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Transforming the Coptic ecclesiastical History at the beginning of the Mamluk Period: from the History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria to the Coptic-Arabic Synaxarion

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PERRINE PILETTE*

Transforming the Coptic Ecclesiastical History at the Beginning of the Mamluk Period

From the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*
to the Coptic-Arabic *Synaxarion***

♦ **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on historiography in the Coptic milieu at the beginning of the Mamluk period and, more specifically, on the major transformations this historiography underwent at this key moment in medieval Egyptian history. Indeed, on the one hand, the famous *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*—the official history of the Coptic Church in Arabic, composed in the Fatimid period—was completely rewritten. On the other hand, a brand-new text, the Coptic-Arabic *Synaxarion*, emerged at the same time, embodying a different approach to history. Thus, the paper hypothesizes that both phenomena are somehow related and need to be understood in the light of the major transformations taking place in the larger cultural, ecclesiastical and political contexts at the onset of the Mamluk era in Egypt.

Keywords: Historiography, Coptic Arabic literature, Coptic Church and milieu, Mamluk period, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, Coptic-Arabic *Synaxarion*, manuscripts

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♦ RÉSUMÉ

**Transformer l'histoire ecclésiastique copte au début de l'époque mamelouke :
de L'Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie au Synaxaire copto-arabe**

Cet article traite de l'historiographie dans les milieux coptes au début de l'époque mamelouke et en particulier des transformations majeures qu'elle a subies à ce moment-clé de l'histoire égyptienne. En effet, c'est à ce moment que la célèbre *Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie* – l'histoire officielle de l'Église copte en arabe, composée à l'époque fatimide – fut entièrement réécrite. Aussi, le *Synaxaire copto-arabe*, qui incarne une approche différente de l'histoire, fut composé à la même époque. Le présent article émet l'hypothèse que ces deux phénomènes sont corrélés et doivent être étudiés à la lumière des changements concomitants dans les sphères culturelles, ecclésiastiques et politiques.

Mots-clés : Historiographie, littérature copto-arabe, Église et milieux coptes, période mamelouke, *Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie*, *Synaxaire copto-arabe*, manuscrits

♦ ملخص

تحويل التاريخ الكنسي القبطي في مطلع العصر المملوكي:
من «تاريخ بطاركة الإسكندرية» إلى «السنسكار القبطي-العربي»

تركز هذه الورقة على التأريخ في الأوساط القبطية في مطلع العصر المملوكي، وبصورة أكثر تحديداً، على التحولات الكبرى التي شهدتها هذا التأريخ في تلك اللحظة الفارقة من تاريخ مصر في العصر الوسيط. ففي الواقع، من ناحية، شهدت تلك الحقبة إعادة كتابة كاملة لـ«تاريخ بطاركة الإسكندرية» – وهو التاريخ الرسمي للكنيسة القبطية باللغة العربية، الذي تم تجميعه في العصر الفاطمي. ومن ناحية أخرى، في نفس الحقبة ظهر مؤلف جديد تماماً، هو السنسكار القبطي-العربي، الذي يجسد نهجاً مختلفاً في تناول التاريخ. هكذا، تفترض الورقة أن الظاهرتين مرتبطتان فيما بينهما بصورة ما، وأنه لمن الضروري أن تُفهما على ضوء التحولات الكبرى التي شهدتها السياقات الثقافية، والكنسية والسياسية الأوسع في تلك الحقبة في مصر.

كلمات مفتاحية: تأريخ، الأدب القبطي العربي، الكنيسة والأوساط القبطية، «تاريخ بطاركة الإسكندرية»، «السنسكار القبطي العربي»، مخطوطات

1. Defining the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*

1.1. General Overview

The Arabic text of the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* (henceforth, *HPA*) has a complex textual history and transmission. Considered the official history of the Coptic Church, it was compiled during the Fatimid period at the initiative of the 67th patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril II (1078–1092). More precisely, he commissioned Mawhüb ibn Manşūr ibn Mufarriğ—a Coptic deacon who was also a tax-collector under the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustanşir bi-llāh—to survey the main monasteries of Northern Egypt and gather Coptic historiographical sources to be translated into Arabic.¹ The output of this endeavor is a general history of the Coptic Church in Arabic, organized along the successive so-called *Lives* (in Arabic: *sīra*, pl. *siyar*) of its patriarchs. This work was rapidly turned into a collective historiographical tradition, as many writers and copyists took over Mawhüb’s work, continuously adding new patriarchal biographies to the corpus. It must be highlighted that these *siyar* mainly serve as a general framework for various information going well beyond ecclesiastical history and concerning the larger social and political history of Egypt—and even the Middle East more broadly. The historical data the *HPA* contains is often unique and, given their particular—Christian—point of view, relevantly complements the work of Muslim chroniclers.

1.2. Editorial History

The earliest publication of the text—more precisely a Latin translation—took place in Paris at the beginning of the 18th century,² on the basis of two manuscripts that had been brought to France by Johann Michael Vansleb in the 17th century, that is, the Paris BnF arabe 301 and 302.³ Besides shedding first light on this text in Europe, the main impact of this work is found in the title of the *HPA* itself: it became “*Historia Patriarcharum Alexandrinorum* (“History of the Alexandrian Patriarchs”)” in Latin while, in the Arabic manuscripts, it was still entitled “سیر البيعة المقدسة” (“The *Lives* of the Holy Church”). This new title was later slightly adapted and translated into modern languages, including Arabic, as the “*History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*”.

