
*The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt, 641–1517* is the second volume of *The Popes of Egypt*, the three-volume history of the Coptic patriarchate published by the American University in Cairo and edited by Stephen J. Davis (the author of the first volume, *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity*, which appeared in 2004) and Gawdat Gabra.

There has been little agreement about the date when the “Coptic Orthodox Church” truly started. Was it in the middle of the fifth century, after the condemnation of the Monophysites at the Council of Chalcedon, or was it in the sixth century when Justinian decided to reinstall the Chalcedonian patriarchate of Alexandria? Swanson prefers the anti-Chalcedonian patriarchate of Benjamin in the seventh century, which began under the Persian occupation of Egypt and continued, with interruptions, after the expulsion of the Persians and the subsequent arrival of the Arabs in 641. By this time the Copts can truly be said to have acquired an independent identity of their own and to have entered an entirely new phase in their history.

With the Arab occupation of Egypt the sources for the study of the patriarchate undergo a change with respect to the earlier period. The principal document is the *History of the Patriarchs*, a work, existing in Arabic, compiled by different authors through the ages. “While the *History of the Patriarchs* provides the framework for the present study,” writes Swanson, “it is, of course, not its only primary source. For the period under consideration here we have some additional material: other *Lives* of popes (sometimes written by contemporaries), homilies, and canonical collections coming from the popes themselves, and a variety of churchly literature produced by close associates or opponents.”

One of the main problems with such sources is that they tend to be heavily prejudiced. The rhetoric of martyrdom—the Church of Alexandria also became known as the Church of the Martyrs and the Coptic calendar starts in the Year of the Martyrs and the Coptic calendar starts in the Year of the Martyrs—entailed a strong emphasis on persecution as well as on the miraculous assistance often accorded by God to the Copts. Swanson, however, copes admirably with such documents. He remains objective, stressing the long periods in which the Copts, despite the inferior status of the *dhimmi* and the genuine persecution and discrimination which they suffered at certain moments, often prospered under their Muslim overlords. He is sensitive to the fact not only that many of the financial crises struck the Muslims just as severely as they did the Christians, but that Copts were, on occasion, joined by
Muslims in riots against the authorities. In fact it would seem that the greatest
damage to Coptic institutions such as churches and monasteries was caused by
Bedouin tribesmen and that many of the attacks on the Coptic Church were
the work of fellow-Christians.

An important phenomenon in the period discussed by Swanson is the
increasing power of the Coptic laity, the rich archons who served the Arab
governors as secretaries, scribes, and chancellors. Although their influence on
the patriarchate varied over the centuries, they would gradually emerge as the
main patrons of their community. By and by, they would have an ever greater
voice in the selection of the patriarch and an ever more important role as
intermediaries between the authorities and the Copts.

Swanson is justly wary of the more sweeping statements that have been
made about the Copts, such as their delight in the Arab conquest which at
last freed them from Byzantine (and Chalcedonian) rule. Attitudes, Swanson
observes, were in fact mixed, and it was not long before “the coming of the
Muslims was being absorbed into anonymous End-Time scenarios.” Then there
is the question of conversion to Islam. There were various waves from the
eighth century on, but we have hardly any information about the numbers.
The situation would seem to have differed greatly from one region to another.
The same may well be true of the survival of the Coptic language. Arabic had
been imposed as the official language of Egypt in 706, but for a long period
Coptic was still spoken in the Coptic communities. By the eleventh century
most Copts were writing in Arabic, and by the twelfth century very few could
still follow the liturgy in Coptic. The vast majority of manuscripts were either in
Arabic, or bilingual. The question nevertheless remains of which Copts, where,
and until when, continued to understand the language of their ancestors.

Judging from the first volume in the collection, The Coptic Papacy in Islamic
Egypt follows certain criteria devised by the editors—a relatively brief text (in
this case just over 130 pages), and a collection of prefaces, bibliographies, and
notes which are just as long. In the case of such an extensive period as the
one stretching from 641 to 1517 this entails inevitable disadvantages. Hardly
anything is said about the Coptic renaissance of the thirteenth century. “The
great irony of Coptic Church history in the early thirteenth century,” writes
Swanson, “is that, at the same time that an extraordinary cultural flowering was
taking shape, near-chaos reigned at the Church’s institutional level.” About
the “extraordinary cultural flowering,” however, we are told little more. In
his preface Swanson clearly establishes the limits of his book, and justifiably
avoids fields which have no direct bearing on the patriarchate itself, but the
general reader might wish for more historical background which could have