressing a serious Sunnite uprising against the Isma'ili dynasty.4

Perhaps a slightly more substantial correction is called for in the case of the term “non-Muslim religious minorities” to whom the *dimma* (protection) status came to apply under Muslim rule (p. 26). Since this status was introduced at an early stage after the Arab conquest, and since it took centuries for the Christian communities — at least in the case of Egypt — to be reduced to a minority in the demographical sense of the word, the *dimma* status pertained to the majority, and subsequently to a smaller but still huge segment of the overall population, for a considerable length of time. Similarly, Hamilton’s observation that only on their conversion could Copts be admitted to prominent government positions (p. 27) may be largely correct, but the evidence adduced for this (Carl F. Petry’s survey in the Coptic Encyclopedia) mostly concerns the Mamluk period (thirteenth-sixteenth centuries) and should thus be applied with caution to earlier periods.

Another development presented from an enlightening chronological perspective is that of Coptic intellectual versatility, culminating in the “Coptic Renaissance” of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As a starting point for this movement Hamilton cites the mid tenth-century production of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa’ (p. 29, see also pp. 157 and 178). While this prolific author was certainly the first known Coptic cleric to produce a significant number of theological and pastoral treatises in Arabic, recent research has demonstrated that he can in no way be associated with the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, the famous Arabic-language official history of the Coptic Church compiled from earlier Coptic sources in the late eleventh century and continued by subsequent generations.5 This “minority question” is important when seen against the background of Hamilton’s highly persuasive and balanced remarks on the Western “myth” of the Copts as a “persecuted minority suffering under the Muslims” (p. 45).

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