Long after this first translation, two editions of the Arabic texts were simultaneously published at the beginning of the 20th century, in a competitive pre-war atmosphere: the first was realized by Basil T.A. Evetts,⁴ from England; and the second by a German, Christian Friedrich Seybold.⁵ Both are still abundantly quoted, despite their methodological

1. Concerning the history of the composition of the *HPA* and a list of the sources used by Mawhüb, see den Heijer (1989, pp. 81–154).

2. Renaudot 1713.

3. Troupeau 1972, pp. 265–266.

4. *HPE*.

5. *HPS*.

flaws resulting from the lack of any comprehensive study of the manuscript tradition that led them to “create” textual versions that never existed as such in the manuscripts.⁶

Shortly after completing his first edition, C.F. Seybold edited, separately, a manuscript from Hamburg, the Arabic 304 (*Lives* 1–46, 1266 C.E., henceforth ‘H’), that provides a very different version of the text which was identified as the “primitive” recension, as it was found to be more ancient than the version contained in the manuscripts on which the previous editions were based.⁷

Later, between 1943 and 1973, a fourth edition was completed by Yassā ‘Abd al-Masīh, Antoine Khater, ‘Azīz Suryāl ‘Atiya, and Oswald Burmester.⁸ This one covers the last parts of the text which, remarkably, had not been taken into consideration in the previous editions. In this case, it must be stressed that the quality of the editorial work was better.

1.3. A Fatimid HPA

In the eighties of the 20th century, new manuscripts were identified as witnesses of the above-mentioned primitive recension⁹: the Paris BnF arabe 303¹⁰ (*Lives* 49–65, 14th cent., henceforth ‘P’) and the Cairo Patriarchate History 12¹¹ (*Lives* 66–72, 1275 C.E., henceforth ‘C’). All these manuscripts brought significant new data, enabling a better understanding of the history of the text: from this moment onwards, the text was recognized as a historiographical production from the Fatimid period.

Indeed, the primitive recension keeps several editorial notes that allowed the *HPA* to be re-attributed to its genuine author, the previously mentioned—and otherwise unattested—Mawhūb. Also, they showed that his work—besides the translation (and adaptation) of Coptic sources—also consisted of the composition of the two first *siyar* directly in Arabic, i.e. the *Lives* of the 66th and 67th patriarchs, of whom Mawhūb was a contemporary (Christodoulos and Cyril II). Consequently, the traditional attribution of the text to the famous and prolific 10th century bishop of al-Ušmūnayn, Sawīrūs ibn al-Muqaffa¹²—the first Coptic author writing in Arabic—was invalidated: interestingly, the attribution to a prestigious ecclesiastical author—who died almost a century before Cyril II’s initiative for the composition of a brand-new official

6. For an analysis of these editions and their reception in the field, see Pilette (2013, pp. 420–423).

7. Pilette 2013, p. 423.

8. *HPC*.

9. Den Heijer 1984; 1985; 1989, pp. 19–21. Note that the first observations that made the connection between P and H are found in *HPSH*, p. VIII, but it wasn’t developed before den Heijer (1984; 1985). As for the edition of the primitive recension, an ongoing editorial project, now under the direction of the author of these lines, aims at releasing a new and complete critical edition of the primitive recension of the *HPA*.

10. Troupeau 1972, p. 266; Boutros 2016; Pilette (in press).

11. Simaika 1942, p. 269.

12. On this author, see Griffith (1996, pp. 15–21).

Church history—was replaced by that to a layman, both committed to his Church hierarchy and to the Fatimid state.¹³

The outline of the abovementioned manuscripts of the primitive recension led to a revision of its definition. Indeed, H contains the *Lives* 1–46, covering the period until the mid-8th century; as for P, it contains the *Lives* 49 to 65, covering up to the first half of the 11th century. The contents of these two witnesses thus clearly derive from Mawhūb’s translation work—which stopped before the 66th and 67th biographies. However, the third manuscript-C—contains, next to the Mawhūbian *Lives* (*Lives* 66 and 67), the *Siyar* 68 to 72.¹⁴ These five additional biographies were composed by later authors, i.e. Yuḥannā ibn Sa‘īd and Murqus Ibn Zur‘a.¹⁵ The latter—who was also the 73rd patriarch of Alexandria (Mark III [1167–1189]) and who saw both the very end of the Fatimid era and the emergence of the Ayyubid state—composed the two last *siyar* entirely dedicated to the Fatimid period, i.e. the *Lives* 71 and 72. Consequently, the primitive recension is to be distinguished from the (lost) authorial work of Mawhūb strictly speaking and defined as the oldest extant version of the *HPA*, as found in the H, P and C manuscripts: it gathers the translation and composition works of Mawhūb, next to the *siyar* written by its immediate successors. More recently, in the beginning of the 2010’s, a new manuscript of the primitive recension—Saint Anthony History 7 (*Lives* 12–50, 14th–15th centuries)—was identified, partially overlapping with the contents of the H and P manuscripts.¹⁶

In this perspective, the very commission of this new Fatimid ecclesiastical history by the Patriarchate to Mawhūb seems to echo two main contemporary challenges for the Coptic Church. First, the *HPA* meets the institution’s need for an official history written in a language understood, as of then, by most of its believers. Indeed, as both the emergence of Christian literature written in Arabic in Egypt¹⁷ and documentary evidence¹⁸ show, Coptic had lost much ground to the language of the conquerors in both the literary and the vernacular spheres. Consequently, at this moment, Coptic historiographical sources were recast in a new Arabic form, starting a new—and ongoing—tradition of historical writing. Second, the person of Mawhūb as well as his production embodies the rapprochement that occurred between the Coptic Church and the civil authorities during the Fatimid period.¹⁹

13. Den Heijer 1989, pp. 81–116.

14. It must be noted that a brief summary of the *Lives* 73 to 76 is also present at the end of the manuscript, but they were identified as coming from the *Chronicon Orientale*, a summary of the *Kitāb al-Tawārīḫ* by Ibn al-Rāhib, a work which was released in 1257 (see hereafter, p. 19). See den Heijer 1989, pp. 77–78.

