Coptic Christians in Mamluk Egypt during the Baḥri Period (1250–1382)

J. Luis Dizon

The Baḥri Mamluk period (1250–1382) was a tumultuous era for the Coptic population of Muslim Egypt. While this epoch witnessed the Mongol invasions of the Middle East, the fall of the Crusader States in the Levant, the transfer of the Abbasid caliphate from Baghdad to Cairo, and the emergence of Egypt as one of the great cultural and political centers of the Islamic world, Coptic fortunes during this period, in contrast to the relative success and prosperity of Egypt’s Mamluk rulers, were less than ideal. The Coptic population had fared relatively well under the earlier Fatimid caliphate (which ruled Egypt 969 to 1171), due in part to the Fatimids themselves being a religious minority (Ismaili Shia), and Copts were regularly appointed to high offices in the Fatimid administration. But, after the Fatimids were overthrown in the late twelfth century, the ruling Ayyubid dynasty initiated a harsher policy towards Copts and other non-Muslim groups in Egypt, and this approach continued under the Mamluks.

This essay will identify and examine various sources that illuminate Coptic-Mamluk relations during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Extant sources from this period, including chronicles and various legal and religious texts, point to a

---

1 The Mamluk Sultanate ruled Egypt, Syria, and the Hejaz region of the Arabian Peninsula from 1250 until 1517, when it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire. Historians commonly divide Mamluk history into two periods, Baḥri/Turkic (1250–1382) and Burji/Circassian (1382–1517).
3 Ibid., 91–98.
tightening of restrictions on Copts and other groups regarded as dhimmīs (non-Muslim groups subject to various restrictions under Islamic law), and indicate the conversion of a significant portion of the Coptic population to Islam. As shall be seen, factors that contributed to the often-difficult situation of Copts in Egypt include the widespread suspicion of Christians as a result of the Crusades, and a renewal in Muslim religious life in Egypt that resulted in more stringent enforcement of Islamic restrictions on dhimmīs and a corresponding drive to promote the conversion of Jews and Christians to Islam.

The main sources of this study are the thirteenth and fourteenth century chronicles of the Mamluk-era historians Baybars al-Manṣūrī,4 al-Nuwayrī,5 al-Yunīnī,6 and Ibn Kathīr.7 These accounts contain important information about how Christians, and Copts in particular, were regarded, and policies towards them by Mamluk leaders. Other sources will also be utilized to see what light they shed on the cultural, political, and religious context in which the chronicles are situated: background information on the period in question can be gleaned from Aḥmad al-Miṣrī’s manual of fiqh (Islamic law), Ṣaḥīḥ abū ʿAbd Allāh Muhammad b. Ḥusayn al-Nuwayrī,7 Nihāyat al-ʿArab fī ʿIlm al-ʿAdab8 (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyah, 1933–1935). al-Yunīnī, Dhayl Mirʾat al-Zamān, ed. Li Guo (Leiden: Brill, 2008).8 Ibn Kathīr’s al-Bidāya wa l-Nihāya fī Tārīkh (Beirut, Lebanon: Maktabat al-maʿārif, 1966). Ismāʿīl ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAzīm (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dār Ṭibāh, 1997).

Using these sources, we can reconstruct a picture of the changing climate of tolerance and persecution for Copts in early Mamluk Egypt, clarifying the attitudes of different social groups (both political leaders and religious scholars, the ‘ulamā’) towards the Copts and how these attitudes were reflected in practice. The variety of restrictions Mamluk

7 Ismāʿīl ibn Umar ibn Kathīr, Al-Bidāya wa l-Nihāya fī Tārīkh (Beirut, Lebanon: Maktabat al-maʿārif, 1966).
Coptic Christians in Mamluk Egypt during Bahri Period  151

leaders implemented against dhimmī groups, and the religious/legal bases of these restrictions, will also be examined. Finally, these sources will be surveyed for the light they shed on the extent to which restrictions and other social pressures induced Copts (especially elite Copts) to convert to Islam.

Copts in the Mamluk Civil Service

During the Mamluk period, Copts were well represented in important government positions, especially in the dīwāns (governmental bureaus/ministries): their expertise in handling taxes and finances was the main asset which protected Copts in the Mamluk administration from persecution. 10 Coptic bureaucrats obtained their experience through family networks, which ensured the survival of Coptic secretarial dynasties. 11 Some Copts even rose to senior chancery positions, such as Hibat Allāh al-Sadīd (d. 1282–1283), who was mustawfī al-suḥba (chief comptroller) during the reign of Mamluk Sultan Qalāwūn. 12 Nonetheless, the highest ministerial positions tended to be dominated in the late thirteenth century by the Muslim Banu ‘Abd al-Zāhir family. 13 In fact, Coptic opportunities for career advancement were limited by the fact that senior administrative positions, especially in the chancery, were restricted to Muslims. Besides the religious rationale for such restrictions, high-ranking chancery posts required negotiating with and occasionally spying on Christian kingdoms, as well as taking oaths in treaties, activities that Copts were not normally trusted

13 Irwin, The Middle East in the Middle Ages, 40, 131.