15. Den Heijer 1989, pp. 77–78.

16. Den Heijer, Pilette 2013.

17. See, for instance, Coquin (1990), Rubenson (1996a, 1996b) and Swanson (2010, pp. 59–61).

18. See, for instance, Björnesjö (1996) and Delattre et al. (2012).

19. See, for instance, Samir (1996) and den Heijer (2015, p. 264).

1.4. *An Evolving Textual Tradition*

In the last decade, a new picture of the textual transmission of the *HPA* has emerged. So far, the tradition was conceived as “dichotomic”: the authorial version, preserved in rare manuscripts, was thought to have been, at some point, turned into a so-called “vulgate”, found in the vast majority of witnesses. However, this misconception stemmed from biases resulting from the poor methodology applied to *HPA*’s older editions.²⁰ Indeed, as mentioned before, both Everts and Seybold published editions that shaped “new” texts that do not seem to have ever existed as such: the editors randomly combined readings from base manuscripts with haphazardly chosen variant readings from a handful of other witnesses. Those are seldom cited, implicitly suggesting that manuscripts they were extracted from are almost identical to the edited text and that, therefore, the latter truly represents a real “vulgate”.²¹ However, an extensive collation and analysis of a large number of *HPA* witnesses has highlighted major differences between the text of the manuscripts, including those used in the *HPE* and *HPS* editions,²² and that there is no such thing as a “vulgate” but many writing stages.

Now, freed from the abovementioned biases, the corpus is to be depicted as an open tradition, meaning that the text is inherently subject to a phenomenon of voluntary rewriting. Phases of re-composition follow one another, without systematically replacing the previous ones though, as some of them keep circulating simultaneously. Many of those writing stages—as was the case for the creation of the *HPA* itself—seem to echo contemporary challenges encountered by the Coptic Church.²³ The picture suggests that the ecclesiastical institution—or at least some of its hierarchical or local components—released updated versions of its official history, as time went by and as society changed. Thus, in a sense, those successive textual versions resulted from the successive transformations of the Copts’ situation within Egyptian society and of their relationships with its other confessional components and with the authorities, as well as from the representations of these relationships—as the number of Christians continued to decrease.

Accordingly, the depiction of the *HPA* as solely a Fatimid production needs to be overcome. Even though the initial version of this corpus undoubtedly appeared during this period, the text was never fixed in time and has been continuously adapted. Consequently, the question of the state of this fluid tradition in any given epoch is relevant: one must pay attention to variations in the text itself or in its manuscript tradition, considering each writing stage as a historiographical production in its own right, and using it as such, with reference to the period in which it was produced.

20. Pilette 2013.

21. For the exhaustive list of the *HPA* identified manuscripts, see den Heijer (1989, pp. 19–27). It must be highlighted here that even the H manuscript—which would later be identified as part of the primitive recension (see above, p. 14)—was among the witnesses used by *HPS*.

22. Consequently, it would be more suitable to refer to these editions as presenting a “pseudo-vulgate”, see Pilette (2013, p. 443) and Pilette (2014).

23. Pilette 2013.

As a test case, the question of the transformation of the *HPA* at the beginning of the Mamluk period will now be analyzed. To do that, both the manuscripts and their contents must be scrutinized.

2. The *HPA* at the onset of the Mamluk period

2.1. Manuscripts and Historiographical Tradition

First, as far as the manuscripts are concerned, we notice that the earliest witnesses of the *HPA*—those of the primitive recension—are chronologically quite distant from the Fatimid period, which saw the dawn of the Arabic text. Indeed, two of the above-mentioned manuscripts, H and C, retain colophons which date their copies respectively to 1266 and 1275 C.E. As for P, it could paleographically be dated to the 14th century.²⁴ Likewise, the ms. Saint Anthony History 7, which contains the *Lives* 12 to 50, probably dates from the 14th or 15th century, according to the handwriting.²⁵ Consequently, we see that all the manuscripts witnessing the “Fatimid *HPA*”, i.e. the primitive recension, date from the Mamluk era.

Moreover, in order to analyze the state of the textual tradition during the Mamluk period, the focus should also be on the first major detectable rewriting phase, previously called “vulgate”, as its earliest witnesses date approximately from the same period: the oldest parts of the ms. Coptic Museum History 1 were probably copied at the turn of the 14th century,²⁶ while the Paris BnF arabe 301–302 was also dated from the 15th century.²⁷

However, it must be underlined that the composition of this new textual version is clearly more ancient than its first witnesses, which are mere altered copies of it. As the text of one of them—the Paris BnF arabe 302—stops with the *Life* of the 75th patriarch,²⁸ Cyril III ibn Laqlaq (1235–1243)—last patriarch before the advent of the Mamluks—it could reasonably be hypothesized that this rewriting phase was completed, at the earliest, after the latter’s death in 1243, i.e. only 17 years before sultan Baybars came to power in Egypt, in 1260.²⁹

24. Troupeau 1972, p. 266.

25. Den Heijer, Pilette 2013, p. 117.

26. The manuscript was restored, and some of its folios replaced at the end of the 19th century; den Heijer, Pilette, 2011, pp. 19–25. It is among the main witnesses used in *HPC*.

27. Troupeau 1972, pp. 265–266. These manuscripts are two consecutive volumes, written at the same time. They are among the main witnesses used in *HPE*, *HPS* and *HPC*.

28. Nonetheless, as this 75th *Life* is, in the Paris arabe 302, attested in a unique long version (while it is only extant in a short version in most of the other witnesses) and seems to be the work of an independent chronicler, it has been considered as part of a mere continuation of the *HPA*. For den Heijer, the *HPA* strictly speaking stops with the 74th *Life*, that of John VI (1189–1216); see den Heijer, 1989, pp. 11–12 and 78. However, this should be reviewed in the light of the new understanding of the *HPA* as an open and living tradition (see above, p. 16). Concerning the question of the links between this *Life* and the (lost) work of the 13th-century bishop Yūsāb of Fuwwa, see Moawad (2006; 2012).

29. This 75th *Life* in the Paris arabe 302 is conserved in a unique long version; den Heijer 1989, p. 78.

At this point, thus, two elements can be highlighted. First, the Mamluk period clearly shaped the manuscript tradition of the *HPA*, as the earlier witnesses of both the primitive recension and the first re-writing stage were produced at this moment. Second, this first major transformation of the text was apparently composed during a hinge-period in Egyptian political history—a few years before (or after) the Mamluk take over. Likewise, during this period, the Coptic Church was also going through major divisions: the reign of Cyril III, a controversial figure, was preceded and followed by long vacancies of the patriarchal throne, in the absence of a consensus about a candidate for the highest office of the Church.³⁰

Thus, the very creation of this brand-new textual version, characterized by countless significant changes—at stylistic, grammatical but, above all, content-wise levels³¹—could directly ensue from such a major turmoil in the socio-political and/or ecclesiastical order(s), which might have resulted in the need for an adapted official history.

Finally, when trying to isolate the Mamluk state of the *HPA*, a last element arises: a substantial disruption seems to take place in the tradition precisely on the eve of the new state order. Indeed, after the end of the 75th biography, the nature of the text profoundly changes: so far, the *Lives* had predominantly served as a framework for the narration of various events, going well beyond the lives of the patriarchs as such—even if the amount of material and significance of details had been uneven—but this biography offers the last such developed narrative. The subsequent *Lives*, from the 76th patriarch onwards (Athanasius III [1250–1261]), are conceived as a long series of extremely short biographical notices, lacking any significant historiographical narrative. Therefore, all these new *Lives* from the 76th patriarch onwards had been considered mere “continuations” of the *HPA*, rather than the *HPA* itself.³²

Nonetheless, in the light of the new picture of the *HPA* as a fluid and evolving tradition, this impression must be reviewed. Even if there is no doubt that, at this point, the collective process of historical writing is impoverished, it does not cease: it is temporarily transformed—as if “on hold”—and will later resume in its “original” form. Indeed, from the 103rd patriarch (John XVI [1676–1718]) onwards, the *Lives* will be more developed again. The sole noteworthy

30. The patriarchal seat remained vacant between 1216 and 1235, and then later between 1243 and 1250; on this period, see Swanson (2010, pp. 83–95); p. 84 he describes these times as “near-chaos at the institutional level”. Also, M. Mikhail hypothesizes that the creation of the new *HPA* version takes place into a “wider ideological shift” in the Coptic milieu—impacting the literary production—in search for “certainty and stability during an era that provided neither”; see Mikhail 2017, p. 87.

31. For detailed examples of comparison between the text layers of the *HPA*, see, for instance: den Heijer 2000; den Heijer, Pilette 2013; den Heijer 2015; Swanson 2017; Mikhail 2017; du Roy et al. 2018; Pilette in press. Among these published examples, many additions made in this writing stage undoubtedly anchor it at the end of the Ayyubid or at the beginning of the Mamluk period, even if they are clearly anachronistic: for instance, the mention, in a gloss added into the narrative of the martyrdom of a young Copt in the 11th cent., of a military title (*amīr ḡāndār*) which is not attested before the Ayyubid period; den Heijer 2015, p. 476. See also Mikhail (2017), who brilliantly analyzed the differences between the primitive recension and the later version of the complex *Life* of Demetrius, the 12th patriarch (189–231), and demonstrates that some of the amendments clearly echo the socio-political and ecclesiastical contexts of the Mamluk Era, e.g. p. 79.

32. Den Heijer 1989, pp. 11–12. See above, note 28.

exception to this rather poor presence of the Mamluk era in the *HPA*—in terms of detailed contents—comes from the biography of the 87th patriarch, Mattā al-Miskīn. The events of the life of this patriarch—who was one of the most influential figures of the Coptic Church—are narrated in an extremely long and developed *sīra*. However, in this case, it is highly probable that the *Life* circulated as an independent Arabic text before being included in the *HPA*, as a number of manuscripts conserve the text isolated from the *HPA*.³³

Consequently, the beginning of the Mamluk Period is a clear milestone in the *HPA* tradition: it left its mark on the manuscript tradition with the creation of the oldest known witnesses, it saw the composition of a new textual version—a Mamluk *HPA*—, and it witnessed a disruption in the process of historiographical writing. To understand the reason for such a phenomenon, the larger cultural environment must be taken into consideration.

2.2. Coptic-Arabic Historiography and Coptic-Arabic Renaissance

A beginning of an explanation of this turning point for the *HPA*—or at least a correlation—probably lies with the contemporary literary dynamics in the Coptic milieu. From the end of the Ayyubid period onwards, a literary movement blossomed among the Copts. Sometimes called the “Coptic-Arabic Renaissance”, it would probably be more accurate—in order to reflect its deep originality compared to what had been produced before in this environment—to call it a “boom”. Indeed, between the end of the 12th century and the 14th century, the Coptic-Arabic literature (i.e. the literature written in Arabic by the Copts) enters a true golden age. A massive number of new texts are produced, in various literary genres, with a peak at the middle of the 13th century.³⁴ Among them are theology, civil and canon law, linguistics (with the creation of the well-known *scalae* and of some Coptic grammars), Biblical exegesis, and philosophy. In general terms, this movement is characterized by a new openness to the productions from other religious spheres, and to the rest of the world in general.

As for historiography, the movement is illustrated by the appearance of a new genre in the Coptic literary landscape, that is, the universal chronography. Well represented by the *Kitāb al-Tawārīḥ* of Abū Šākir ibn al-Rāhib and the *Ta’rīḥ* of al-Makīn ibn al-‘Amīd, it aims to encompass the history of the world from its creation onwards. Both heavily rely on sources produced in different confessional environments: Abū Šākir ibn al-Rāhib mainly uses several Melkite and Jewish sources, while al-Makīn ibn al-‘Amīd—who himself draws extensively on Ibn al-Rāhib—relies heavily on a Muslim historian like al-Ṭabarī.³⁵ Also, both works will

33. For a recent survey of the manuscripts containing this *Life* and the challenges of its study, see Swanson (2013b). As for the relationship between this *Life* and the *HPA*, see my paper entitled “The many *Lives* of Matthew I the Poor (1378–1409), from Egypt to Ethiopia” at the colloquium “Ethiopian abroad in the Middle Ages” (org. J. Loiseau, M. Ambu and S. Dorso) held at the École française de Rome on may 23–26, 2023, the proceedings of which will be published.

34. Sidarus 2002; Mikhail 2017, p. 15.

35. Sidarus 1978, pp. 33–40; den Heijer 1996, pp. 85–87.

later be quoted by Muslim historians, such as al-Maqrīzī and al-Qalqaṣandī.³⁶ And, as for al-Makīn ibn al-ʿAmīd’s work, it will be later completed—in the middle of the Mamluk period—by the Coptic author al-Mufaḍḍal ibn Abī al-Faḍāʿil in his *Al-nabḡ al-saḍīd wa-l-durr al-farīd fīmā baʿd taʿrīḥ ibn al-ʿamīd*, in a rather Islamic style, up to the death of al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (1341).³⁷

Interestingly, considering the *HPA* in the light of the 13th-century chronographies highlights two crucial elements. First, we see that one of their main sources is the *HPA* itself: Abū Šākīr ibn al-Rāhib quoted it generously and, from his work, this historiographical material found its way to the writings of al-Makīn as well. For the first time, therefore, the *HPA* serves as a source for the composition of new historiographical compilations. Second, one sees that both the chronographies and the above-mentioned first rewriting of the *HPA* were actually composed almost exactly at the same time: Abū Šākīr ibn al-Rāhib released his work in 1257,³⁸ while al-Makīn ibn al-ʿAmīd’s own text ends precisely with the coming to power of Baybars in 1260.³⁹

We thus observe that the changes occurring in the *HPA* in the mid-13th century—production of a significant amount of new manuscripts, rewriting, disruption in the tradition and migration of the material towards new *corpora*—are part of a much wider transformation process in the Coptic-Arabic literary production.

2.3. Coptic Laymen

A key for understanding these changes may lie with the authors’ profiles. Indeed, observing the literary genres booming during the so-called Coptic-Arabic Renaissance shows clearly that innovation came largely from the Coptic laity:⁴⁰ most authors associated with the movement are documented as “lay”—understood as the opposite of “monastic” rather than “ecclesiastical”.⁴¹ And, as far as historiography is concerned, there is no exception: the authors of universal chronographies belong to this same social category, whose role has been identified as the main reason for the emergence and success of this larger cultural movement.⁴² Indeed, as difficult as had been the end of the Ayyubid period and the beginning of the Mamluk era both for Egypt in general—with the Crusades and the Mongol invasion, for instance—and for the Christians in particular—with the increasing atmosphere of religious repression, the growing number of conversions to Islam and the difficult situation at the institutional level—it is the Coptic laity who both prepared and framed the literary renaissance. More precisely, wealthy Coptic families which, since the Fatimid period, had been forming a rich intellectual urban elite both

36. Den Heijer 1996, pp. 90–95.

37. Den Heijer 1996, pp. 88–93; Cecere 2020.

38. Sidarus 1978, pp. 25, 28.

39. Den Heijer 1996, p. 88.

40. Sidarus 2002, p. 17.

41. Sidarus 2002.

42. Visual arts are also affected by this movement; Sidarus 2002, pp. 9–13; Swanson 2010, p. 83.

close to the centers of power—as high state administration employees—and involved in their Church—as married priests or deacons—built shared knowledge, paving the way for some of their members to become the masters of the Coptic medieval “*Nahḏa*”. In other words, it is the exceptional situation of these families—living in a region which had been one of the main centers of the Islamic world, benefiting from long-term cultural exchanges with other parts of the empire—which can, at least partly, explain the incongruity of the success of this cultural movement carried out by an otherwise political and religious minority during difficult times.

2.4. *A Fracture in the Church?*

Keeping these elements in mind and coming back to the *HPA*, one could hypothesize that the emergence of a rewritten version in the mid-13th century—while the *Life*-writing enterprise itself was slowing down and its older content was now feeding new historiographical texts—could be also explained by the emergence of a new milieu of production. Indeed, as the production of the new abovementioned chronographies clearly emerged from the laity at the same period, one could reasonably consider that the first rewritten version of *HPA* might have originated from a different environment, inducing some competition with the original milieu. Therefore, one should look beyond the production milieu of the Fatimid *HPA*, that is the same Coptic lay elite that would later develop and nurture the Coptic-Arabic renaissance, well represented by the Alexandrian deacon and tax-collector for the Fatimid state Mawhūb ibn Manṣūr.

Two of the main characteristics of this new *HPA* version could provide us with some information about the environment it was created in. The first one is its brand-new pseudo-attribution to Sawīrūs ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, the famous 10th century bishop, which was ingenuously accomplished through the addition of an explicit preface to the text, absent from the primitive recension.⁴³ The second characteristic is that, in this version, the representations of the Muslim authorities are, somehow, voluntarily more critical than in the primitive recension.⁴⁴ As it is hard to imagine that these elements would somehow come from the hand of a member of the urban elite close to the sultans, they could have come from a more conservative faction within the Church, which could have wanted to reclaim Church history for itself in a period of internal dissension and instability.

43. The third preface of the text describes the work of Sawīrūs as the author of the text, but it has been demonstrated to be a late addition to the text; see *HPE* I, 114–117 for the text and den Heijer (1989, p. 86 and 115) for the demonstration.

44. For instance, the narrative of the conquest—found in the *Life* of Benjamin, the 38th patriarch (622–661)—shows a clear evolution between the primitive recension and the first rewriting stage, previously called “vulgate”: among other explicit features, the prohibition of oppressing inhabitants who do not pay the *ḥarāğ* is replaced by the order to imprison them; or, the fire in the Alexandrian churches, which results from the escape of the Byzantine soldiers in the primitive recension is, in the later version, a deliberate action made by the Muslim conquerors; den Heijer 2000, p. 238.

Remarkably, looking at the patriarchs' background for this period shows that in less than one century—between the end of the Fatimid period and the beginning of the Mamluk era—at least three patriarchs out of seven (the origin of some of them is uncertain) came from lay circles instead of being of the traditional monastic origin.⁴⁵

Consequently, as they seemed (temporarily) to lose control of the Church while they witnessed the historiographical enterprise being renewed and taken over by lay circles, members of monastic circles, in opposition to the latter, might have felt the need to release a new and adapted version of the *HPA*, better fitting their vision of contemporary Egyptian society. Also, the barely veiled criticism of those in power could perhaps be interpreted as also intended for their contemporary co-religionaries, close to the Muslim leaders. Resituating, from this period onwards at least, the *HPA* tradition in monastic milieus could also explain why, sometimes, the patriarchs themselves are also under fire: the monastic circles consider themselves the legitimate “patriarchs-makers” and arrogate to themselves the right to judge their actions⁴⁶.

To conclude this section, as for the *HPA*, we see a transformation in the Coptic historiographical writing process just before or at the beginning of the Mamluk period, which probably echoes a deep transformation of the ecclesiastical milieus, resulting in a fracture. At first, during the Fatimid period, the *HPA* was the historiographical product of a Church whose people were still a numerical majority⁴⁷ in the region, and which deliberately got close to the Fatimid power. The urban Coptic elite was involved both in the state and in the Church, while the main monasteries were still relatively well-populated and continued traditionally to ‘create’ the patriarchs. Therefore, in this context, the depictions of the secular authorities in the primitive recension oscillate between positivity and exemplarity, as in the narrative of the conquest for instance,⁴⁸ even if the bad actions of some of them—mainly more ancient than the Fatimids—are not ignored.⁴⁹

Later, at the beginning of Mamluk period, the context gets darker for the Copts. The Church is endangered, both because of the decreasing number of Christians and of the institutional chaos,

45. See the list of the patriarchs and their origin in Atiya (1991). Only one lay Patriarch is attested before, i.e. at the very beginning of Fatimid presence in Egypt, under al-Mu‘izz: Abraham ibn Zur‘a, a Syrian laymen who became the 62nd patriarch (975–978).

46. See, for instance, the countless occurrences of simony by the patriarchs reported in the text, e.g. in the *Lives* of Philotheus and Shenute II (*HPC*, II.2 (trans.), pp. 54–173).

47. Coquin 1990, p. 18.

48. In this narrative, we see the development of what Swanson calls the “‘Amr-Benjamin paradigm” which somehow frames the ideal relationship between the Church and the secular authorities and to which all future leaders should ideally conform. The depiction of ‘Amr and the conquerors is bright—and will be tarnished in the rewritings (see above, note 44). As for the depiction of the patriarch Benjamin, whose authority is reinforced in the second version, it probably echoes the difficult situation of the Church, which was on the wane during the Mamluk period; Swanson 2017, pp. 161–165.

49. Suffice it to see the description, for instance, of the violent actions committed by the Umayyad officials in Egypt, e.g. al-Asbağ, the son of the governor of Egypt ‘Abd-al-‘Azīz ibn Marwān (685–703), and Qurra ibn Šarik, the governor of Egypt (709–715), all exposed in the *Life* of Alexander, the 43rd patriarch (705–730); *HPE* III, pp. 302–342.

partly characterized by the opposition of different factions. On the one hand are the powerful remnants of the abovementioned Coptic intellectual elite, which provided the impetus to the Coptic-Arabic Renaissance. On the other, we see the monastic milieus, more conservative, trying to maintain their grip on the Church. At the turn of the new dynasty, we are thus dealing with two Coptic milieus, producing two types of historiographies: the updated “fashionable” historiography emerging from the urban elite on the one side, more and more influenced by the framework of the Islamic chronographies; and the official and “traditional” ecclesiastical historiography on the other, produced in the monasteries.

3. Ecclesiastical History Transformed: the Coptic-Arabic *Synaxarion*

Finally, one major literary production emanating from the Coptic ecclesiastical circles during the Mamluk period perfectly embodies the shift in historical writing that was already observed in the *HPA*, that is the Coptic-Arabic *Synaxarion*. The history of its composition is complex and far from having been written so far, but a few meaningful elements can still be highlighted.

3.1. *Textual Tradition*

First, the *Synaxarion* heavily relies on the *HPA* and could, therefore, like the above-mentioned chronographies, also be considered a “*HPA* by-product”. It gathers the lives of saints and martyrs organized by the days of the Coptic calendar corresponding to their commemorations, so that they could be read during the daily liturgy. As most of the Coptic patriarchs are among those holy figures, one understands easily why the *HPA* and its dozens of biographical narratives are among the *Synaxarion*’s main sources, next to countless other hagiographies. In the *Synaxarion*, *HPA*’s historiographical material was thus entirely reorganized: it left its traditional chronological ordering to fit a new time frame, that is of liturgical time.⁵⁰

As for the *Synaxarion*’s composition, it is complex. Indeed, the text has circulated in two different volumes, each of them corresponding to one semester of the year; they were not written simultaneously, have different textual traditions, and sometimes circulated independently.⁵¹ Moreover, two recensions of the text have been identified: one from Lower Egypt and the other from Upper Egypt.⁵² As for the date of the composition, some elements can help us. The Ethiopian *Synaxarion*, which was translated into Ge’ez during the 14th century on the basis of the Lower Egyptian recension, mentions that the Arabic text itself was compiled in 963 A.M. (1246/1247 C.E.) by Miḥā’īl, bishop of Atrīb and Malīḡ, Yuḥannā, bishop of

50. Pilette 2019.

51. Swanson 2013a, p. 938.

52. Coquin 1978. The Upper Egyptian recension could be a bit more ancient than the Lower Egyptian one. However, this needs to be supported by further research, as the earliest witnesses of this recension date from the 17th century and only a few witnesses of this recension have been identified so far; see pp. 356–357.

Burlus, and other collaborators, while the *Miṣbāḥ al-Zulma* of Abū al-Barakāt (d. 1324) refers to it as the work of the aforesaid bishop Miḥāʿil and a certain Buṭrus al-Ġamīl, both active in the beginning of the 13th century.⁵³ Even if the origin of the text is anything but clear, two elements can be highlighted from these data. First, the tradition of the *Synaxarion* probably started around the same key moment as the major identified transformations in the *HPA*, that is, the end of the Ayyubid period or the beginning of the Mamluk period. Second, it was rapidly turned into a large and collective open literary tradition, many times rewritten and adapted: the names of various (successive?) authors are preserved, and two recensions and an Ethiopic translation are extant, each of them bringing new and original elements to the text.

In line with this, the earliest known manuscripts of the *Synaxarion* date from the 14th century and already contain an enhanced version of the text which does not correspond to the work of any 13th-century writer. Indeed, they all contain the *Life* of a major saint of the Mamluk period, Barṣawmā the Naked who died in 1317.⁵⁴ This element provides us with a *terminus post quem* for the redaction of this version of the *Synaxarion* which, therefore, is undoubtedly a pure Mamluk product; just as might also be its Geʿez translation realized in the late 14th century, probably at the monastery of Saint Anthony in Egypt.⁵⁵

In this perspective, it should be noted that, in the Coptic Church, the *Synaxarion* appeared relatively late in history. Strikingly enough, no clear proof of the circulation of a *synaxarion* in Coptic has been identified yet—while some abbreviated or rewritten hagiographies found in the *Synaxarion* are in fact known in (sometimes fragmentary) Coptic versions, no such coherent collection is known so far. And, for the sake of comparison, in the Melkite Church, an Arabic *synaxarion* (different from the Coptic-Arabic *Synaxarion*) was composed already in the 11th century, based on a translation from the Byzantine *synaxaria* (in Greek).⁵⁶ It could be argued that such a difference results from the socio-linguistic situation in Egypt, where Arabization was slower than in the Levant, but this is not convincing: Coptic authors had been writing in Arabic from the 10th century onwards, and the *HPA* was compiled based on Coptic sources as early as in the 11th century (see above). More probably, given our previous observations, it should rather be hypothesized that the composition of the Coptic-Arabic *Synaxarion* could be assimilated to the same “historiographical turn” identified in the Coptic milieu at the beginning of the Mamluk period. Indeed, even if its exact composition date remains unclear and might also well be the very end of the Ayyubid period, it is certain that the work circulated widely from the 14th century onwards, when it was released in a post-1317 version.

53. Coquin 1995, p. 79; Swanson 2013a, p. 939.

54. The oldest dated manuscript is the ms. Coptic Museum lit. 41a; it dates from 1340 C.E. (1056 A.M.) and contains the first semester. For the question of the stabilization of the text after 1317, see Swanson (2013a, p. 939) and for the list of all known manuscripts, see Swanson (2013a, pp. 942–943).

55. Colin 1988, p. 300.

56. Sauguet 1969.

3.2. Contents and Challenges

Browsing the contents of the text might now help us to recontextualize the *Synaxarion* (or at least its 14th century version) in the larger movement of historiographical transformation that took place in the Coptic milieu—and thus confirm the above-mentioned hypothesis—and to understand the stakes of its composition. More precisely, a look at the narratives concerning “recent” saints and martyrs is instructive. However, it must be noted that the interpretation of these data will, for now, remain tentative, as our understanding of the manuscript tradition is still incomplete. Indeed, the three existing editions of the text were based on relatively late manuscripts:⁵⁷ the oldest edited manuscript, the Paris BnF arabe 256, dates from the 16th century.⁵⁸ Moreover, all editions were realized without any classification of the manuscripts, indistinctly blending recensions. Also, recently, new manuscripts have been discovered but they have not yet been classified.⁵⁹

Browsing the *Synaxarion* throughout its ancient editions with caution, it can be highlighted that only a few recent or contemporary narratives are included in the earliest manuscripts of the post-1317 version. First, as for the hagiographies, we find a short list of so-called “neo-martyrs”—i.e. holy figures who died as martyr for their faith after the Islamization of Egypt—of the Mamluk Era.⁶⁰ Next to Baršawmā, whose case is widely attested since the earliest witnesses,⁶¹ we find the *Life* of Dioscoros, martyred in 1290 under sultan Qalāwūn.⁶² Also, in the Paris BnF arabe 256 only, we find the story of the martyrdom of Maryam the Armenian, who was burned at Bāb Zuwayla under sultan Baybars.⁶³ And, in a 14th century-unclassified manuscript, we find the *Life* of Mikhail of Damietta who also died as a martyr under Baybars (in 1277).⁶⁴

Second, as for the patriarchal biographies, the data are even more interesting: in the edited manuscripts, the last *sīra* of this kind is that of the 71st Patriarch, Michael V (1145–1146), who lived during the Fatimid period.⁶⁵ Remarkably, no mention of any patriarch from the Mamluk period is found in the editions, which nevertheless include the abovementioned Mamluk

57. Wüstenfeld 1879 (trans.); *Synaxarium Alexandrinum*, 1905–1926 (ed. + trans.); *Le Synaxaire arabe jacobite (rédaction copte)*, 1907–1929 (ed. + trans.), *al-Sinaksār al- ġāmiʿ*, 1936–1937 (Arabic text). The latter used the ms. Coptic Museum lit. 41a—the oldest known manuscript (see note 54)—among other unidentified manuscripts, but the absence of a critical apparatus prevents us from understanding what the exact contents of each witness are. For a comment on the European editions, see Pilette (2019, pp. 34–35).

58. Used by *Le Synaxaire arabe jacobite (rédaction copte)*, 1907–1929.

59. Swanson 2013a, p. 943.

60. For a list of all the neo-martyrs commemorations found in the *Synaxarion* (not only for the Mamluk Period), see Swanson (2013a, pp. 940–941). Among those are also the 49 martyrs who died in 1380–1383, during the patriarchate of Mattā al-Miskīn, but they are considered part of a more recent rewriting of the text (post-1380). See Swanson 2013a, p. 941.

61. Commemorated on al-Nasi 5.

62. Commemorated on Baramhāt 6. Even if the commemoration is largely attested, only a unique fragment situates it precisely during this reign, see Khater (1963–1964).

63. Commemorated on 27 Masrī.

64. Commemorated on Hātūr 11. See Fayez, Mistrih 2006.

65. Commemorated on Baramūda 3. This commemoration is not found in *al-Sinaksār al- ġāmiʿ*, 1936–1937.

neo-martyrs. Even the patriarchs included in the first *HPA* rewriting (and the last of the primitive recension, i.e. the 72nd) are not included in these manuscripts. We will have to wait for the modern versions of the *Synaxarion* to see them included, from Cyril ibn Laqlaq onwards.

Consequently, these observations on the *Synaxarion*'s content offers some indication for dating the short "Mamluk *Lives*" of the *HPA*, as this probably means that they were probably not yet written at the time that this stage of the *Synaxarion* was composed. And, doing so, it also confirms, the existence of a "historiographical turn" in the Coptic milieu during the Mamluk period. Indeed, simultaneously with the splitting of the Coptic-Arabic historiographical tradition at the beginning of the Mamluk period, probably resulting from a dissension in Coptic ecclesiastical circles, the Coptic-Arabic *Synaxarion* emerges as a new literary object in the same socio-religious environment. In other words, while the *HPA* is both claimed by conservative elements within the Church—probably monastic—and put on hold, a new form of "writing of the past" emerges and takes over.

* * *

In the *Synaxarion*, history is turned into fragmented memory, to be read and repeated every day of every year, from the Mamluk period onwards, in the framework of the liturgical celebrations of a shrinking and cornered community. The "holy heroes" of the past are retrieved from the *HPA* and other hagiographies as inspiring and exemplary figures to be remembered and invoked for personal and collective salvation. To keep alive a faltering Church, these ancient figures are extracted from their original *HPA* context, a larger historical fresco.

Nonetheless, the *Synaxarion* is "out of its own time": it narrates few recent events. Only the reactivation of ancient models of holiness matters. More precisely, throughout this text, the Coptic Church reaffirms its identity as the "Church of the Martyrs", which was originally forged throughout a massive production of hagiographies and apocalypses in Coptic when it experienced the considerable challenge of the arrival of Islam in Egypt.⁶⁶

It now becomes clear why the *synaxarion* appeared so late in Egyptian history and not at the turning point of the Arabization of the Church and its people: it was later, when Christians became a numerical minority in Egypt, that the reactivation of old martyrdom representations came to hand, in order to provide the Copts with new models of holiness in the face of the new challenges brought by the Mamluk Era.

66. Papaconstantinou 2006.

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